

INCREASING COMMUNITY CONNECTION TO BUILD SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

By La'Shante D. Grigsby

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on interactions and conversations with youth participants as well as other young people in my local community about their understanding of social capital and connection to community, I grew curious to understand more about how communities function as spaces for young people to increase social capital. This paper explores social connections between young people (ages 13 to 24) and their community, as well as the role of community in boosting connectivity to increase community ties and the social capital of young people. Using secondary research and lived experience, I examined the foundations for community connectedness and the benefits of connection for young people and found that if youth are positively connected and valued by their communities, they are able to add context to their emerging sense of self, cultivating meaningful relationships and building social networks. When communities recognize what they see as change agents of the future and collaborators of the present, there is infinite potential for young people and communities to thrive. When examining Graham's statement it is evident that multiple factors are at play. Though Toya Graham was upset with the way her son was acting, she also acknowledged that police have not always been protectors of African Americans. In an interview with Fox News she said, "Well, before Freddie Gray, there was always hostility towards a lot of the residents and the police officers. They are here to protect and serve us, but we are also human beings first. And a lot of times we don't get that respect from the police officers." (Graham, 2015).

Key words: youth development, social capital, community connection

FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITY

Communities are the foundation of our everyday lives; providing exposure, accessibility, and connection for our lived experiences. The concept of community is perceived and experienced differently based on ones' race, class, religion and geographic location, which have effects on how a community is connected and accessed by its members. This paper focuses on the personal and social connection that communities provide for their members, especially the young people. Connection to community is cultivated by the development of relationships amongst its members, which relies heavily on social interactions and engagement. These members can then begin to shape a set of values, beliefs and codes of conduct conducive to community needs. This cultivation of social connection provides the opportunity to those who inhabit that space to formulate ties, share resources and invest in the capital of one another by increasing their network of people, awareness and exposure to new possibilities and underutilized resources, such as business classes offered at a local community center or makerspaces for aspiring artists. Social and personal

connection to one's communities can be sustained only if all community members are allotted the opportunity to contribute. My questions then are:

- If communities are created through shared understanding, shared resources and social connection; why do young people feel disconnected from their communities?
- How does this affect their potential to develop social capital?

In this paper, I explore how connecting youth to their communities provides the unique opportunity to build trust and efficacy that will position young people to explore dreams, foster positive relationships with their peers, adults and the broader community.

DISCUSSION

Young people feel connected to their communities based on how they are welcomed, perceived, engaged and encouraged by others within their community, including neighbors, local business owners, law enforcement, and others. If some young people are consistently seen as disruptive, untruthful, rebellious or more “adult-like,” their social connection to community is likely to be limited or even nonexistent because it is likely that they are monitored more, controlled more, have less access and freedom to explore based on how youthhood is being perceived by elders and more authoritative figures in the community. The social connection young people feel to their communities influences their experiences within it; if young people do not feel welcomed, it is less likely for other members to invest in the young people's social capital or believe they can contribute in any way. These young people are socially disconnected, lacking the exposure to information, resources and opportunities for both personal and professional growth. They are denied the opportunity to develop skills in civic engagement, network, and map resources within their communities. It is my intention to explore how communities support their young people in attaining and developing social capital through increasing community connections.

“Youth work is a way of working with young people that has been thought up and practiced by human beings—in all their diversity” (Davies, 2010, p. 1), which simply means that everyone is capable of being a youth worker, including librarians, policy makers, law enforcement, and ordinary community members. Small investments in young people can go a long way. These investments do not have to be monetary—they can be small tokens that are given through time, talent, acknowledgment or validation—modeling a new standard for community that encourages positive relationships between young people and adults, community engagement, efficacy and reciprocity. Communities thrive when they nurture their assets—and young people *are* assets, not liabilities. They possess distinct lived experiences, skills, abilities, talents and information that can be beneficial to their communities. The nurturing of these assets or just the mere opportunity to be exposed to available resources in their communities allows young people to explore and learn about their community as well as develop social networks.

In addition, one's social capital is formed through the collection and development of resources made possible through access to information and opportunities. Community investment and the promotion of access, exposure and engagement in young people allow for meaningful relationships to be formed, talents to be explored and fostered as well as for new networks to be created. The networks we have and are exposed to often influence the trajectory of our lives, both personally and professionally. Young people can be encouraged to participate civically and engage socially simply by being given the opportunity to be seen as young people with free spirits, inquisitive minds, sometimes disruptive behavior, and infinite potential, if given the freedom to genuinely explore their communities unrestricted. Young people deserve to be

connected and valued by their communities and through that experience they are able to add context to their emerging sense of self while cultivating their social capital and building community.

PROMOTING COMMUNITY CONNECTION AS AN ASSET

People are our greatest assets because they possess a plethora of information, experience, and capital. Moreover, social capital has infinite potential, which is very difficult to measure and assumedly appreciates over time. Social capital is a tool of necessity for all people—whether used for access to educational needs, employment resources, housing or health care needs, it is a tool for economic and social survival—and without this knowledge and access, young people are not given an equitable opportunity to thrive.

As a youth work practitioner, I have witnessed that youth rely heavily on systems or institutions for support and connections to resources. However, when asked about familial or communal ties to their desired goals, they are often unaware that within these forgotten networks there are individuals with access to pertinent information and resources. The most important factors in this process are: asking the right questions, actively listening, encouraging reflection, and allowing for young people to see the connections. The responsibility of increasing young people's connection to their communities relies heavily upon us, as youth workers, and others who interact with young people, irrespective of the capacity.

It is through the experience of resource mapping with a young person seeking to become an artist that I realized how often communities are overlooked as places for connection to a broader goal or skill acquisition. Through this process the young person was able to identify individuals within the community who possessed a similar skill or access to equipment that would allow the youth to explore their own talent and career aspirations. The youth also gained a relationship with a member of their social network, thereby increasing their social capital and connection to community. Other examples of this work can be found in spaces, such as Courageous heARTS, Kulture Klub Collaborative, In Progress, Golden Thyme Café, etc., these spaces allow for young people to form meaningful relationships, engage in multi-generational interactions as well as explore self and identity through the process of creating and reflection. The aforementioned spaces are also influential pillars in the community working closely with both young people and adults as well as encouraging partnerships between young people and adults.

It is imperative that communities begin to view their young people as assets, not liabilities; shifting language allows for mindsets to transform and behaviors to change. When young people have the opportunity to explore and engage within their communities around their interests, it creates a bond with community that allows for youth to contribute and/or shift community values and norms. It provides a foundation for social cohesiveness and efficacy as young people gain access to new resources and social networks previously unknown. Positive youth development includes both young people and adults working together to create a more inclusive and understanding community for generations to come. Exposure and engagement present the opportunity for young people to gain information, tools, and a network that aid in the construction of their own social capital and development. Through this process young people also foster trust with the community, which influences their connection and willingness to contribute by giving back what has been given to them. With positive social connections made to community, young people become aware of their resources and allies that will allow them to be their authentic selves, explore their identities, and foster meaningful relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If used as a tool to explore and pursue interests, communities can become assets and resources to be nurtured and utilized by their members. Social capital is inherent to the structure of relationships. To possess social capital, one must have a relationship with others outside of the traditional family group; this will then allow young people to maximize their network and opportunities for growth and exploration. When young people are connected to their communities they have the unique opportunity to build trust, efficacy, shifts community perception, and most importantly, explore their interests. Communities can begin this process by reframing harmful narratives and perspectives of young people by intentionally interacting with the young people who co-exist within their communities. This is especially important for nontraditional spaces such as corner market stores, beauty/barber salons, nail salons, as well as other spaces young people frequent. We must acknowledge that learning takes places everywhere and regardless of capacity or profession, if you have something valuable to offer a young person take advantage of the opportunity, share information and become a resource for the young people around you or your place of business. It is also critical for adults to encourage authentic power sharing that is not tokenized, or conditional, young people must be seen and valued as equal partners in idea generation and decision-making processes. Lastly, communities must begin to remember that it takes a village to raise a child, “young people learn by the examples that are set in front of them and by those who support and hold up their dreams even it is not a good idea” (C. Webley, personal communication, December 14, 2017). When communities recognize what they see as change agents of the future and collaborators of the present, there is infinite potential for young people and communities to thrive.

REFERENCE

Davies, B. (2010). What do we mean by youth work? In J. Batsleer & B. Davies (Eds.), *What is youth work?* (pp. 1-6). Exeter, UK: Learning Matters Ltd.

ABOUT LA'SHANTE GRIGSBY

La'Shante Grigsby is a youth support specialist at YWCA St. Paul. Previously, she was engaged in youth work internationally, utilizing the arts as a framework for expression and community building among young people. La'Shante has a Bachelor of Arts in sociology/criminal justice from Clark Atlanta University, and graduated with her Master of Education in youth development leadership from the University of Minnesota. She also enjoys spending time in coffee shops and book stores and writing poetry.
