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Exploring Youth Development Workers in the Process of Civic Youth Engagement in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of civic youth development within the wider context of Caribbean youth, specifically in Trinidad and Tobago. It is important to understand youth development from this perspective given the critical social and developmental changes within the Caribbean. A qualitative research methodology was used to examine these issues. Eighty-two adult youth development workers from across the country were asked a series of questions on their knowledge and understanding of civic engagement, barriers to involving youth in community activities, and what they feel motivates youth to participate. Data collected were analyzed using the NVIVO statistical software. Several themes emerged for each question in the data set. These included creating positive civic experiences, teaching youths to be good citizens, empowering youths, engaging youths in community activities, adult mentoring, parental and community involvement, generation gap, time and social constraints, incentives, adult involvement, and youth participation. The results provide a foundation upon which a model can be built for the full engagement of young people in programs and activities that can impact positively on their quality of life.

Keywords: Adult, Agriculture, Civic Engagement, Trinidad and Tobago, Youth Development

Introduction

An estimated 15% of the labor force in the Caribbean region is unemployed and of this 15%, there are 204,000 persons between the ages of 15-24 years (Brown-Chen, 1996). It has been reported that while Caribbean youth are generally happy and healthy, there are several factors present that have the potential to derail the process of positive youth development and engagement (World Bank, 2000). Some of these issues relate to unsustainable programs meant to provide quick fixes, use of the region as a trans-shipment mission point for drug trafficking, slow implementation of national youth policy, and expanding commercialism (Lewis, 1994; Mills, 2006; Nowak, 2001; Palmer, 2003; World Bank, 2000). Regional governments have recognized this looming problem and several short-term relief programs have been organized (Alexis, 2002). Most Caribbean countries have set up youth desks and departments in government, assigned public resources for youth and funded special programs for youth. However, in spite of these efforts, youth continue to be at serious risk because of underemployment and unemployment and this is evident in a rising tide of anti-social behavior: an upsurge in criminal activities, increased drug use and higher incidences of teenage pregnancies associated with these disengaged young people (Gupta, 2000; Singh & Mustapha, 1994).

Regionally, many of the programs which seek to develop the potential of young people often propose agriculture as a vehicle for their employment and transformation (Maximay, 1996; Seepersad, 1994). The reality is, however, that agriculture in the region is in steady decline with falling prices for traditional commodities, loss of preferential markets, severe demands on the sector to comply with multilateral and bilateral trading managements and a host of other domestic problems (Ganpat & Bholasingh, 1999). Other areas, focused on the development of youth in the region, must be explored at the same time.

Regardless of the programs being contemplated for young people, the key issues that impact the full engagement of youth must be understood. One of the several ways to elaborate these issues is to tap into the knowledge and understanding of those adults who interface with youth on a regular basis. The information generated can be used to develop civically engaged programs that enhance the well being of young people (Betts & Norquest, 1995).

Purpose

The primary purpose of this paper was to examine adult youth workers' understanding of civic engagement. The study also investigated the motivational factors associated with participation in civic activities and adults' knowledge of the barriers to implementing such civic activities with young people in Trinidad and Tobago. There is a pressing need to understand these issues from this perspective given the critical social and developmental changes taking place within the Caribbean and the restlessness of the young people. As youth become active members of society, it is crucial that they understand their role and the power they have as change agents within their own communities (Hoover & Webster, 2004). When adults engage youth in their communities, young people gain a greater awareness of opportunities and the potential impact they have on changing their current quality of life.

Methodology

The qualitative research was guided by an interpretative theory which grounds the researchers in the context of the participants and helps to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. Interpretive research does not predefine dependent and independent variables, but focuses on the full complexity of human sense making as the situation emerges (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994, p. 65).

Participants for the survey were targeted from workshops held during countrywide fall meetings on engaging youth participation in existing programs. The 82 participants were recruited because of their direct involvement in youth organizations that engage young people in positive activities throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Prior to the start of the workshops, participants were informed by the researchers that they would have the opportunity to participate in a voluntary survey. They were instructed that their decision to participate would require an extra 15 minutes of their time after the workshop. Individuals who chose to participate were instructed to stay seated at the close of the workshop in order to have an accurate count of the voluntary participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and the participants were assured that if they wished to stop taking the survey at any time, they could do so. The researchers had minimum contact with the participants during the workshop in order to not interfere with participants' potential responses on the survey.

The survey was developed by researchers at Pennsylvania State University and a Director at the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Marine Resources. In order to test for content validity, the survey was given to a panel of experts who work in youth development in Trinidad and at Penn State University. The survey was administered by two workshop facilitators identified by the Ministry of Agriculture, Marine and Land Resources. It consisted of seven open-ended questions which were used to gather the most comprehensive data and to assist with the formation of interview questions that would be used in subsequent field research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Participants responded to open ended questions to assess their knowledge and understanding of civic engagement, the factors that motivate adults to participate in civic activities, and to elicit the barriers to

implementing civic activities with youths throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

The researchers used content analysis to interpret the data. The statistical software package, NVIVO 2.0, assisted the researchers in analyzing the qualitative data in a constant comparative method and to ground the meanings that people assigned to particular activities and experiences in a flexible coding and analytical manner (Brown, Taylor, Baldy, Edwards & Oppenheimer, 1990; Crowley, Harré & Tagg, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This qualitative software package allowed the researchers to code data, examine themes across the data set, and look for patterns in responses. The researchers used a qualitative technique to analyze data which included taking notes, summarizing responses, developing categories, and sorting information to develop sub-themes. Colleagues in the department were responsible for reviewing the process and verifying results.

In this study, the researchers established credibility through triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. The researchers used thick description in the reporting of respondents' thoughts and ideas relative to the research questions and purposive sampling to establish transferability. Researchers had debriefing meetings throughout the study to ensure accurate descriptions and content analysis. An audit trail and journaling were used to establish dependability and confirmability. Using the above mentioned techniques as a part of the methodology of the study established trustworthiness.

Results

Sample Description

A demographic profile in Table 1 shows that more than one-half (59.8%) of the 82 respondents were female employees either in the school system or in the agricultural extension field. A small percentage of the total number of respondents (25.6%) had worked in

extension over 20 years and classified themselves as “a seasoned extension employee.” Eighty-one percent were employed in Trinidad and 29% were employed in Tobago.

Table 1

<i>Demographics</i>	
Variables	Percent
Gender	
Female	59.8
Male	31.1
Non Response	9.1
Years of Service	
1-5 years	29.3
6-10 years	18.3
11-15 years	9.8
16-20 years	2.4
20 years or greater	25.6
Non Response	14.6

Issues in Youth Development

Understanding Civic Engagement.

The first question explored adults understanding of civic engagement. It revealed four specific themes among respondents. Adults felt that civic engagement 1) created positive civic experiences for youth, 2) taught youths to be great citizens, 3) empowered youths to get involved in their community to create change, and 4) engaged youths in community activities to build pride, patriotism, and self esteem. Youth workers gave a variety of responses that supported the creation of these themes.

Theme 1: Creating Positive Civic Experiences

This theme was supported by responses such as,

- [Civic engagement is] *a meaningful and purposeful way to create positive experiences for youth—to stimulate their minds, provide service for others to be responsible and interactive with others.*

- *This is the process whereby the youth are positively encouraged to participate in learning activities geared toward both their personal development as well as the consideration of the variables and circumstances, etc. which would influence the person[’s] ability and willingness to learn.*

Respondents felt that civic engagement should involve youths and adults working together in communities, neighborhoods, and clubs to create mutual positive experiences. They supported the idea that positive experiences spanned across the entire society. Activities should include social, cultural, spiritual, and educational aspects of life across the country.

Theme 2: Teaching Youth to be great Citizens

The second theme was supported by comments from respondents that centered on building citizenship activities and programs. A comment by a male respondent, who was involved in a current after school program, is noteworthy.

- *Civic engagement is participation/involvement in programs/activities that would build civic responsibility, patriotism, etc.*

Citizenship was considered to be pride in oneself and one’s country, neighborhood, school, and church. Adult volunteers responded that without citizenship, youth will not know what it means to be part of a positive society. Other respondents suggested that youths should be involved in programs that promoted citizenship and inculcated a sense of cultural and ethnic pride. Citizenship meant that youths were responsible for the development and maintenance of their communities and worked collaboratively to achieve this goal. Individuals also felt that civic engagement

was about programs that taught youths about what it means to be a good citizen.

- *Civic engagement is to get [youths] involved in activities which would make [them] grow- both in courage [and] knowledge.*
- *Civic engagement is the continuous involvement of community and youth to improve youth's education and socialization skills.*
- *Effectively communicating with young people and getting them interested to become united in meaningful activity for people and development and eventually raising their standard of caring.*
- *Meaningful and purposeful intent to create experience for youths. Stimulation of their mind. Enhancement of critical thinking skills. It is also the involvement of youths in community activities.*

Theme 3: Involvement in Community for Change

The third theme of the importance of community change was expressed through a variety of comments. Each of the comments reflected the need for civic engagement to help young people engage in meaningful activities in their communities throughout the country. For example one respondent described civic engagement as a way for “youths being involved with other communities and not in one stable community throughout the country.” They noted that it was important for youths to help others, not just themselves. This was seen as a way to give back to others and build on the idea of good citizenship. The comments below which discuss the notion of community building and citizenship are instructive:

- *I think that youth civic engagement is things that youths should be doing to make an input in society.*
- *[Civic engagement] is engaging youth in activities which would allow*

them to participate in community building and self development.

- *[Civic engagement] is to do something for your community.*
- *Participation of youths in various programs. A way or method of getting youths to do more within their community or club.*

Theme 4: Engagement to Build Pride, Self Esteem and Patriotism

The fourth theme which focused on engaging youths in community activities to build pride, patriotism, and self esteem was built on the comments that centered on self-esteem and sense of pride. For example, one respondent commented that, “[youth civic engagement] is community service with a view to develop a sense of pride and responsibility toward their community.”

Other comments which echoed this response were:

- *Getting youth involved in community/national projects that promote development of self and community and ultimately promote positive self sufficiency.*
- *[Civic engagement] is [youths] learning about their country and community and helping to promote and improve them both.*

Adults commented that civic engagement was a way to encourage youths to be proud citizens through their good works. It was not enough to just be a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, but rather a person who was well-balanced, caring and capable of working with others to build and maintain a healthy society.

Barriers to Youth Involvement in Community Programs

The second question explored adults' knowledge about the barriers faced in getting youth involved in their community. The overwhelming majority of participants (75%) responded that there were definite barriers and difficulties in involving youth in

their communities. Five themes emerged as barriers for adults who worked with youth—lack of adult mentoring, lack of parental and community involvement, generation gap, time and social constraints and lack of incentives (lack of appeal).

Theme 1: Lack of Adult Mentoring

The lack of adult mentoring seemed to be the major concern cited throughout the responses. Adults commented that difficulties generated from the lack of “good adult mentoring” and “no one taking responsibility for guiding youths.” Other adults commented on the need for motivational leaders to engage youth and to “guide their energies and skills in the right direction.” One adult suggested that adult mentoring was the ability of adults to look at youths as valuable persons with experiences and knowledge to give in programs. This was echoed by the comment:

- [Youth] *feel a sense of distrust since they are accused by adults. If they genuinely trust an adult that makes them feel good about themselves, then they respond.*

Theme 2: Lack of Parental and Community Involvement

This theme emerged from comments and ideas around the limited participation of parents and community members in the lives of youths. For example, several respondents commented on the environment and the lack of support from the home and parents. This was further supported by the comments about the lack of motivation that centered on parents and their involvement in their children’s activities. One participant stated that due to the lack of approval by parents, it was difficult to motivate youth in community activities.

Theme 3: Age Differences

The differences in ages between the adults and the youths surfaced as a theme in this section. Respondents commented that due to the age difference between youth

participants and adult mentors, the youth were less inclined to become involved in programs. This “generation gap” as it is referred to locally, created a perception that “adults do not understand youths.” Other comments suggested that some youth were not respected by some adults. This was illustrated in the following responses:

- *Yes, it is difficult for youth to get involved in their community. Youth are not taken seriously. Youth believe that they are not respected by adults.*
- *Because of the way older folk approach things that concerns them and the way the older folks respond to questions [and situations differently] young people find it difficult to relate to them.*

Respondents felt the “generation gap” as defined by the local culture between adults and youth was the cause for a lack of respect and interest in working with older people. This was a problem individuals felt would continue to be problematic until addressed by adults and youth alike.

Theme 4: Time and Social Constraints

The work and school schedules of individuals as well as peer pressure helped create the theme, time and social constraints. First, adults expressed that young people’s time is limited due to their academic studies and work. They felt the pressure of academics deterred youth from becoming involved in community activities. One respondent supported this idea with the following comment, “...because of the tremendous number of distractions and the fact that they must focus on studying for academic excellence [youth are not involved in our programs].” Other adults also discussed the need for youth to do well in school because of pressures from parents and other members of the community. In addition to these issues, adults also expressed other social pressures faced by youths that inhibited involvement. A social

constraint, namely negative peer pressure, was a major problem voiced by the respondents. Peer pressure originated from other peers, television, cultural influences, and technology. These problems were expressed in the following comments by respondents:

- *American cultural influence, cable TV, video games, inhibit youth from community activities.*
- *It [youth community involvement] depends on the community. If drugs are prevalent there is the lure of easy living.*
- *It is difficult for some youth to get involved in their community because of peer pressure- cannot socialize and other social problems.*
- *If they [youth] are not up to standard with others (peer, academic, etc.) they might not be accepted by those who are involved.*

Theme 5: Lack of Incentives

Adults felt that there was an overwhelming lack of enthusiasm by youth to participate in community activities. They felt this was due to the lack of incentives and rewards offered in programs. Respondents expressed the need for greater stimuli by adults, financial rewards, and more appealing choices of activities. Adults also felt that if youth had a greater variety of choices in the programs, they would be more inclined to stay involved. Incentives and rewards would not only attract youth, but keep them interested over a longer period of time.

Motivating Youth Participation in Community Activities

Motivation to assist young people in becoming civically involved in their communities and neighborhoods was a key concern of the adults surveyed. The two major themes that developed from this question were (1) adult involvement and (2) youth participation.

Theme 1: Adult Involvement

Several respondents expressed the need for adults to be more involved in the lives of young people through volunteer activities and community programs. They stated that more opportunities needed to be created for adults' engagement, through governmental sponsored programs, churches, school programs, and community organizations. Adults discussed the need for an organized approach to involvement of youth through collaboration and group activities involving both adults and youths. For example, one respondent stated that "*by being more accepting of our young persons and including them in planning activities, and by guiding them, encouraging them to get involved and by asking their opinion and acting on it [adults assist in young people's involvement in neighborhoods and communities].*"

Adult involvement also included the serious engagement of youth working on the planning and implementation of programs. Although this was a relatively new concept, adults felt this was a needed approach in order to have maximum participation of youth in community programs. Several comments supported this type of involvement as noted below:

- *Adults need to volunteer their time and knowledge in the project-- that will elevate the youth.*
- *By finding out the needs of the youth in the community [one can] get them to help in the planning of the projects [and get] them to work in the implementation of the program.*

Other adults also commented that motivating youth would come from constant communication and positive participation by the adult. Any efforts to promote youth participation would need to tap into the knowledge and expertise of a variety of adults in various communities. Programs and workshops for community leaders using the resources available in schools and other

learning institutions were suggested as ways to support adult leaders across the country.

Theme 2: Youth Participation

The second theme, youth participation, emerged through the comments that reflected the voice of youth in community programs. Adults felt that the best motivating factor was allowing the youth to be active and vital members of the programs. Moving away from the traditional concept of being seen and not heard, adults felt that youth should have an active role and voice in community activities and programs. This could be developed through trust, building up the youths' confidence, involving them in the planning process, asking their opinions, incorporating their personal experiences in the programs, making them role models, encouraging them to make valuable decisions, and accepting them as members of the community planning team. One respondent expressed that adults should, "*give youths a voice that can be heard. Many adults do not allow youths to give an opinion therefore their involvement is very rare.*"

Adults understand that they play a vital role in facilitating the youth voice process. As expressed by one respondent, "*First and foremost- create a forum for both teens and adults to talk, talk, talk, and then one can organize relevant programs.*" The majority of respondents said that adults needed to be responsible for the development of youth through a variety of strategies. Some felt that it was through direct interaction and involvement, positive mentoring, holistic participation, and listening. Others felt it was through joint programming efforts between adults and youth such as youth and adult partnerships or teen boards. Based on the range of examples provided in the data set, it was understood that Trinidad and Tobago adult youth development workers felt that youth must be a part of the process in order for significant changes to occur in motivating

young people to become involved in civic activities in their communities.

Discussion

According to the 2020 Vision plan set forth by the Trinidad government, by the year 2020, Trinidad citizens will be, "a united, resilient, productive, innovative and prosperous nation with a disciplined, caring, fun loving society comprising healthy, happy and well-educated people and built on the enduring attributes of self-reliance, respect, tolerance, equity and integrity..." (GORTT, 2005). This extensive plan suggests that individuals take a proactive role in creating a sustainable government, society, and people. By creating the foundation for a more holistic society, the government has urged individuals to be a catalyst to these changes in behaviour and actions.

As is suggested by the comments from the participants in this study, adults realized their role in the quest for creating a safe and nurturing environment for themselves and the generations to follow. They suggested that they play a vital role in the social and civic development of young people within their country, but were not always a part of the solution. This could be attributed to the current role of policies and programs geared towards youth development. Programs which are inclusive of youth voice, active participation of adults, and demonstrate a clear vision for positive youth development is the model that is believed to be the best fit for addressing the youth population. This model could also serve as a template for government organizations, schools, and other agencies that work with youth populations across the country.

Participants shared that the concept of "citizenship" was not a notion common to youth in Trinidad and Tobago. This could be due to a lack of understanding or general naivety by the youth population. If citizenship is not a concrete idea taught in the general society, youth may have a

difficult time understanding the concept. In this context, civic engagement could be reinforced through youth programs and modeled by the adults. By encouraging youth and adult interaction, there is a greater chance for youth to gain awareness and understanding of citizenship.

The adult/youth model also provides an avenue for youth and adults to work together to address local and national issues. The ability for youth to work with adults provides a foundation for cooperative learning and respect. It allows youth to gain a greater understanding of the adults in their communities and in other areas of society. More importantly, youth are exposed to the structure and leadership of organizations which serve as fundamental agencies within their local communities. Youth exposure and interactions within these institutions provides them with an understanding and a base for how they operate and provide services to the citizens of the country.

Adults felt most of the youth of the country were disengaged individuals who were not necessarily involved in meaningful activities. Perhaps with a better understanding of their role as citizens, youth's apathetic attitude could be reversed. Youth who understand their role in the greater fabric of society could be more productive and engaging citizens. In the context of Trinidad and Tobago, civic engagement could serve as a tool which could positively engage youth in the cultural, social, and spiritual fabric of life.

Respondents expressed that civic engagement should be an integral part of the society. Inclusion of these types of concepts helps to create positive experiences for both youth and adults. Building a society of individuals who understands and values civic engagement, could in turn, reduce some of the noted barriers expressed by adults. Several of the mentioned barriers to engaging youth were issues that could be addressed through behavior and attitude changes. If parents and youth were part of a system that incorporated civic activities and

promoted activities for civic engagement at all levels, youth development workers would be able to work cooperatively with parents and their children. They would also have a better connection with the youth in spite of an age difference. An inclusionary spirit of civic engagement from the family would also promote community pride and patriotism thereby assisting in the creation of an engaged youth population. This would also assist youth development workers in incorporating activities that they deem as important and necessary to the mental, social, and psychological development of youth in Trinidad and Tobago.

Conclusion

Based on this study, several pertinent areas related to the role of youth development workers in the process of civic engagement have become clearer and highlight the critical role they play. In the context of changing the Caribbean social landscape, youth development workers signal the need for alternative forms of engagement. Providing alternative mechanisms for engagement to youth development workers in Caribbean countries will broaden their context of learning and allow them to assist in the development of youth across all walks of life. The several themes distilled from the responses to the questions investigated in this study point to key critical areas that must be addressed if a solid foundation is to be built for the full engagement of young people. Concepts such as the promotion of citizenship and empowerment along with genuine dialogue with young people can serve as good entry points to start dismantling several barriers to participation identified. Also, the several actions which promote full participation of youth will certainly go a long way toward building a new culture of full youth engagement. As youth gain a greater sense of ownership and pride in themselves and their programs, they will begin to become integral parts of the society and add to the

civic richness found throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

It is now also evident that youth development workers across the country will need greater training and understanding of their role in this process. They must be familiar with the models that can be used to engage youth; models that have proven successful in other Caribbean and Latin American countries. These include service learning and experiential models. By bringing greater awareness to these individuals, they will have a more realistic view of their role and the potential they have for making a larger impact on the lives of these young people.

Implications for Youth Development in Trinidad and Tobago

The restlessness of young people in the region together with high unemployment and unproductive time on their hands constitute a recipe for trouble. Providing interactive and engaging educational programs for these youth is part of the solution to this looming problem. It appears that most of the issues brought to the fore as a result of this investigation can be addressed through education, not only for young people, but also for adults who work with them. Such educational programs can help in all areas of youth development, but can provide the agricultural sector with a new breed of young persons so urgently needed to reverse the rising tide of antisocial behaviour.

The results from this study will serve as a guide and conversation piece for individuals who work with youth. By understanding the implications for youth engagement, adults may have greater success in connecting youth to a variety of programs that will build communities and individuals. For this to happen however, adults need to be grounded in the concepts and practices of youth development if they are to shape young persons for now and the future. When adults fully understand the implications for youth engagement, they will

have success in programs conducted on their behalf.

In order to capitalize on the strengths of existing programs and create more sustainable programs, the agricultural field would seem the most likely programmatic area to develop. Agricultural programs have received funding and widespread support for creatively developing several facets of life for Trinidadian youth and adults, but there is a need still to expand programs in the future. Newly created programs would need to focus on areas identified in this study such as building youth confidence, self esteem and entrepreneurial spirit. This could have the effect of deepening youth's understanding of their role and function in society. Furthermore, it can help create a class of young people who are striving to create a positive change not only for themselves, but the country and region at large.

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