

Volunteering: Intentionally Developing a Sense of Mattering in Youth

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Abstract

Shape Up: Family Style is a nutritional and physical activity program for at-risk families in South Dakota. The Children, Youth, and Families at Risk program's success depends upon youth volunteers or Youth Action Teams (YATs). By learning and applying life skills through youth engagement opportunities such as Shape Up: Family Style, the YATs were able to be active contributors to their own individual and community's development. Thus, an intentional environment for at-risk families also became an intentional environment for positive youth engagement and a sense of mattering for the youth volunteers.

Key Words:

youth, volunteer, mattering, engagement, community development

Review of Related Literature/Conceptual Basis

Within communities across the country a growing movement exists to involve young people beyond participation in youth programs. Young people, generally teenagers, are being asked to help plan, implement, and evaluate youth programs so that they are more than just participants. Moreover, youth are being asked to serve on decision-making boards and community collaborative teams. This involvement of young people beyond participation is known as youth engagement (Scheve, Perkins, & Mincemoyer, 2006). By learning and applying life skills through youth engagement opportunities as well as the development of their communities and by

participating in solutions that address local issues, youth are able to be active contributors to their own development as well as their communities' (Curnan & Hughes, 2002; Irby, Ferber, Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, 2001; Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoop-Rooney, & Villarruel, 2003, Scheve, et al., 2006).

Within the youth development field, the community youth development (CYD) framework promotes youth engagement opportunities as a viable avenue for healthy youth and community development. CYD incorporates the developmental assets of positive youth development (Benson, 1997; Lerner, 2004), while also emphasizing the use of youth-adult partnerships to create social change (Camino & Zeldin, 2002;

Jones & Perkins, 2006). Perkins and colleagues (2003) define community youth development as:

...purposely creating environments that provide constructive, affirmative, and encouraging relationships that are sustained over time with adults and peers, while concurrently providing an array of opportunities that enable youth to build their competencies and become engaged as partners in their own development as well as the development of their communities (Perkins et al., 2003, p.6).

Because youth volunteers have opportunities to problem-solve, make decisions, and work with others, participation in these engagement experiences enable youth to be involved in a discovery process about their skills, talents, and interests. Indeed, both resiliency research and youth development research have found that opportunities to contribute or to “matter” within one’s context are linked with successful outcomes in adolescents (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Villarruel, et al., 2003). A sense of mattering is created when a youth is efficacious, that is, a youth has an opportunity and feels competent to do things that make a real difference in his or her social world (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). By engaging in acts to help others, youth gain a sense of generosity and self worth, as well as an opportunity to overcome the egocentric thinking so prevalent in adolescence. Youth involved in making contributions are reframing their self perceptions as well as other adult perceptions of them from being a problem to be solved and a receiver of services to being a resource and provider of services (Bernard, 2004; Perkins & Borden, 2003).

Implications to the Profession

A case in point, the South Dakota’s

New Communities Project: *Shape Up: Family Style*. (SUFS) is a collaborative effort between the South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service, McLaughlin School District, Standing Rock Indian Reservation, and the Brookings’ Community. This five-year project is supported by a grant from United States Department of Agriculture’s Children, Youth, and Families at Risk Initiative. The project’s purpose is to create an intentional environment with the help of community agencies and youth volunteers that supports families in the areas of nutrition and health. Families within the selected communities receive education about physical activity, nutrition, obesity, and diabetes within a formalized framework and the youth volunteers receive a sense of belonging and competence. SUFS addresses the physical and emotional needs of both early childhood and school-age children and their parents by educating the whole family in the areas of nutrition and physical activity. The targeted audience for the SUFS program is families with children between the ages of 4 and 14, who have potential health risks associated with obesity and diabetes, or whose family meets the income requirements set forth by the 2004 United States Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines.

As indicated in goal three, (see Table 1), youth volunteers or Youth Action Teams (YATs) are a mainstay of the program. YATs are composed of youth volunteers between the ages of 14-18. Teens were recruited through the school guidance counselors, who recommended students with the potential for leadership but youth who required some guidance. The success of the Youth Action Teams was dependent on three very important steps. First, the project site director met with the youth and his/her parent(s) about the youth being a potential YAT member. Having parent buy-in was

integral to the success of the YATs because parents were responsible for transportation to and from the program as well as encouraging their child to follow through with the commitment they agreed to complete. Furthermore, at these family meetings, goals for the YAT members were explained and agreed upon; the goals were threefold (see Table 1). The second step in the success of the YAT team was having each goal be modeled for the young volunteers. The goals included that YAT member would be responsible for promoting and modeling healthy lifestyles to younger members of the community. Each YAT member received hands-on training and mentoring by the SUFS staff and young college students majoring in the areas of health promotion and/or elementary education. Because of their relative closeness in age, these college-student mentors were able to connect with the YATS in a way that the adults were not able to. In addition, by relying on continuous mentoring relationship rather than relying upon a one-time training, SUFS increased the likelihood of sustained quality engagement of the youth given that one-time trainings generally do not have lasting effects. Consequently, by having role models, the YATs were able to become role models to the SUFS families; the teens were able to influence healthy lifestyle behaviors for the younger children, while reinforcing these same healthy lifestyle behaviors in themselves. Moreover, the YATs with the help of their mentors were able to help design and participated in physical activities during Family Fun Nights. These activities helped create a safe atmosphere for parents and children alike to explore different ways to meet their exercise needs. The activities also enabled the youth to feel as though they were important to the program and respected for their ideas, hence these activities represent the third step in the success of the

YAT teams. The YATs were not only asked to participate in the program but they were given opportunities that created a sense of mattering.

Figure 1
Goals of the Shape Up: Family Style program.

1. Nutrition education will be provided to both parents and children by having Family Nutrition Seminars, sending out newsletters to participants, and putting together a nutrition website for participants to access.
 2. Opportunities for children and families to participate in regular physical activity will be available during Family Rec Days.
 3. Youth Action Teams (youth volunteers) will be recruited and trained to participate in the program and give the program continuity. YAT members will work with families to help model and promote proper nutrition and physical activities.
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Each YAT member was expected to provide leadership at each SUFS Nutritional Nights. For example, the YAT members helped the at-risk families by preparing healthy meals and modeling food safety. Although the focus of the events was for families to learn about nutrition, Family Nutrition nights also afforded YATs the opportunity to gain a sense of mastery (in terms of cooking) and have a sense of mattering within their own community. This point was especially important to the YAT members of the McLaughlin School District (majority Native American youth) and the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Being a YAT member not only gave Native American

youth the ability to become leaders within their culture, but to also be able to extend that leadership with youth who were not part of the reservation. Thus, the Native American YAT members were able to feel competent on and off the reservation, something that is often a challenge. Moreover, each YAT member was to be an integral part of a national conference by helping host and present at workshops at the national Children, Youth, and Family at Risk conference.

As part of their role, teens provide approximately 100 hours to the project each year. The project has had YAT members who have volunteered consistently for over four years. The long-term engagement of youth in this project is a strong indication of its relevance to youth as longevity in youth development programs has been linked to better outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In order to learn why the YATs were willing to volunteer over a long period of time, the principle investigators of the program requested the YATs to write a focus paper on why they volunteered (and continued over a period of years) and discuss independently with an investigator on the importance of volunteering. While YAT members receive incentives (e.g., MP3 players, digital cameras, and gift cards) for actively participating, the YAT members have indicated that the creating and defining of personal convictions about the importance of health and nutrition has been an ongoing benefit of volunteering in the program. Moreover, the teens report that the new relationships they formed with the participants has benefited them outside of the project by helping them to interact appropriately with younger children, and to work with diverse populations. They saw improving their social-emotional intelligence as a critical competency for their future endeavors. The opportunity to travel and present at national conferences

have also been important reasons for them to consistently volunteer. The YAT members reported enjoying the opportunity to form positive relationships with adults within the South Dakota State University system. Finally, the YATs indicated that their parents encouraged them to participate in the project to help with the development of leadership abilities and self-confidence.

In conclusion, the community youth development (CYD) framework views youth as active participants that can and should contribute to families, schools, organizations, and communities. Youth should not be thought of as future leaders, but rather as leaders of today who deserve a voice in the decisions that affect their lives and their communities (Perkins, et al., 2003). Such opportunities to make a difference in one's social environment are a critical feature of a positive developmental setting according to Eccles and Gootman (2002). In their book sponsored by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, Eccles and Gootman provide strong evidence of the importance of experiences that provide youth with a sense of "mattering" (p. 103). For example, a youth's participation in family activities, school extracurricular activities, youth programs, and in other group activities provides a thread of connectedness that addresses a youth's need for belonging and recognition. Indeed, *Shape Up: Family Style* was originally created to help struggling families within the community. In reality, by incorporating parental buy-in, having on-going mentoring throughout the program by young college students, and creating an atmosphere of leadership for the YATs, it also became an intentional environment for youth to become change agents for their community and society.

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