

Roads To Empowerment for a Youth in a Program for Diverse Teens

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Introduction

Aiesha is a shy, 16 year old African American girl who was empowered to become outspoken through participation in a youth activist organization. The organization, Youth Action, is focused on teaching youth how to work for change in their schools. Through her participation, Aiesha is now an active participant in forums sponsored by her faculty to discuss school policy issues. This case study describes the experiences in a youth program that facilitated Aiesha's transformation. In research with adults, Kieffer (1984) articulates how empowerment occurs through a development process. Here, I demonstrate how this process unfolds for this one youth.

Youth Action

Youth Action is a youth activist organization located in the South Side of Chicago, IL. The members are mainly students of color, including Latino/a, African American and biracial teenagers. With the guidance of their adult leader Jason, a devoted young Arab-American man, the youth carry out campaigns to alter policies in the city's public high schools. Some of the issues Aiesha has worked on in this program include over-crowding and fair school funding. The program has a positive reputation for supporting youth leadership and helping youth achieve change in their schools.

Data Source

Interviews were conducted with Aiesha over a 4-month cycle of program activity. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted at the beginning, midpoint and end of the study period. Biweekly telephone interviews were carried out throughout the 4 months. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study aimed at understanding the developmental experiences of youth in organized youth programs. Program sessions were also observed to gain insight into the roles and contribution of other members and program leaders.

The Beginning: Personal Connection

Aiesha originally joined Youth Action to earn community service hours to satisfy high-school graduation requirements. Her early experiences in the program, however, facilitated continued participation, even after earning the number of hours required.

"At first I just wanted to make sure I got all my community hours ...and then I started liking the program ...the different activities made me want to go more and more."

As Aiesha worked on planning a citywide youth-led forum, she identified with the problem of overcrowding in schools, which was one of the topics to be discussed at the forum.

“Last year at Garvey I got suspended for too many tardies because I never could get to class on time because there were too many students in the halls. So I got suspended for that, and I missed six days total. So that was something I could relate to personally.”

Kieffer (1984) proposed that the empowerment process usually begins with the experience of injustice. The subsequent feelings of frustration and anger are a mobilizing force that marks the beginning of a journey to participatory competence, the “attainment of a new set of insights and abilities.”

Finding her Voice

As a result of taking a lead role in the city-wide forum, Aiesha developed skill and comfort in speaking out for change in the public schools.

“I’m a more outspoken person now than I ever was. I would say more confidence to speak out about something.”

“I am a little shy, but since I have been working with Jason, I have been working with so many kids, I would like to be able to speak about problems I feel shouldn’t be going on.”

Support

The support that Aiesha received from her peers and the adult leader in Youth Action was an important factor that contributed to the process of finding her voice. Kieffer (1984) suggested that support provided by like-minded peers is important during transitions that involve exploring new ways of being and perceiving the world. Jason, the adult leader was intentional in making sure that the program provided support for youth as they gained new insights about difficult issues, such as racism in schools.

“When I came here I noticed how friendly they were for me being a newcomer, they made it easy for me to relax and be comfortable, so I wouldn’t be nervous, you know make me want to pursue this program. They did a lot of activities as a group to make us know more about each other.”

“I can actually experience telling people how I was going through stuff in school and they give me feedback on it.”

Participatory Competence Aiesha’s response to questions about her future plans suggest that she has developed a new sense of competence about her ability to be an active agent of change.

“I plan on getting on the local school council next year to speak about the problems that kids have in Garvey. Usually, I wouldn’t even think about going to join or speak in front of a whole bunch of people, I think I could do it next year.”

“If they have a student board at school, instead of always bringing it to the faculty board...if they have anything like that at my school I would be the first one on the list.”

Implications

Case studies are useful for stimulating ideas for further research (Garmezy, 1982). This case study illustrates how youth programs can be a context for fostering empowerment. Preliminary findings from the larger study indicate that similar change processes took place with other participants in the Youth Action Program. Like Aiesha they progressed from fulfilling a school requirement to finding their voice to developing participatory competence. In current research we are examining how this process of empowerment occurs across a variety of types of youth programs.

