The Importance of Promoting Connectedness Through Developmentally Structured Work Experiences

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Abstract

Students at risk for dropping out tend to feel disconnected from school, their families and other social worlds. Feeling disconnected, many underachieving youth respond by rejecting the conventional institutions of work and school, thereby exacerbating their disconnectedness, diminishing their self-esteem, and thwarting their vocational and self-development. One strategy for promoting self development and self-esteem among academically disconnected youth is to mobilize the processes of social and self development by constructing school-to-work programs that provide structured opportunities for vocational and self development. In this article, a developmental theory of adolescent connectedness is used to illustrate the developmental properties of an alternative education program designed to promote self-development, academic success, and vocational commitment.

The Importance of Promoting Connectedness Through Developmentally Structured Work Experiences

There are developmental consequences for students who are identified as being less academically successful in school than their peers. Deficits in both self-esteem and skill development often result from the stigma associated with being a member of an underachieving group (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995). This is because praise, empathic understanding, and positive attention—necessary for self-esteem and self-development—are less often provided by teachers, parents, and peers to underachievers than to their more academically and socially successful peers. However, alternative education programs can be developed to re-engage these youth. The matter of how to construct such programs may be addressed by first analyzing how traditional schools fail underachieving youth, and, second, by asking what it would take to jump-start their social, academic, and vocational development.

The problem of stigma for underachievers is a perennial one because academic stratification in public schools does not provide all students the same developmental experiences. There are at least two reasons for this. First, most public schools in the United States use norm-driven standards and assessments as measures of success, the structure of which ensure that not all children can be academically successful. When statistical norms and achievement scores create within group stratification of students along some measure of academic success, some youth will always fall below the midpoint of the bell curve. Where youth fall on this achievement-underachievement continuum dramatically affects their educational experiences.

Second, the behavioral and academic reward systems used in schools are not equally motivating for all youth. For example, often the use of negative consequences to shape students' behaviors is neither well received nor very effective with underachieving adolescents (Bullara, 1993; Cameron, 1998). Youth who are at risk for dropping out of school often do not respond as their peers to the traditional methods of evaluating success and shaping behavior (Wehlage, 1989). Rather than conform, many underachieving and delinquent youth reject the validity of the schools' standards of success and minimize or disregard institutional consequences for their misbehavior. They do this because they are aware that school is a "zero-sum" game, the system cannot promote the success of all youth equally (Jankowski, 1991). That such youth reject these traditional school norms is understandable and predictable (Apple, 1989).

Disconnection in Response to Conventional Institutions

Merton's (1938) work helps to explain why the behavior of underachieving adolescents is not so easily modified or controlled within traditional educational settings. He describes four types of responses that adolescents have to the traditional rules and consequences in school systems. The first response, the one that most educators expect, is for adolescents to understand and value the rules and rewards of the school system and to strive to be successful within the system. Alternatively, response two is that some youth will rebel against the rules of the system and try to change the system. A third response, common among underachievers, is to reject the school's rule system or social norms (i.e., consequences) and become normless, alienated, and disengaged from school. The fourth is to reject the system (i.e., the school), to leave it, and then to create an alternative subculture with its own rules and consequences within which the

adolescent can feel more successful (Jankowski, 1991). These last two responses are common among underachieving and delinquent youth, and reflect disconnection from school and from society in ways that put them at-risk for dropping out and delinquency (Newmann, 1989).

Youths' past experiences of social and contextual support within social institutions, especially within the family, appear to influence the type of response youth make to school rules and consequences. Typically those youth who enter school having previously experienced other institutions (e.g., family, neighborhood) as chaotic, inconsistent, and punishing will interpret most consequences as barriers to their immediate needs and signs of external threat (Dodge & Price, 1994). Such youth often lack the fundamental building blocks of self-development—self-esteem, confidence in their skills, identity development, and faith in conventional institutions or the future (Jessor, 1993). These elements of self-development typically develop within homes and families where life is organized and predictable, and where relationships are characterized by consistency, emotional support, and interpersonal trust (Winnicott, 1965). Youth from neighborhoods, homes, and families where such experiences are less common often seek out these experiences in the school and other institutions. Because of the primacy of these basic needs for warmth, esteem, competence, and structure, however, underachieving youth often become more concerned about gratifying these immediate needs than about preparing for their future.

Yet, many schools do not meet these basic relational needs and, educators' use of some methods of evaluation and discipline further preclude these youth from receiving the empathy, praise, and attention they need. When these needs cannot be met at school, youth may downplay the importance of school as well as other institutions that reflect conventional values (Jessor, 1993). Consequently, many underachieving students disengage, begin to devalue the importance of school, and experience further disconnection from their school, family, and peers, all of which further exacerbates their status as unsuccessful students at risk.

Developmental Education: How Emotional and Contextual Support Promote Self-Development

The key question is: how can schools reconnect youth to those persons and activities that foster positive development? A growing body of research indicates that adolescent connectedness to the conventional worlds of family and school is a necessary component of successful development (Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000; Cooper, Grotevant & Condon, 1983; Hendry & Reid, 2000; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). Connectedness can be characterized as the amount of adolescents' involvement in and concern for people and places in their social ecology (Karcher, 2001). Connectedness to the people and places in adolescents' social ecology may be conventional or unconventional, depending on whether the values and activities in those relationships and places are mediated by adults or children (Jessor, 1993). Family, schools, and work are conventional because activities in these contexts are mediated by adults and positive attitudes towards these worlds reflect conventional, adult-supported values.

Kohut's (1977) model of self psychology posits that two types of social support are fundamental to the basic building blocks of the self: self-esteem, identity, skill development, and faith in institutions and the future. First, youth must experience emotional support, in the form of

genuine empathy, praise, and attention from others, which elicits self-esteem. Second, youth must experience environments characterized by high environmental or contextual support that can foster identity development and youth's identification with the conventional world of adulthood. A positive sense of connectedness to a vision of one's self-in-the-future and a belief in one's ability to function well in society are dependent on receiving these two basic building blocks: self-esteem and identity.

The first task in self-development is the achievement of self-esteem. Kohut and others argue that self-esteem develops through a reciprocal process of being praised and attended to in relationships (Harter, 1999; Kohut, 1977). Kohut suggests that the first need in life, and the most primary human need, is for empathy, praise, and attention. This need is present throughout life and is central to self-esteem and identity development.

The second task in self-development described by developmental theorists like Kohut and Erikson is the achievement of a cohesive identity. An identity reflects the sense of who one is, what one can do, and what one likes. An identity can be described as being mature and cohesive when it integrates multiple skills and abilities, and when it provides the individual with a sense of self that can endure across multiple contexts over time (Erikson, 1968). Self-esteem combined with supportive contexts for skill development facilitate the development of identity (Cooper, Grotevant, & Condon, 1983).

There are three types of contextual development that directly contribute to identity development and conventional values: (a) clearly defined examples of rewarded behaviors that are consistently modeled by adults, whom the adolescent sees as competent and emotionally supportive (Kohut & Wolf, 1978; Rogoff, 1991), (b) opportunities for skill development and the coaching necessary to develop skills just beyond his or her level of knowledge and competence (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978), and (c) activities that foster the youths' belief that successful engagement in these tasks will result in a positive future (Hirschi, 1969; Jessor, 1993).

There appears to be a three-step process by which success at specific activities, like schoolwork or employment, leads youth to become connected to those conventional activities as well as to the institutions and people that practice them (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). First, adolescents begin to value the activities at which they feel successful. Then adolescents begin to value those individuals who praise them for their success in these activities. Finally, adolescents internalize others' praising function by increasingly praising themselves. When adolescents begin to internalize others' emotionally supportive comments about their performance of specific activities (by making these statements to themselves), they begin to take over the process of self-esteeming by conveying internally the praise and empathy that was previously conveyed to them by others.

Alternative education programs should be structured to provide experiences that promote these core aspects of self-development: self-esteem, identity development, and a future orientation (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). The emotional support that is conveyed through personal attachments, praise, empathic understanding, and positive attention from others can tell the adolescent "You are important." The contextual support that is provided through structured opportunities for skill development and that are accompanied by clear guidance from someone

the adolescent sees as competent, consistent, and caring can instill feelings of "I can" or "I am competent and capable." And when skill development opportunities are experienced as purposeful and immediately rewarding, the youth may come to envision personal and career goals that relate to their futures and that evoke a sense of "I will" or "I should." This combination of "I am important," "I can do this" and "I should do these things to secure my future" typically encourages conventional behaviors and attitudes, and facilitates commitment to school and work.

The goal of developmental education should be to expand the adolescent's identity through increased connectedness across the conventional social ecologies of school, home, and work that underachieving youth tend to reject (Bonny et al., 2000; Hendry & Reid, 2000; Jessor, 1993). By building up youth's self-esteem and identity, developmental education programs can help a previously fragile, defensive, or immature youth develop an identity that can withstand the occasional and inevitable slings and arrows of everyday social existence. But only self-esteem and identity based on real experiences of success will lead youth to expect future successes in the conventional worlds of school and work (Damon, 1995). To instill in underachieving youth a vision of themselves in the future that both identifies with and feels esteemed by the conventional institutions of school and work, alternative education programs should sequence developmental experiences that guide youth through these three steps of self-development.

The Madison, Wisconsin Work and Learn Center: Alternative Education as a Developmental Intervention

From this developmental perspective the key to successful alternative program development is providing social support and structured opportunities that promote connectedness to school and to work. The Work and Learn Center (WLC) provides one example of how an alternative education program can be used to promote adolescents' self development by strengthening the adolescents' sense of connectedness to the conventional worlds of school and work. WLC has an impressive record of consistently graduating an average of three quarters of participating youth, most of whom had officially dropped out of school before the end of 10th grade. We describe this program to illustrate how a developmentally sequenced set of opportunities can mobilize youths' self-development, academic achievement, and career exploration.

The program targets high school students who have dropped out or are likely to drop out. WLC was designed to serve 64 students, ranging in age from 16 to 20 years old, with 16 new students enrolled in each semester of the two-year, four-semester program. In the program, students have a single teacher who teaches several subjects and who supervises the students in the work component of the program. This staffing pattern was employed to facilitate closer connections between the students and the teachers than is common in most high schools. The program avoids the seemingly artificial qualities of traditional grading systems by setting benchmarks for successful work and attendance. The high school diploma is awarded after successful completion of the program's two-year sequence of academic and career-related requirements. During the program, WLC students attend school for a half-day and work for the other half of the day. But what distinguishes this program the most from other alternative education programs and work-study programs is the developmentally orchestrated sequence of experiences.

There are five work experiences that are developmentally sequenced across a two-year period. The first work experience is a full semester in length and places students in a childcare center or a school that serves children under the age of six. For half of the second semester in the program, the WLC students work at a construction site under the leadership of a community-based agency that builds homes for low-income families.

During the other half of the second semester students work at a home for the elderly. During the second year in WLC, students begin to self-determine where they will work. Based on interest inventories, vocational counseling, and other opportunities to determine career goals and aspirations, the students are asked to select two jobs for employment during the third semester in the program. Students are encouraged to try to work in jobs that represent high-level aspirations—to try something difficult to see if they can do it and to see if it is really what they might want to strive for in the future. This is called tryout employment and is usually an unpaid internship or mentorship. By choosing an unpaid position they can gain access to more advanced work opportunities than they could attain based on their training. For example, some third semester students have worked alongside nurses, architects, and diesel mechanics.

One goal of the third semester is to prepare youth for paid job placement in the fourth and last semester in the program. The last placement is often one of the jobs the student had tried during the third semester, and is almost always a paid position that the student can keep upon graduation. Although the fourth semester WLC students are still not sufficiently well trained for many jobs, over the years businesses have made significant investments in these students by finding ways to pay them while they are gaining the skills to be a productive employee. For example, a truck repair firm had a student do oil changes for part of each day (to earn his keep), and then work with a master mechanic for part of the day to provide a significant learning experience. Through this program, by the time students reach graduation, they have experienced what the work world is like and have made important connections in the areas of employment that interest them.

Developmental Principles for Promoting Connectedness in Alternative Education Programming

The WLC program facilitates self-esteem by providing a developmental sequence of vocational opportunities that provide consistent doses of empathy, praise and attention. Students begin with experiences with children, who provide emotional support unconditionally. Then they work with elderly and as part of a construction team, both of which provide slightly more challenge and conditional praise. Finally they enter a fast paced business setting in which they are expected to perform at a higher level. By involving youth in activities in which interpersonal connectedness and commitment to work can develop, the WLC program instills in youth the belief that they can be important members of the world of work.

How does the WLC program provide contextual support for students at risk of dropping out of school? Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) argued that the developmental aims of education is to present students with a challenge that is just beyond the limits of their current thinking. From this perspective, there must be an optimal level of challenge in the activities at each step of the WLC program, just enough to make clear the inadequacy of the student's thinking and present skills,

but not so much that the student will give up or be incapable of performing successfully (Vygotsky, 1978).

In both the work and classroom experiences in WLC the goal is to elicit active engagement through learning tasks that are just beyond the students' everyday understanding of themselves and their larger social ecologies. The WLC employment sequence begins with basic child care giving, eliminate "which was" followed by more complex interpersonal interactions with the elderly coupled with team-based cooperation in a more demanding activity (home building), followed by two more complex, personally meaningful work experiences. This approach of providing tasks of increasing complexity and personal interest also occurs in the classroom through teachers' attempts to push students to entertain new ideas and social perspectives. For example, one student who had no trust in the police was invited to ride along with police officers for two eight hour shifts to see the police in action and to begin to understand the world from the perspective of police trying to do their jobs.

A third task in developmental education is to affect students' perception of their future opportunities. The Work and Learn Program helps students to develop a belief in the efficacy of school and to see its links with success in adulthood. The developmental sequence of work opportunities provides a clear, sequential pathway leading from high school classes to graduation. It strengthens the link between school and work for graduates by helping them to retain upon graduation the jobs they have successfully completed in their final semester in the program. For students with aspirations of higher education, program staff facilitate a transition, and WLC awards college scholarships, thereby ensuring that successful participation in the WLC **comes** with some guarantees about the future.

Summary

The Work and Learn Center Program provides a developmentally guided form of alternative education for re-engaging disconnected and underachieving students. Students at risk for dropping out tend to feel disconnected from school, as well as from their families and from other conventional institutions like work. Feeling disconnected, they respond by rejecting institutions like the family, school, and work. This exacerbates their disconnection, diminishes their self-esteem, and thwarts their self-development. Selecting the best strategies for promoting self development and self-esteem among disconnected youth requires an understanding of the processes of self development and the use of these principles to construct programs. We argued that effective programs must provide opportunities for self- and skill development as well as increased connectedness with teachers and employers. The Work and Learn Program's sequence of systematic structured work opportunities provide youth with emotional and contextual support that serves to re-establish their connectedness to conventional institutions like school and work and that mobilizes their self-development.

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