

Success and Independence: Rethinking the Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT. This article builds on previous calls for re-examining the theoretical tenants that underpin practice with emancipating foster youth. In addition to exposing the contradictions and limitations imbedded in our current definitions of success based on independence, this article both challenges and offers strategies for practitioners, educators, researchers, policy makers, and the community at large to begin embracing and valuing the emerging concept of interdependence and building strategies for more effectively partnering with youth exiting the child welfare system.

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Independence and Success: Rethinking the Rhetoric

The spirit and imagery of individualism is well entrenched in the fabric of American society. As a core American value, Day (1989) suggests that “individualism” is a frontier ideology, originating with the birth of this country when it was romanticized that all individuals could achieve success in a country of free land. Day further contends that while the view of “rugged individualism” has been re-conceptualized over the course of the nation’s history, it remains a core American value, fostering a belief that:

everyone must be self-reliant, in control of and responsible for his or her own life—and sheer effort will bring success. To ask for help from others is an admission of weakness, and a failure to achieve—money, happiness, status, whatever—is the fault of the individual rather than society. (p. 6)

While the mantra of individualism permeates various aspects of American social welfare policy, perhaps nowhere are its affects more penetrating and pervasive than in issues related to youth preparing to emancipate from the foster care system. A clear derivative of the core American value of individualism, the concept of *independence* has served as the barometer for gauging success with this population and for creating programs and policies to support their maturation as they age-out of the foster care system and move toward adulthood.

It has been estimated that there are over half a million children living in foster care placements in the United States (Stoner, 1999). Youth 13 and older represent nearly 30% of the foster care population, and every year over 20,000

older youth transition or age-out of the foster care system (Barth, Courtney, Berrick, & Albert, 2004). In the general population the journey from adolescence to adulthood is rarely void of obstacles, but most young people navigate the transition with relative success (Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams & Nackerud, 2000). However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the roads that most foster care youth travel as they speed toward “independence” are lined with numerous barriers, pitfalls, and landmines. Stoner (1999) found that while some foster care youth are prepared for independent living, most leave care with minimal skills and supplies. Research has revealed that a significant number of youth, upon exiting the foster care system, have experienced various hardships and struggles, including homelessness (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor and Nesmith, 2001), unemployment (Cook, 1994), incarceration (Barth, 1990), and difficulties with health and mental health concerns and limited health care coverage (Barth, 1990).

As evidence continues to mount suggesting that youth exiting the foster care system are not fairing well, some have questioned the fundamental conceptual lens underpinning work with this vulnerable population and the rhetoric that is associated with independence (see Garcia, et al, 2004; Propp, Ortega, and NewHeart, 2003; and Wald & Martinez, 2003). The outcome of this questioning has spawned a call for a re-conceptualization of the definition of success based on the emerging concept of interdependence.

The first step in moving away from traditional approaches to independent-living programming and practices requires a change in definition of

independent living, as well as changes in the attitudes, values, and beliefs that child welfare workers hold regarding the efficacy of youth. The notion of independent living is unrealistic. The premise of living on one's own devoid of assistance is not feasible. (Propp, Ortega , and NewHeart, p. 264)

In advocating for improving the life chances of the country's most vulnerable youth (defined as dropouts, youth in the justice system, unmarried teenage mothers, and **foster youth**), Wald and Martinez (2003) argue that "since the transition to independent adulthood rarely occurs at 18, we need to create, at the local, state, and national levels, young adult systems of support" (p. 4). They further argue that the extensive network of support that envelops young adults who are routinely termed as successful magnifies the need for addressing the serious lack of societal support for vulnerable youth. Wald and Martinez offer compelling evidence to suggest that the absence of a network of support engenders a life of isolation and disconnection with devastating consequences.

As with any call for a paradigm shift, considerable thought, dialogue, and clarity are needed so that alternative approaches might be envisioned. Additionally, as it is easy for tradition (focus on independence) to dictate practice and policy, calls for change must be persistent and clearly articulated.

In this article, we highlight the current research and practice literature related to emancipating youth in order to further expose the concept of independence as a prominent factor for defining, preparing, and measuring success for emancipating foster youth. Following this overview, we provide

insight regarding the limitations and contradictions that are imbedded in a definition of success based on independence. Next, we turn the reader's attention to the broader *positive youth development* literature to highlight key concepts that are being described as strategies for preparing all youth for healthy participation in society as young adults. We believe that this knowledge base has much to offer those persons who are attempting to prepare youth for life after foster care and further exposes the contradictions and limitations of the current emphasis on independence with emancipating youth. Finally, with a particular focus on "independent" living skills programs (as a central practice approach for preparing youth for emancipation), we offer our suggestions for practitioners, educators, researchers, policy makers, and the community at large to begin embracing and valuing the emerging concept of interdependence and building strategies for more effectively partnering with youth exiting the child welfare system.

Emancipating Youth and Independence

The emphasis on independence as a theoretical lens guiding program development and research is intimately linked to the legislative initiatives designed to support emancipating foster youth. Independent living skills programs (the centerpiece intervention for emancipating youth) were authorized by Congress as part of Public Law 99-272, the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985. Initially, \$45 million was allocated for the purposes of helping older foster youth make the transition from foster care to independent living (Allen, Bonner, & Greenan, 1985). It was reauthorized indefinitely as part of

the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 (PL 103-66), which increased its level of funding to \$70 million per year (GAO Report, 1999). Subsequent legislation has provided further federal support for independent living skills programs. The Foster Care Independent Act of 1999 (PL 106-169) doubled federal funds available to independent living programs with an increased allocation of \$140 million. The act also allowed more flexibility in the development and construction of programs that would enable foster youth to make the transition to self-sufficiency. It provided states the ability to make its own determination as to when foster children should be eligible for independent living services, and authorized independent living services to extend to youth beyond the age of 18 but no older than 21. The act also amended section 477 of the Social Security Act with the creation of the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program. Under the Chaffee Program, authorization for flexible funding was continued as well as the provision of more specific guidelines as to the types of services that should be provided. The Chaffee program also required states to submit plans for the development of program evaluation and outcome measures of its independent living programs.

A review of the PL 99-272 and PL 106-169 reveals an intent by the legislature to render foster children independent no later than age 21. Although *independence* is not defined, the act contains several provisions which suggest that the ultimate goal should focus on self-sufficiency. Section 477 (a) (1) through (5) mandates that state programs will be designed and facilitated to:

Identify children who are likely to remain in foster care until 18 years of age and to help these children make the transition to self-sufficiency by providing services such as assistance in obtaining a high school diploma, career exploration, vocational training, job placement and retention, training in daily living skills, training in budgeting and financial management skills, substance abuse prevention, and preventative health activities... to provide financial, housing, counseling, employment, education and other appropriate support and services... to complement their own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency. (Foster Care Act of 1999, p.2)

In response to the requirements of the mandates of these legislative efforts, almost all states implemented independent living skills programs. According to Collins (2001) while states have discretion and flexibility in how they design and implement their independent living skills programs, attention primarily focuses on employment related training, assistance with completing education, instruction in daily living skills such as money management, cooking and nutrition, counseling services and a written transitional independent living plan for every foster youth. Within the literature, the skills and training youth need to be successful post emancipation have been classified into two categories: tangible or “hard” skills and intangible or “soft” skills (Hahn, 1994). Tangible skills focus on specific independent living needs such as education, vocation, housing, home management and money management. Intangible skills include less concrete and definable qualities and emphasize individual development/personal attributes such as self-esteem, decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution,

communication and social skills (Cook, 1991; Iglehart, 1994). According to Propp et al., because hard skills can be more easily translated into deliverable and measurable outcomes, they have become the primary focus of most independent living skills programs.

Consistent with the objectives listed in the legislation and the nature of the services delivered, most researchers examining issues related to emancipating foster youth have channeled their efforts to examining the indicators and outcomes related to self-sufficiency. Because “hard skills” lend themselves best to quantification and tend to be the emphasis of most programming, these tangible indicators have become the variables of interest in most emancipation studies. The compilation of outcome indicators most commonly found in the research literature include employment, education, housing, financial management skills, support networks, and costs to the community (Stoner, 1999).

The research that has been conducted in this area, while painting a bleak outlook for foster youth, has also produced inconclusive results regarding the efficacy of independent living skills programs. That is, comparisons of foster youth who participated in the independent living skills programs with those who did not participate have, for the most part, showed no statistical differences in their skills (Cook, 1994; Shippensburg University, 1993 as cited in Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999). Lindsey and Ahmed’s (1999) evaluation of the North Carolina Independent Living Program examined program participants and nonparticipants’ outcomes on employment, education, housing,

and financial self-sufficiency. They found no significant differences between the two groups on any of the variables measured relating to employment, their stability of housing arrangements and number of residences, completion of high school or GED and reliance on public assistance.

It should be noted that the research on independent living skills programs is still in its early stages and has been limited by methodological short-comings (including small sample sizes), and thus it would be premature to suggest that independent living skills programs are not achieving their desired objectives. The intention here is not to illustrate the conclusive results of research related to the intervention but rather to highlight the focus of the research. Table 1 (see Appendix) provides a quick sampling of some of the evaluations, in chronological order, of independent living skills programs and their outcome indicators to illustrate the emphasis and value placed on self-sufficiency.

It is our contention that the tripartite structure of legislative mandates, service delivery (program conceptualization/implementation), and research emphasis serves as a means for reifying, promoting and perpetuating the concept of independence (based on the notion of rugged individualism) as the ultimate goal for emancipating youth. It also creates a powerful shield for deflecting or minimizing alternative ways of thinking about factors that contribute to the healthy development of youth experiencing and exiting the foster care system.

The Rhetoric of Independence

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,

as well as if promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. (Meditation XVII from Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions 1624)

As we look at the goals and aspirations of most of the programs that surround youth moving inexorably toward adulthood and the abandonment of the child system of supports and services, employment and self-sufficiency rise to the high side of most lists. Youth are presented with an image of the “good life” not only in their programs but also in the cultural icons presented in popular media and schools. These icons declare that success and wealth are equivalent and that attaining them is the product of a life of an individual who is hard working and moral. Youth are regularly infused with the notion that they can “make it” if only they try hard enough and “fly right”. They are also told the way one demonstrates success is to assemble and display a host of badges. These include, but are not limited to a hot job, a hot car, a hot look, a hot life style, a hot partner, and a hot place to live. If they are moral enough, work hard enough and are self sufficient enough all these and more will be theirs.... right?

A closer inspection of these icons reveals a very different picture. According to Wolff (2002), in the United States, the richest 1 percent of households owns 38 percent of all wealth. If one widens the scope to include the richest 5% of all households, 59% of wealth resides there and 20% of U.S. households own 83% of the wealth. That leaves 80% of us distributing the last 17%.

Prior to the 1970's, the disparity in the distribution of wealth was going down in the United States and had surpassed many European countries. Since then the disparity has grown alarmingly and now surpasses those same countries. If we look at mobility in terms of wealth, there lies another difficult picture. People in the bottom three fifths of the economic ladder were more likely to be heading down in 1990 than they were in 1970, and people in the highest two fifths were more likely to stay in the highest brackets in 1990 than they were in 1970. The gap in mobility is getting wider as well (Wolff, 2002).

This consolidation of wealth and mobility make the icons of success less and less achievable for most folks but this becomes especially true for foster youth exiting the system.

Another factor in the individual achievement/success imagery is the mythology that surrounds those that have achieved it. The models we are presented with are populated by the Kenneth Lays, Dick Cheaneys, Donald Trumps and Martha Stewarts of the world. These and a host of others remind us of the dream; they resound with a celebration of "boot strap" success. By definition then they must be moral, hard working and devoted citizens. We are shown that even when they stumble and transgress that they are punished but not tarnished, and even in the face of adversity they continue to become wealthier.

Several things are wrong with this imagery but we will focus on one. In every case the mythical successful person was only successful because of the labor of others. The largest bulk of that labor produces at vastly different earnings

than that of the successful person. All of these successful people found a way to capitalize on the work of others and claim it for themselves. In other words, they were experts not at self-sufficiency but rather were masters of complex networks of people upon whom they depended. In the cases of these extremely wealthy folks, this *interdependence* benefited them much more than it did the people whose labor they used - but it was still interdependence. This interdependence, although remarked on, is essentially devalued and dismissed. When these folks discuss who they are responsible to for their success they point to stockholders, not the people who work for them. The vast majority of influential stockholders are simply other wealthy people.

The impact of these myths on the exiting foster youth is devastating. For many youth moving into adulthood the daunting task of “making it” is a challenge. They have grown up with all the same imagery discussed above and many suffer disillusionment in the face of the reality of the United States version of capitalism. Many, however, find ways of surviving and often thriving in the culture. So, what are some of the differences we know about? We know that youth, in general, do not go out into the world on their own at 18. We know that in the face of the imagery above there were forces, networks and reliable relationships in their families and communities that served to temper the popular conceptualizations of success. We know that for many there is not expectation of individual achievement outside of the context of an intelligible and accessible support system.

When we examine the experience of foster youth a very different picture emerges. This picture is riddled with incoherence, the lack of deep and meaningful relationships, and an extremely untrustworthy network of supports. We know that given these factors there is very little to mitigate the impact of cultural imagery on these youth. For many, success really does mean the array of “hot” items all related to the false mythology of them being representations of their real worth as a person. There is little exploration, as part of the foster care experience or in independent living programs, into the reality of those images. The focus in these trainings is to get a job so that you can, in fact, acquire them. For those who fail, there is no home or family or trustworthy support network built over a lifetime to fall back into. There is little left except the definition that suggests to them that their “failure” is a reflection of their own corruption and misguided nature. Without a set of definitions that places this experience into the context of modern United States capitalism there are few other conclusions to draw.

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development is a fairly recent strategy for preparing young people for adulthood, by emphasizing the positive aspects of development, health, and well-being (Small & Memmo, 2004). Synthesizing the work of various scholars associated with the positive youth development movement, Small and Memmo identified four assumptions embraced by the movement:

- 1) Helping youth achieve their fullest potential is the best way to prevent them from experiencing problems.

- 2) Youth need to experience a set of supports and opportunities to succeed.
- 3) Communities need to mobilize and build capacity to support the positive development of youth.
- 4) Youth should not be viewed as problems to be fixed, but as partners to be engaged and developed. (p. 7)

Pittman (1993) identified the five “C’s” that the positive youth development approach hopes to foster and which are deemed essential to the healthy development and well being of young people: confidence, commitment, caring, character, and connection. Silliman (2004) contends that in fostering health and well being, effective positive youth development programs target personal and interpersonal process skills, including self-awareness, problem solving, communication and conflict resolution, and skill mastery. As opposed to focusing attention on attempting to reduce risk, these personal and interpersonal skills increase developmental assets.

The Search Institute has offered probably the most prominent and influential framework associated with the positive youth development movement. The Search Institute’s Developmental Asset model is organized around two groups of 20 assets that are believed to help young people grow up as healthy, caring, and responsible adults. Half of the model (20 assets), termed “external” assets, is devoted to positive experiences youth need from their surrounding environment. The twenty external assets are clustered into the following four categories: **support** (e.g., family and other adults provide a high level of support, youth are surrounded by a caring neighborhood, and the school climate is caring

and encouraging); **empowerment** (e.g., the community values youth, youth are seen as resources, youth have opportunity to provide service in the community, and youth feel safe at home, school, and in their neighborhoods); **boundaries and expectations** (e.g., families, schools, and the community have clear rules and consequences, youth are surrounded by adult and peer role models, and adults hold high expectations and encourage youth to do well); and **constructive use of time** (e.g., young people are engaged in creative activities/organizations including music, theater, or other arts, sports, clubs, and religious institutions). Regarding these external assets, the Search Institute contends that for positive youth development to occur, on a daily basis young people need access to safe places, challenging experiences, and caring people.

The second half of the model focuses on the internal assets that serve as the building blocks for healthy youth development and which are allowed to blossom in response to the external assets of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The twenty internal assets are organized into the four categories of: **commitment to learning** (e.g., the young person is motivated to do well in school, is actively engaged in learning, and reads for pleasure); **positive values** (the young person places high value on helping others, honesty, responsibility and promoting equality and social justice); **social competencies** (e.g., the young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices, possesses empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills, has knowledge of and is comfortable with people of different cultural backgrounds, and seeks to resolve conflict in a non-violent manner); **positive identity** (the

young person feels power/control over what happens to him/her and has high self-esteem, a purpose in life, and a positive outlook for the future). According to the Search Institute, the community's commitment to young people begins with the provision of external assets; however, it must also embrace a similar commitment to nurturing the internal qualities of young people (commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity) that foster a sense of confidence, passion, and purpose.

Positive Youth Development and Independent Living Programs

In stark contrast to much of the professional work directed at emancipating foster youth that emphasizes independence, the positive youth development movement is predicated on the concept of connectedness/interdependence. That is, as Rozie-Battle (2002) suggests:

Socially competent adolescents have a sense of belonging, feel valued, and have opportunities to contribute to society through their schools, neighborhoods, and the broader society...They need support from parents, adults and communities. Absent these supports and adult advisors, young people will fail, and ultimately, the nation will fail. (p.15)

The positive youth development literature, with its focus on connectedness and interdependence, has much to offer our conceptualization of practice with emancipating youth, particularly independent living skills programs. For the purpose here, we focus our attention on three areas where we believe the positive youth development literature offers powerful recommendations:

1) program mission (the way in which the programs are envisioned), 2) training and pedagogy (the way in which adults are prepared for their role as “youth workers/educators” and the way in which “teaching” is approached), and 3) content (the type of issues that are addressed in the program).

Program Mission

With its emphasis on “external assets” being fundamental to the fostering of healthy development, the positive youth development literature highlights a critical shortcoming to emancipation (independent living skills) programs. In their current incarnation, independent living skills program are, for the most part, isolated from or only superficially connected to the community. Independent living skills programs have historically been embedded in and governed by the child welfare system.

Whalen and Wynn (1995) have made a powerful case for extending our conceptual lens beyond traditional intervention efforts housed within schools and specialized social services such as child welfare, mental health, or juvenile justice:

Although there is no disputing that schools and social services house resources and relationships that make a difference in young lives, the evidence is also strong that endemic organizational constraints such as mandatoriness, bureaucratic inflexibility, and age-group segregation often cut directly against the grain of adolescent needs and aspirations. (p. 89)

These constraints are pervasive in many child welfare programs/services but are particularly prominent in independent living skills programs. Youth preparing for

emancipation are regularly and routinely exposed to a “one-size fits all” curriculum, which is highly controlled and restricted by legislative mandates.

As an intervention strategy which is purported to address the “unique” needs of older foster youth, most independent living skills programs are ill equipped to handle youths’ diverse needs and aspirations and place little creativity/originality in the hands of participants and instructors. Additionally, while many child welfare workers have acknowledged the unrealistic expectations that are being placed on emancipating youth to be self-sufficient, program coordinators and workers are beholden to policy mandates that require programs to embrace the spirit of individualism and promote skill development accordingly. As youth fail to achieve these lofty and unrealistic outcomes (e.g., How many 18 years olds who have not been in the foster care system are prepared for “independence”?), they are viewed as the problem and more attention is given to strategies for “better” preparing them for independence.

In advocating for a collaborative/community based approach to youth development, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) remind us that no one program, no matter how fully conceived, can develop youth: “Young people do not grow up in programs but in families, schools, and neighborhoods” (p. 171). Roth and Brooks-Gunn further contend that our best odds for fostering positive youth development lie in expanding the web of options available to youth in the community and ensuring that the myriad of options embrace the values of the positive youth development movement.

Quite possibly nowhere are these words more poignant than when describing the process that is needed for preparing youth for life outside of the foster care system. Such a shift from agency to community (independence to interdependence) allows for concepts such as social support, community connections, and relationships to become prominent features of programs for youth emancipating the foster care system (Propp, Ortega, NewHeart, 2003). Propp, et al., further contend that shifting our lens from independence to interdependence fundamentally encourages programs to be more community based and requires programming to emphasize asset development that does not focus on individual survival skills but rather asset development that focuses on youth achieving connections.

Consistent with, yet expanding on, the call for interdependent-community based “connection programs,” Whalen and Wynn (1995) have offered a vision for a community focused service reform approach. This approach calls for joining primary youth services (local sports teams, arts, youth groups, and larger youth serving-organizations) with traditional specialized services (child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice) to form a comprehensive service infrastructure that is governed by the community. This service reform approach calls for a “more planful approach” for organizing and linking traditionally specialized programs, such as the independent living skills programs, with community based programs, thus producing a web of support that is needed for youth to achieve their fullest potential.

Training and Pedagogy

While advocating for and highlighting the strengths of the youth development movement, various authors associated with the movement have also acknowledged some of the shortcomings to the current state of practice. While one of the core tenets of the positive youth development movement is that youth should not be viewed as problems to be fixed but rather as partners to be engaged and developed, Huebner, Walker, and McFarland (2003) argue that many youth serving programs and agencies have not adequately supported staff development and training. Others have argued that a “climate of anti-intellectualism has developed among youth workers” (Morrison, Alcorn, and Nelums, 1997, p. 328). According to Huebner et al., the reality is that most youth service workers are “savvy, street smart, youth loving adults” (p.206). However, they are also individuals who have not been regularly engaged in a critical reflection process regarding the conceptual lens underpinning their practice, nor do they regularly and collectively participate in discussions focused on the assumptions underpinning their practice and the match between their assumptions and actions.

Similarly, independent living skills programs have also not given adequate attention to the skills and abilities of the persons charged with the task of engaging and working with youth. Whether it is an anti-intellectual atmosphere or a priority/preference given to “real world” practice experience, we must be cognizant of the fact that failure to engage emancipation workers in

serious/committed educational development could have devastating consequences.

Youth workers (and those connected to emancipation programs) do not operate in a vacuum. Like all of us, their values and beliefs are shaped/influenced by the broader culture. In learning through experience, youth workers also embody/embrace the messages that were/are conveyed by their models. It follows logically that, in the absence of on-going training/critical reflection, most youth workers will rely on the lessons learned from their experience with the educational system, as well as the messages that are conveyed about youth needs in the broader society, as they approach the tasks of educating and engaging youth.

Regarding their experience with the educational arena, it is only in recent years that the educational system has begun to fully embrace the concept of collaborative/participatory education. Furthermore, examples of “true collaborative” educational philosophies in action continue to be dwarfed by what Freire (1970) has termed the “banking approach” to education. In the banking approach, students are viewed as empty vessels, and it is the educator’s job to deposit (fill) the student with information/knowledge. Furthermore, in this traditional “banking” system:

- a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- d) the teacher talks and the students listen meekly;
- e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;

- f) the teacher chooses and enforces his/her choice, and the students comply;
- g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the actions of the teacher;
- h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students who were not consulted adapt to it;
- i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- j) the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are the objects. (p.54)

The “banking” system of education breeds/perpetuates the characteristics that have been attributed to the oppressed (in this case, youth in the foster care system) in the broader society. The goal of this approach to education is to “change the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them” (Freire, p. 55). This approach to education is the antithesis of what is being advocated for in the youth development movement. Nevertheless, it is the model to which most youth workers have been exposed. While most independent living skills programs have adopted the belief that youth should play an integral role in developing the curriculum and in the teaching and learn process, an authentic “partnership” between youth and adults remains elusive. In an “anti-intellectual” atmosphere, where little attention is given to training and pedagogy, it would be easy for anyone to fall into the “traditional” role of the banking educator.

According to Howard (2002), engaging youth in an educational process to help support healthy development requires more than just the transmission of knowledge. In a teacher-centered approach where the teacher lectures on disconnected facts and figures, students rarely understand how these facts and

figures are connected with their lives. In a learner-centered approach, where students can incorporate their life experiences with the curriculum, education becomes a collaborative process. This process is called critical pedagogy (Howard, 2002). Critical pedagogy embraces concepts such as self-direction, mutual respect, praxis (action and reflection), personal development, and collaboration. As such, students are not only viewed as active participants in the learning process, but they are also expected to initiate the desire to learn and develop new skills and knowledge. Borrowing from the words of Paulo Freire, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach...Students--no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (p. 62). In partnership, youth and youth workers must grapple with difficult material in an effort to develop and strengthen critical thinking skills and promote critical reflection. Minus a commitment to the engagement of youth workers in continuing education, critical pedagogy and the tenets of the youth development movement might never be fully realized.

At the same time, experiences in the educational system are not the only forces that raise contradictions for youth workers in their charge to embrace youth as partners, to willingly and openly share power, and to envision alternative approaches to teaching and learning. The messages espoused in the broader environment, and as Lakoff (2004) describes, the frames that are offered for viewing youth development, are extremely powerful. Lakoff contends that the current (religious and conservative) political agenda and the associated wave of

public discourse that are shaping economic and social policies are fundamentally based on the “strict father figure” model/frame. According to Lakoff, the strict father figure model embraces a set of assumptions that include:

The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore they have to be made good.

What is needed in this kind of world is a strong, strict father who can:

- a) Protect the family in the dangerous world,
- b) Support the family in the difficult world, and
- c) Teach his children right from wrong. (p. 7)

According to Lakoff, this strict father figure frame has direct implications for social programs, youth development, and the manner in which youth are educated.

Regarding social programs, the strict father figure frame dictates that because social programs (particularly those based on nurturance and care) promote dependency, they are immoral and should be curtailed. Regarding youth development, good people have discipline. Undisciplined children will taint their peers, and their behavior should be punished or shamed as to promote discipline. It is the view of the strict father-figure model that this approach will promote children to grow up to be self-reliant adults—those who do not should

experience further discipline and no support, as to not promote dependency. Regarding education, the frame dictates that teachers/educators should be strict, as opposed to nurturant. Consistent with the banking approach to education, teachers are to be the experts, in possession of the right and wrong answers, and students should be tested on those answers.

This frame and its set of assumptions are particularly important to the re-conceptualization of practice with youth in the foster care system and particularly independent living skills programs. Failure to engage youth workers (and youth) in regular dialogue and critical reflection leaves everyone involved vulnerable to operating on principles that are directly opposed to the fundamental values of the intended practice. Absence of on-going dialogue and critical reflection regarding the values, beliefs and assumptions underpinning one's practice opens the possibility that workers' actions (influenced by powerful and conflicting messages) will be at odds with their intended objectives.

Content

Drawing once again on the positive youth development literature and the work of the Search Institute, we recommend the crafting of a curriculum and enacting a program for emancipating youth that shifts the focus from individual tasks/skills for independent living to one that builds partnerships vital for survival and success in our culture. Such a shift would not devalue the need for learning interviewing skills, cooking skills, and money management skills, but rather would change the emphasis and the nature of the interaction. Driving this practice would be an emphasis on creating learning opportunities that focus on

developing skills and competencies for living, working, and being connected to others, while also fostering skills and abilities for mobilizing community change efforts, advocating for social justice, and taking action to secure one's well-being and the well-being of those around him/her. As Propp, Ortega, and Newheart contend, "Perhaps this shift in thinking will produce a shift in practice and training, making it as important to teach youth how to meet their neighbors as it is to teach them how to balance a checkbook" (p. 263).

Programs of this nature would differ significantly from the current Independent Living Skills Program not only in content and process (pedagogy) but also in composition. With an emphasis on interdependence, our view is that the program participants cannot be limited to foster youth. Rather, the participants will also be adults, including foster care providers, family of origin, and other interested community members.

Consistent with our calls for critical pedagogy, without question the core curriculum for an interdependent living skills program should be conceptualized and implemented in partnership with various constituents, including current and former youth in the foster care system, service providers, and community members. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the curriculum cannot be based on a vision. The creation of a program/practice built on the tenets of "critical pedagogy," where youth and adults work together to prepare young people for life after foster care, offers a vision for guiding program content.

Summary

The paradigm shift supported in this document contains a number of critical issues. First and foremost, we are calling for a re-conceptualization of independent living skills program based on the concept of interdependence. As part of this transition, we are arguing for greater attention to be devoted to mobilizing, coordinating, and connecting “interdependent living skills” programs with primary services offered in the community. Additionally, we are calling for community members to be more actively engaged in the youth development process. Consistent with this recommendation, we have attempted to stress the importance of the need for better preparing youth workers for their tasks/roles as educators and community activists. While the thrust of the article focuses on independent living skills programs, we firmly believe that the concept of interdependence has broader implications for the child welfare system in general.

Being true to the ideas that were set forth in this article, we have begun the process of engaging foster youth, service providers, and concerned citizens in this re-conceptualization effort. While our work is in the embryonic stage, we can report that we began the process by engaging stakeholders in intensive dialogue regarding the “definition of success” and factors that contribute to a successful transition for emancipating foster youth. Through this dialogue, it has become very clear that the concept of “independence” and its relationship to success is powerfully engrained in the minds of both adults and youth. While our adult and youth participants recognized the importance of support systems and connectedness, preliminary discussions have been dominated by the rhetoric and imagery associated with independence. As such, it is becoming increasingly

clear that much work is needed (a critical reflection process) to expose the contradictions associated with success and independence. We contend that a deliberate process of this nature is needed if we are to create a new “frame” where the concept of interdependence is valued and embraced.

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Table 1

Evaluations of Independent Living Programs

| Study | Indicators |
|--|--|
| Barth (1990) | Ability to manage finances Education Drug use Housing Involvement in criminal activity |
| English, Kouidou-Giles and Plocke (1994) | Education Employment Ability to manage finances Ability to manage daily living |
| Scannapieco, Schagrin and Scannapieco (1995) | Education Employment Housing Self-supporting |
| Colca and Colca (1996) | Money management Decision making ability |
| Mallon (1998) | Education Employment Savings Support network Living arrangements (housing) Life skills preparation- personal appearance, health care, housekeeping skills, food management, transportation, emergency safety skills, legal issues, interpersonal skills |
| McMillen and Tucker (1999) | Education Employment Housing |
| GAO Report (1999) | Employment Housing Education |
| Davis and Barrett (2000) | Employment Housing Money Management Self-Sufficiency |
| Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor and Nesmith (2001) | Education Employment Money management |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Sanders (2001) | Living arrangements (Housing) Social support Health care Mental health care Delinquency and post discharge crime Public assistance Self-sufficiency – education, employment, housing, money management, use of health resources |
| Kerman, Wildfire and Barth (2002) | Self sufficiency- employment, housing, financial resources, education, health insurance Personal well-being- alcohol and drug use, health status, family situation Overall adult outcomes- criminal activity, community involvement |
| Collins, Lane and Stevens (2003) | Education Housing Reduced dependence on public assistance |
