Exploring Adult 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. Eighty-two adult youth development workers from across the two islands 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.
Introduction
An estimated 15% of the labour force in the Caribbean region is unemployed and of this 51%, there are 204,000 persons between the ages of 15-24 years (Brown-Chen, 1996). Governments have recognized this looming problem and short-term relief programs have been organized. However youth continue to be at serious risk because of underemployment and unemployment and it is evident in a rising tide of anti social behaviour: an upsurge in criminal activities, increased drug use and higher incidences of teenage pregnancies associated with these disengaged young people (Gupta, 2000; Trinidad and Tobago, 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. The reality is however that agriculture in the region is in steady decline with falling prices for traditional commodities, severe demands on the sector to comply with multilateral and bilateral trading managements and a host of other domestic problems (Glean, 2004). 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, an understanding of the full engagement of youth must be understood. This is explored by examining the potential role and presence of youth development workers within the country.

Purpose
By examining the understanding and knowledge of adults who work with youth, greater strides can be made in the development of civically engaged programs that enhance the well-being of Trinidadian youth. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of civic youth development within the wider context of Caribbean youth. It is important to understand youth development from this perspective given the critical social and developmental changes within the Caribbean. As youth become active members of society, it is crucial that they understand their role and power they have as change agents within their own communities. By engaging 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 research was guided by an interpretative theory which allowed the researchers to focus on daily context of the participants. Data for the study was collected using a qualitative research approach method. Participants for the survey were targeted from a country-wide workshop on engaging youth participation in programs. Open-ended questions were used in order to gather the most comprehensive data from a survey and to assist with the formation of interview questions that will be used in subsequent field research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Participants were asked open ended questions to gain greater knowledge of their understanding of civic engagement, what motivates adults to participate in civic activities, and what are the barriers to implementing civic activities with youths throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Questions were analyzed using the statistical software package NVIVO. This qualitative software package allowed the researchers to examine themes across the data set and look for patterns in responses.
After analysis of the data, a series of codes 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, generational gap, time and social constraints, incentives, adult involvement, and youth participation.

Results and Conclusion

A demographic profile in Table 1 shows that over half (60%) of the 82 respondents were female employees either in the school system or in the agricultural extension field. As shown in Table 2, a small percentage of the total number of respondents (23%) had worked in extension over 20 years and classified themselves as “a seasoned extension employee.” Eighty-one percent of the individuals were employees in Trinidad and twenty-nine percent were employees in Tobago.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Distribution of Respondents by Years of Service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 years</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20 years</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 years or greater</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding Civic Engagement

The first question which asked about the understanding of civic engagement revealed four specific themes among respondents. Adults felt that civic engagement was 1) creating positive civic experiences for youth, 2) teaching youths to be great citizens, 3) empowering youths to get involved in their community to create change, and 4) engaging youths in community activities to build pride, patriotism, and self esteem. Respondents gave a variety of responses that supported the creation of these themes. For example, the theme creating positive civic experiences for youth 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 to in communities, neighborhoods, and clubs to create positive experiences on both sides. 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 island.

The second theme was supported by comments from respondents that were around building citizenship activities and programs. Take for instance the comment by a male respondent, who was involved in a current afterschool program,

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

Citizenship was considered to be pride in not only yourself, but also your 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 discussed the idea that youths should be involved in programs that promoted citizenship involved a sense of cultural and ethnic pride. Citizenship meant that youths were responsible to 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 youth (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.”

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 island. 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 island.” 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. Take for example the comments below which discuss the notion of community building and citizenship:

“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 of method of getting youths to do more within their community or club.

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 around 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, but rather a person who was well-balanced, caring and capable of working with others to maintain a healthy society.

**Barriers to Youth Involvement in Community Programs**

The second question asked adults 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 generational gap, time and social constraints, lack of incentives (lack of appeal).

The lack of adult mentoring seemed to be the major concern cited throughout the data. 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:

“[Youths] 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.”

Another theme which flowed from limited adult mentoring was the 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 noted that due to the lack of approval by parents, it was difficult to motivate youth in community activities.

The generation gap surfaced as the third theme in this section. Respondents commented that due to the varying ages between youth participants and adult mentors, the youth were less inclined to become involved in programs. The generational gap created a perception that “adults do not understand youths.” Other comments suggested that due to the ages of the youth, they were not respected by adults. This was illustrated in the following responses by participants:

“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- the older folks responds to questions [differently] and as far as the young say the old folk feel they have all themselves- also because of the young folks lack of respect.”

Respondents felt the generational gap 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.

The busy work and school schedules of individuals as well as peer pressure helped create the theme, time and social constraints. First, adults expressed that youths time is limited due to their 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 the social pressures faced by youths that inhibited involvement. A social constraint such as negative peer pressure was a major problem voiced by the respondents. Peer pressure came in the form of 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 standards with others (peer, academic, etc.) they might not be accepted by those who are involved.”

Finally, 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. If the youth had a greater variety of choices in the programs, adults felt 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. The greater number of respondents felt that adults should be involved in all aspects of youth’s lives. Adults commented that with their presence, youth have a greater chance at being better citizens and more productive individuals in society.

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 Trinidadian adults. The two major themes that developed from this question were (1) adult involvement and (2) youth participation. 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 government 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 state that “by being more accepting of our young persons and including them in the 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 youths working on the planning, implementation and evaluation of programs. Although this was a relatively new concept, adults felt this was a needed approach in order to have maximized 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’s 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. An important effort such as youth participation would need to tap into the knowledge and expertise of a variety of adults in various communities. Supportive programs and workshops for community leaders to use schools and learning institutions were suggested as ways to support adult leaders across the island.

The second theme of 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 for 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 stated that adults 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. Although a range of examples were given, it was understood that Trinidadian adult youth development workers felt that youth must be a part of the process in order for there to be significant changes in motivating young people to become involved in civic activities in their communities.

**Conclusion**

Providing a new mechanism for engagement to youth development workers in Caribbean countries broadens their context of learning and allows them to assist in the development of youth across all walks of life. The several themes distilled from the responses to the questions investigated point to the critical areas that must be addressed if a solid foundation is to be built for the full engagement of young people. Major themes such as the promotion of citizenship and empowerment, beyond the buzz words, through genuine dialogue with young people can serve as good entry points to start dismantling the several barriers to participation identified in the results. Also, the several actions which promote full participation of youth, beyond the cosmetic involvement with which
they have become accustomed, will certainly go a long way in building a new culture of full youth engagement. As youth gain a greater sense of ownership and pride about 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.

**Implications for Youth Development in Trinidad and Tobago**

The importance of this research and type of programming to youth are even greater because it provides them with a voice and presence that is many times not heard or seen in developing countries. In the case of many Caribbean countries, youth are not allowed to fully express themselves as this is seen as an act of being disrespectful. Results from this type of study will hopefully 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 engaging youth in a variety of programs that will build communities and youth.

In addition to the basic understanding of civic engagement, the findings of this investigation build on work that is being contemplated in the Caribbean region. The Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) Heads of Government have supported the establishment of a Youth Forum. The primary purpose would be to provide “a vehicle to enable young people to address issues affecting their generation and participation in decision-making at all levels” (Glean, 2004). A study such as this one would help to facilitate the process and give adults other alternatives and options in working with young people.

**REFERENCES**


