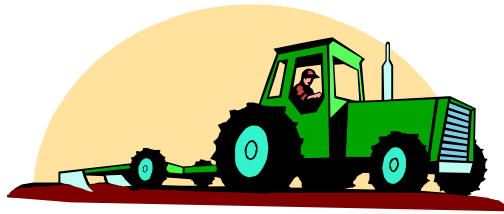


Bridging Difference in a Rural Youth Program: Hicks, Punks, and the In-Crowd

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Poster presented at the
9th Biennial of the Society for Community Research and Action
June 7, 2003, Las Vegas, New Mexico

Introduction As interactions across human differences become more commonplace in the 21st century, it is essential that young people learn to “bridge difference” – to understand, respect, and forge relationships across ethnic, religious, and other dimensions of human diversity. Yet, high rates of racial intolerance and hate crimes by youth indicate that many young people are not developing the competencies necessary for understanding and appreciating human diversity.

Youth programs have been identified as unique and potentially important contexts for youth to develop these competencies. Research suggests that youth tend to be more highly engaged in youth activities as compared to other domains of their daily lives (Larson, 2000), and have greater contact with diverse peers through participation in youth activities (Patrick, Ryan, Alfeld-Liro, Fredericks, Hruda, & Eccles, 1999). The present study examines the processes by which youth in a high-school based agricultural program come to learn about and respect human differences. Bridging difference took on a different form for these youth, as little racial or ethnic diversity existed in the rural, relatively isolated community in which the program was located.

Clarkston FFA

- ◆ Clarkston FFA is an after-school program oriented toward promoting leadership and preparing youth for careers in agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resource systems
- ◆ Program is located in a nearly all White rural high school (495 students; 98.6% White)
- ◆ Selected because its two advisors gave high value to youth leadership and had reputations as effective mentors

Method

- ◆ Seventy-four biweekly interviews conducted with 11 students (6 female; 5 male; mean age = 15.9) over 16 weeks
- ◆ Interviews focused on students' developmental experiences in the program (e.g., becoming motivated, identity exploration, learning initiative, peer relations)
- ◆ Data were analyzed for underlying themes and concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998)

The Difference that Makes a Difference

- ◆ "Difference" took on a different meaning for youth in the Clarkston FFA program, as little racial or ethnic diversity existed in rural Clarkston

"Small town Clarkston—all White people and not too many others." (Jeff, 12th grade)

- ◆ Belonging to a different clique or crowd group was the most salient area of difference

"This is a really cliquy school. We have the farm kids...the in-boys and the in-girls, and then the ones in the middle or the ones that are really smart." (Kimberly, 9th grade)

"[T]here's the jocks...some preps...[not] too many of the punky kids...a lot of hicks...some of just the normal people." (Jamie, 9th grade)

- ◆ Data revealed a 3-step process by which youth bridged these clique/crowd differences

Step I: Interacting

- ◆ The first step in the process of bridging difference appeared to be interacting with youth from different cliques and crowds

"I've gotten along with people in FFA that I wouldn't have hung out with otherwise." (Sarah, 12th grade)

"I've met a lot of different types of people [through FFA]. I hang out with different types of people—people that maybe my best friend doesn't hang out with." (Ann, 10th grade)

- ◆ Through large group and small team activities, youth came together around shared goals and interests, and recognized the utility of being interdependent

"Cliques will have their different ideas on the small tiny details. You give each a major goal, and then give them each their own part to work on to reach that goal. They're still working together while having their own individual likes and dislikes." (Jamie, 9th grade)

Step II: Discovering

- ◆ High levels of close interactions and interdependency in program activities provided youth with opportunities to learn about one another outside of clique/crowd labels

"We know each other better because we've worked with each other." (Kimberly, 9th grade)

"I think that if they know each other outside of their cliques they get along better." (Sarah, 12th grade)

"You learn a lot about a person [by] going to conferences and conventions with them." (Ann, 10th grade)

- ◆ One youth experienced what we called "discovering personhood." She learned to look past outward appearance and group affiliation and came to understand the humanity of another

"Jack, he's a big punk. He's one of those guys you see skateboarding through a basketball game. [But], there's a person inside of him that's completely different from what you see." (Jamie, 9th grade)

Step III: Bridging

- ◆ The insights gained in step 2 seemed to facilitate youth being considerate of clique/crowd differences. Youth showed changes in thinking that appeared to affect how they interacted with members of different peer groups

"Usually [the different groups] split up; but, at the state convention, we were all in the hotel room sittin' around eating pizza and having a great time. It was weird. You just learn to respect people's different ways."
(Kimberly, 9th grade)

- ◆ One youth also described developing the ability to “code switch”—to shift vernaculars when talking to different people
"You have to be willing to change, not your person, [but] how you present yourself for different people."
(Jamie, 9th grade)

Discussion

Rural youth often have few opportunities to develop skills for interacting with people who are different from them. These limited data suggest that participation in youth programs may be an important way for rural youth to acquire these skills. In the Clarkston FFA program, youth from different backgrounds came together around shared goals and interests. These goals and interests provided a common ground for youth to build trust and have sustained, meaningful interactions. The adult leaders facilitated this process by providing conditions that promote positive intergroup relations: equal status, cooperative interactions, and individualized contact (Allport, 1954; National Research Council, 2000). Within this structure, youth actively and intentionally interacted with, made discoveries about, and, for some, changed how they thought about and behaved toward youth outside of their clique or crowd group.

Implications

This example illustrates how youth programs can serve as contexts for fostering positive intergroup relations among youth. In current research we are examining how the process of bridging difference unfolds in other youth programs (e.g., the arts, civic programs). One important question to ask is how the lessons learned from bridging one area of difference prepare youth to bridge the differences they will encounter in the future.

Funding for this study was provided by the William T. Grant Foundation

