Building Social Health:

Creating a Youth-Friendly Community in Thurston County

Karolynn Tom

HEHD 8000: Foundations of Youth Development

September 15th, 2016

Clemson University

In 2015, the Office of Homeless Youth Prevention and Protection Programs was established in Washington State with the goal of working towards reducing and eliminating youth and young adult homelessness (Washington State Department of Commerce, n.d.). In Thurston County alone, there were 180 young people under the age of 25 who were considered homeless during the annual Point in Time Count (Thurston County, 2015). There is a clear connection between foster care and homelessness. In fact, a recent study found that within the first year of aging out of the foster care system 28% of youth will experience homelessness (Ford Shah et al., 2015). The two most common reasons for homelessness reported by respondents were job loss and family crisis or break-up (Thurston County, 2015).

One aspect that has been shown to correlate with positive outcomes in educational and occupational attainment is the development of social health (Eccles & Gootman, 2002b). The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth proposed five separate components of social development including connectedness, sense of social place/integration, attachment to pro-social/conventional institutions, ability to navigate multiple cultural contexts, and commitment to civic engagement (as cited by Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). Another way of considering social health is to examine a young person's social capital which can be utilized in connecting them to employment, education and other service opportunities (Larson & Walker, 2005).

The scope of this paper will be to assess the existing opportunities to develop social health in Thurston County for young people under the age of 25. This age group has been identified because it has been shown that the brain continues to develop into the 20's (Henig, 2010). Also, several of the programs in Thurston County that focus on youth and young adult

homelessness use this age in their eligibility criteria. The goal of this paper will be to propose an agenda for building a youth friendly Thurston County.

Interview

Being new to the area, I wanted to interview someone who had extensive knowledge of the community and its resources. Liz Snyder is the Program Coordinator for the Supplemental Education Transition Planning Program (SETuP) and Independent Living Skills (ILS) programs at Community Youth Services (CYS), serving Thurston, Mason and Lewis Counties. Ms. Snyder has a long history of working with youth and young adults who have experienced foster care and/or homelessness in Thurston County. She began work as floor staff at a girl's group home and worked her way up to program manager of the home before moving to work at CYS as the Team Coordinator of the local AmeriCorps Reading Corps. Six years ago, Ms. Snyder moved to her current position. CYS is a large, youth-focused agency in Western Washington and it has a multitude of programs serving youth and young adults. Since Ms. Snyder has lived in Thurston County for most of her life and has been with CYS for over a decade, I knew she would be a great source of knowledge of what opportunities existed for young people in the area.

The interview with Ms. Snyder covered many aspects of social health development in youth. The following commentary introduces the reasoning behind several of the interview questions. A full list of questions and Ms. Snyder's responses can be found in the Appendix.

- How would you define social health? What does having good social health mean for a young person?
  - There are several different working definitions of what it means to have positive social health (Hamilton et al., 2004; Larson & Walker, 2005). I wanted to know

what this term meant to Ms. Snyder, so that I could understand her point of view

on social health in order to frame the rest of our conversation.

- Do you believe there is a disparity between opportunities to develop positive social

health between different populations in the area?

  o One principle of Positive Youth Development is the idea that all youth should be

    given the opportunity to thrive (Hamilton et al., 2004). Yet, research on and

    program participation of marginalized populations is lacking (Lerner et al., 2014;

    Russell & Van Campen, 2011). I was curious of Ms. Snyder's assessment of the

    community opportunities available to different populations. Any community

    agenda would need to address the disparity if one did exist.

- One aspect of positive social health is the ability to interact with multiple cultures. Do

you believe this is easier or harder for youth today compared to 20 or 30 years ago?

Why? How do you think community partners can assist in this area of development?

  o Both the Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth and the Search

    Institute include cultural competence or the ability to interact in multiple cultural

    contexts as aspects of social health (Hamilton et al., 2004). We are living in an

    ever growing diverse population. In fact, "the U.S. is projected to become a

    majority-minority nation for the first time in 2043. While the non-Hispanic white

    population will remain the largest single group, no group will make up a

    majority" (United States Census Bureau, 2012). If young people today are

    exposed to more cultures are they more able to navigate different cultural

    contexts? I wanted Ms. Snyder's opinion on this issue. I also wanted to

understand where she saw the community's role was in this specific aspect of

development.

- Do you think technology is affecting youth's ability to develop positive social health?

  How so?

  o Irvine (2006) as well as Henig (2010) discuss how technology is changing youth

    development. For example, technology has increased access to adult content for

    younger youth, which some argue contributes to them growing up faster (Irvine,

    2006). I was interested in learning Ms. Snyder's opinion on technology and

    social health. Since technology is a growing aspect of youth's lives, any

    connection between it and social health (positive or negative) should be addressed

    in a community agenda.

Ms. Snyder made several interesting points as we discussed youth opportunities to

develop positive social health in Thurston County. I started the conversation by having Ms.

Snyder explain what positive social health meant to her. Ms. Snyder believes an individual has

positive social health if they have stable housing, a job with a living wage, and access to

affordable health care. Furthermore, a sign of good social health would be if a young person can

feel that they are part of the community and that their voice is being heard. This information set

the stage for the rest of our discussion.

Throughout the interview Ms. Snyder made it clear that in her opinion poverty and access

to basic needs and resources is a critical barrier to youth developing positive social health. This

idea was consistent from her definition of social health to her recommendations to the

community which includes increasing access to housing and work training programs. Ms.

Snyder sees that there is still a lot of prejudice against marginalized groups, especially towards

those in lower socio-economic statuses. She also notes these attitudes appear to be more

prevalent in the rural areas of Thurston County. In respects to technology, Ms. Snyder feels that

it has served to further isolate young people and has impaired their ability to verbally

communicate. With all of this in mind, she believes that the community needs to provide young

people with more life skills training and more opportunities for real life experiences including

cross-cultural interactions. Ms. Snyder advocates for these opportunities to be available for

young people at an earlier age.

Ms. Snyder also stressed the importance of community collaboration in helping youth

succeed. She listed several organizations and programs that serve young people in the area. She

believes youth serving organizations in Thurston County do a pretty good job of collaborating

for the benefit of the youth; however, she sees the need for such collaboration to be more youth

led. Even with all these programs, Ms. Snyder noted, with frustration, that there are still

significant gaps in the system. She emphasized that as a whole, the community is failing in

providing an environment where youth can thrive socially.

Evaluation

In reviewing our conversation, many of Ms. Snyder's responses align well with the

principles of positive youth development. For instance, her focus on youth voice both in her

definition of positive social health, and also in her recommendation for changing community

collaboration is in line with several PYD theories and frameworks. One such framework is the

Rings of Youth Engagement which includes youth voice and input as one of the four essential

components (rings) of youth engagement, the others being participation, passion and collective

action (Saito & Sullivan, 2011). In addition, Ms. Snyder's emphasis on the need for more life

skills and real life/challenging experiences along with community collaboration reflects PYD

practices. Eccles and Gootman (2002a) include opportunities for skill building and integration of family, school and community efforts as part of the essential features of positive youth development settings. Finally, Ms. Snyder also recognized that youth do not develop alone, but rather in the context of community. This is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model as discussed by Hamilton et al. (2004).

However, there was one aspect of our conversation that stood out as being at odds with positive youth development principles. Ms. Snyder typically had a deficit view of the community and the resources it had to offer. Lerner and colleagues (2014) proposed as a PYD theory of change, that all youth have strengths and all contexts have strengths and it is when these strengths are aligned that positive development occurs. While Ms. Snyder was aware of many of the resources the community had to offer, she focused the conversation on what was lacking and generally viewed the community as negative. To align better with PYD principles I would propose looking for the strengths in the community. This not only includes the organizations and programs available, but also the actual community members. In the short time that I have worked in area, one strength that I have seen is the amount of passion and commitment from youth workers. I also think, that with Thurston County being the home of the state capital there is an untapped resource in our state policy makers and government officials.

Youth-Friendly Community Agenda

Originally, I was narrowly thinking of social health as an independent silo, however Ms. Snyder really brought forward that the first step to working towards providing opportunities for development in this area would be to begin by assuring that young people have a solid foundation. This would include basic needs like shelter, food and health care are met. With this

and the rest of our discussion in mind, I would make the following recommendations to Thurston

County:

- Provide basic needs including housing, food and health care to all youth.
  - o "Young people need stable places, which are theirs and where they can feel safe.
    One place can –and should –be home. … Young people need access to basic care
    and services that are appropriate, affordable and, if necessary confidential"
    (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2003, p. 12). Young people cannot
    focus on positive development if they are constantly in 'survival mode.' By
    ensuring their basic needs are met, they will have greater opportunity to focus on
    their development.
- Expand access to life skills training programs which would include opportunities for real
  life/challenging experiences
  - o Currently, there is a program available for foster youth that focuses on teaching
    life skills. Independent Living Skills (ILS) programs provide individual and
    group training opportunities in numerous areas including nutrition, study skills,
    money management and job readiness. ILS trainers work with participants to
    define goals and work alongside the youth to reach those goals. ILS is offered to
    youth ages 15-21, with the requirement that the young person be in an open
    dependency (i.e. in some form of foster care) for at least 30 days after their 15th
    birthday (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, n.d.). This
    program is a good beginning model and could be expanded to include younger
    youth and youth experiencing homelessness.

- Continue and increase collaborations between youth serving organizations, other

  community organizations and businesses

  o Youth do not develop in a single context, but in a multitude of environments. It is

    important to build on the current collaborations that exists between youth serving

    organizations and expand to include other agencies and individuals who can play

    a role in assisting youth in developing social health.

Next Steps and Conclusion

To work towards these recommendations, a resource guide for Thurston County should

be created, which would include information about the available services and eligibility

requirements. In the process of creating the resource guide it will be important to identify gaps

in services. Once these gaps are discovered, a town hall meeting with youth, community

organizations, business professionals, and policy makers could be held to identify potential

partnerships within the community to address these concerns. One possible outcome from this

meeting could be support for a workshop series led by community businesses. It will be

important to follow up on the ideas and partnerships proposed and to continue the conversation.

In order to make progress in reducing and ending youth and young adult homelessness in

Thurston County community members need to recognize the importance in providing basic

needs to all. Beyond that it is important to acknowledge not only the strengths of the individual,

but also those that exist within the community. The entire community needs to work together in

supporting young people in building their social assets as a way to escape homelessness and

achieve independence.

References

Eccles, J., & Gootman, J.A. (2002a). Chapter 4: Features of positive developmental settings. In J.

Eccles & J.A. Gootman (Eds.), *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*

(pp. 86-115). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Eccles, J., & Gootman, J.A. (2002b). Chapter 3: Personal and social assets that promote well-

being. In J. Eccles & J.A. Gootman (Eds.), *Community Programs to Promote Youth*

Development (pp. 66-85). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Ford Shah, M., Liu, Q., Mancuso, D., Marshall, D., Felver, B.E.M., Lucenko, B., & Huber, A.

(2015). *Youth at Risk of Homelessness: Identifying Key Predictive Factors among Youth*

Aging Out of Foster Care in Washington State. Olympia, WA: Washington State

Department of Social and Health Services.

Hamilton, S.F., Hamilton, M.A., & Pittman, K. (2004). Principles for youth development. In S.

Hamilton & M. Hamilton (Eds.), *The Youth Development Handbook: Coming of Age in*

American Communities (pp. 3 – 22). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Henig, R.M. (2010). What is it about 20-somethings? Retrieved August 30, 2010 from

http://www.nytimes.com

Irvine, M. (2006, November 26). *10 is the new 15 as kids grow up faster.* Retrieved November

26, 2006 from http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-11-25-teen-tweens_x.htm

Larson, R.W., & Walker, K. (2005). Processes of positive development: Classic theories. In P.

Witt & L. Caldwell (Eds.), *Recreation and Youth Development* (pp. 131-148). State

College, PA: Venture Publications.

Lerner, R. M., Wang, J., Chase, P. A., Gutierrez, A. S., Harris, E. M., Rubin, R. O., & Yalin, C.

(2014). Using relational developmental systems theory to link program goals, activities,

and outcomes: The sample case of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. *New Directions for Youth Development, 144,* 17–30.

Pittman, J.E., Irby, M., Tolman, J., Yohalem, N., & Ferber, T. (2003). *Preventing problems, promoting development, encouraging engagement: Competing priorities or inseparable goals?* Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc.

Russell, S. T., & Van Campen, K (2011). Diversity and inclusion in youth development: What we can learn from marginalized young people. *Journal of Youth Development, 6*(3), 95-108.

Saito, R.N., & Sullivan, T.K. (2011). The many faces, features, and outcomes of youth engagement. *Journal of Youth Development, 6*(3), 109-125.

Thurston County. (2015). *May 2015 Thurston County Homeless Census Report – Fact Pack.* Olympia, WA: Author.

United States Census Bureau. (2012). *U.S. Census Bureau Projections Show a Slower Growing, Older, More Diverse Nation a Half Century from Now* [Press release]. Retrieved on September 12, 2016 from http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/population/cb12-243.html

Washington State Department of Commerce. (n.d.). Office of Homeless Youth Prevention and Protection Programs [Web site]. Retrieved September 12, 2016 from http://classic.commerce.wa.gov/Programs/housing/Homeless/Pages/youth.aspx

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. (n.d.). Independent Living Program [Web site]. Retrieved September 12, 2016 from https://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/adolescents/independent-living-program

Appendix

The following is the complete list of interview questions and responses:

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and describe your experience/history working with young people?
    a. 30's college student after divorce
    b. Raised in extreme poverty
    c. Work History
        i. 8 years at Brentwood Group Home → girl's home for 13-18-year old's
            1. Started as floor staff worker her way up to program manager
        ii. Moved to CYS as Teem Coordinator for the AmeriCorps Reading Corps
        iii. 6 Years ago moved to ILS/SETuP Program Manager
    d. Personal focus on poverty and changing the way people think about poverty

2. How would you define positive social health? What does having good social health mean for a young person?
    a. Look at a community as a whole
        i. No poverty/street living
        ii. Access to safe housing
        iii. Living wage for all
    b. For the Individual
        i. Good housing, job, health care
        ii. Feel a part of the community and have voice heard

3. What are the systems/activities in our community that help youth achieve social health? Are there examples of ones you are familiar with?
    a. CYS Transitional Housing (available for those under 24yrs)
    b. HUD → provides limited housing
    c. Family Support Services
    d. Iggy Hop → Provides hygiene supplies to those on the streets
    e. Capital Recovery Center → Chemical Dependency Services
    f. Rosie's Place (part of CYS) →Drop in Center/ Shelter for homeless youth (up to 24 yrs)
        i. Has Free Health Clinic
    g. Thurston County Food Bank →More Rural Services
    h. **Most resources in Olympia are connected, if a client comes to one place there are easy referral systems for other services

4. Do you believe there is a disparity between opportunities to develop positive social health between different populations in the area?
    a. Yes
        i. Middle class and Upper class have more opportunities

       ii.   Differences by race also

      iii.   Thurston County is not very racially diverse →but can still see the differences

5. One aspect of positive social health is the ability to interact with multiple cultures. Do you believe this is easier or harder for youth of today compared to 20 or 30 years ago? Why? How do you think community partners can assist in this area of development?
   a. Depends
      i. Sometimes easier and yet sometimes is older because there are some communities that are still restrictive and hold 'old belief systems'
   b. "The 1% has pitted people against each other"
   c. Community can provide a space for honest conversations
      i. Figure out the root of why and where the belief came from
         1. Did it come from hearing it from someone or personal experience?
   d. Community can provide chances for safely guided exposure between cultures

6. Thinking of the young people we work with who are often surrounded by paid staff. How do we as a community help youth gain social capital outside of these staff?
   a. Paid staff need to be in the field for the right reasons (not just for the pay-check)
   b. Communication between members and collaboration efforts
      i. Need to help youth feel fully supported
   c. Youth as center and as the leader of the group
   d. Bring up conversations about services ended and aging-out earlier and often to prepare young person and focus on getting the outside supports set up
   e. Need for good rapport to help guide the discussions

7. Do you think technology is affecting youth's ability to develop positive social health? If so in what ways?
   a. Yes
      i. Can cause youth to isolate, to escape (provides an easy way to isolate)
      ii. Easier to bully → no immediate impact (like seeing someone's face be sad or crying)
      iii. Youth are so used to texting now, that they can't make phone calls
         1. They are uncomfortable or don't know how to have a conversation over the phone
         2. Impacts ability to interact with service providers or government agencies which often have complicated phone systems
      iv. Facial Interactions are not there

8. What are the challenges to youth achieving social health? Why?
   a. Own Selves
      i. Change is Scary
      ii. Ties to negative influences
         1. Enmeshed and can't seem to 'get out'
         2. Guilt for 'getting out' and 'making it'
   b. Not preparing for program exit

9. What resources are necessary for youth to achieve social health? Why? Which resources are lacking in our community?
    a. Preparing young people earlier
        i. Working on Life Skills
        ii. Building an external support system
    b. Lack Housing
        i. Several programs that provide housing, but every program has so many restrictions for eligibility
            1. Hard to navigate which program may work
    c. Work Programs
        i. Supportive training with compensation
        ii. Job coaching
        iii. Model program -- DVR