

RUNNING HEAD: YOUTH WORK, DELINQUENCY AND THE ARTS: A UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT: If grounded in a youth development perspective, art programs can be effective tools in combating juvenile delinquency. The Family Network Partnership integrates community-based programs in writing, graphic arts and the performance arts into an array of academic, recreational, counseling and family support services aimed at reducing delinquency among low-income African-American youth in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. This article outlines the art program itself, describes its evolution, including a number of substantial challenges it faces, and calls attention to some of the benefits of joining youth work and the arts in this way.

The effectiveness of arts programs in juvenile correctional settings has been documented, albeit somewhat scantily (see, for example, Browning, 1998; Durland, 1996; Hillman, 1983, 1998a). Programs in writing, the graphic arts and the performance arts, moreover, have been applied specifically to preventing juvenile delinquency and contributing to "alternative cultures" for high-risk youth in a wide range of school and community settings (Browning, 1998; Costello, 1995; Hillman, 1998b; National Endowment for the Arts, 1997).

This paper describes a unique community-based partnership developed to provide arts programs to delinquent youth and youth at-risk for delinquency in low-income, predominantly African-American neighborhoods of Hattiesburg (Forrest County), Mississippi (population approximately 70,000). Directed by the authors, the project links a range of key actors in efforts to plan and implement arts-oriented programming. Partners in the venture include the county youth court and detention center, the local arts council, the city police department and housing authority, the university's college of the arts, and practicing

artists from the local community. The fruits of these efforts have been innovative programs in writing, graphic arts, and the performance arts provided to youth at the county detention center and at a community housing authority site. Initial success of this university-community partnership has led to invitations from others concerned for delinquency prevention/reduction to expand the project into new areas.

The following remarks will briefly address the background of the project; the program itself, as it has evolved and its immediate plans; and a short reflection on the value of joining youth work and the arts in this way.

PROJECT BACKGROUND: THE FAMILY NETWORK PARTNERSHIP

The arts project operates from one "center" within the Family Network Partnership (FNP), a community program of the School of Social Work at the University of Southern Mississippi. With minimal infrastructure and relying almost exclusively on social work field education students for "labor," the FNP initiated operation in 1995. Forming an alliance with the city's young community policing program and the county youth court, the FNP's initial vision was simply to work with troubled youth and their families in the city's two highest crime districts in whatever ways were feasible.

Over time, FNP sharpened its focus and extended its collaborative reach to include other key players—notably the city housing authority, the public schools, the local neighborhood association, various academic units within the University of Southern Mississippi, and, most recently, the local artists' community and a Boys and Girls Club. More occasional participants include the public health, mental health and child welfare agencies, local churches, and various individual faculty members within the university. While delinquency prevention remains the primary concern of FNP, the agency's purposes encompass strengthening the key socialization institutions—family and community—in order to improve general well-being; improving key public systems performance on behalf of poor children and families through networking and collaboration; and advancing social justice and racial equality in communities historically characterized by poverty, pervasive discrimination and injustice. (Material only briefly outlined here is treated more fully in Forster & Rehner, 1999)

The agency's focal community is characterized by poverty, high rates of crime, and limited opportunities for youth to engage in positive socialization activities. The overwhelming majority of residents in the FNP's focal community are poor. The mean annual income of residents in 1997 was \$5,800. Among those who worked, the mean hourly wage was \$5.80. While mean incomes in the surrounding district are somewhat higher, census data suggest that over 60% of families living in the area fall below the poverty line, approximately twice the rate of poverty in Mississippi, the poorest state in the nation, as a whole. Approximately

40% of households in the area are headed by single women. Education levels of area residents are low, with less than a majority completing high school. Employment opportunities of any type not requiring private transportation are scarce; living wage jobs are virtually non-existent in the area.

Program Strategies

The Family Network Partnership employs three general strategies to reduce and prevent juvenile crime.

The first strategy is early intervention with youth already involved with the county youth court. Without intervention, a majority of juvenile first offenders are likely to commit a second offense (Quinn, Bell, & Ward, 1997). Referrals of first- and second-time offenders from the target community are made to FNP by the youth court. Following an ecological assessment taking into account individual, family and systemic factors, Partnership staff look to engage the youth's family and other relevant and influential community agents to address immediate needs and improve coping capacities.

The Partnership's second general strategy is to develop positive skills and capacities in youth at-risk but not yet before the court. Competency deficits of various types constitute significant risk factors for delinquency (Forster & McCarthy, 1995; Goldstein & Glick, 1987; Strayhorn, 1988). Deliberate cultivation of competencies, conversely, can promote resilience (Anthony & Cohler, 1987), while inhibiting the development of delinquent behaviors.

The Partnership's third strategy is to reduce environmental risk factors through community capacity building. The absence of community resources is associated with high risk for delinquency (Hawkins, Catalano, & Brewer, 1995); their presence, conversely, contributes to the resiliency of at-risk youth (Carnegie Council, 1991; Thornberry, Huizinga & Loeber, 1995). For this reason, the agency has physically "joined" the community, and seeks to channel a wealth of university and other resources into the community.

Social Work and Social Pedagogy

As noted, FNP's principal work force is comprised by social work interns. These students rapidly learn that successful work with youth, families and community systems requires expansion of the social worker's role beyond the constraints of "clinical practice." Group and community work retain honored places in the history of social work practice, and recently the "strengths perspective" and "solution-focused work" have come into vogue. Yet over several decades the profession has generally embraced a somewhat narrow, individually oriented psychotherapeutic orientation (Specht & Courtney, 1994) most closely aligned with the traditional pathology-driven "medical model." Typically, this orientation places the worker ("helper") at an expert "distance" from

the client ("helpee"), and retains and unhealthy power differential between the two.

Youth and community work require, by contrast, a generalist perspective closely akin to that of "pedagogical action" as practiced by European "educateurs" and "social pedagogues" (Beker & Barnes, 1990). Like social pedagogues, FNP social workers operate within the comprehensive life-space of youth and families, side-by-side with them, as it were, not so much solving discrete problems as teaching and strengthening competencies for living.

THE ARTS PROGRAM

Program Development and Structure

FNP's art program was developed in response to a 1998 grant initiative of the Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC), a public body funded by the state legislature. MAC was so impressed by the experience of a program operating in the Lowndes County juvenile detention center (funded as a pilot by MAC) that the Commission developed a distinct Request for Proposals for model projects to deliver art programs to youthful offenders over a 30-month period (Mississippi Arts Commission, 1998).

The essential model was (and is) attractively simple. The grant recipient leads a partnership that includes, minimally, the local arts council, the youth court and the county detention center, with wider inclusion encouraged. This partnership can, in turn, design virtually any type of arts program(s) that it wishes, with the key stipulation that programs must be delivered by practicing (i.e., "real") artists, who are paid a fair rate for their professional services. As a result, offenders experience art through contact and work with individuals for whom art is a fundamental part of life, and not a mere "recreational" pursuit. The partnership, with expert consultation and support provided by MAC, selects artists who can work effectively with delinquent youth.

FNP was one of three agencies which applied for and received a \$30,000 per year grant to develop and operate a project. While the Request for Proposals issued by MAC, inspired by the Lowndes County model, stipulated that programs should be aimed at youthful offenders currently in detention, FNP was successful in convincing MAC to allow an expansion to include community youth "at high risk" for delinquency—a population which included all youths residing within FNP's target service area.

The first half-year of funding was devoted to planning, development of the partners group, and staff and artist recruitment. FNP's partners included the Hattiesburg Arts Council, the Forrest County Youth Court, the County Detention Center (operated by the County Sheriff), the Hattiesburg Housing Authority (providing programming space to FNP), the Hattiesburg Police Department (specifically the community policing team) and, unique among funded programs, the College of the Arts at the University of Southern Mississippi. A half-time coordinator ("team

leader") was hired, recruited (by an unanticipated coincidence) from among the ranks of current Master of Social Work students in the School. Artist recruitment became a first priority of the team leader—a challenging but not daunting task with the assistance of the community Arts Council and the university Arts College.

The next several months were used to design and implement pilot programs in dance, pottery, writing and expressive/graphic arts at the detention center and at the public housing complex. These pilot projects demonstrated the popularity of art programming both with the young people and with staff members at the detention center. As a result, full programming, consisting of an average of two sessions (approximately 90 minutes each) per week at each site, commenced in Fall 1999.

The project continued (and continues) to evolve in the current year (2000). In Spring, FNP was invited by the Adolescent Offender Program, a mental health program for serious offenders, to offer art programs at its site on a weekly basis; plans include a community-based art group for youth transitioning out of AOP care back to the community. Similarly, a local alternative school that includes an arts curriculum is looking to establish community links through the FNP Art Center. In an exciting development, the program coordinator has initiated construction of a FNP Art Center web site for display of work created by participating youth.

Findings to Date

Incorporating art into youth development programs is not of itself, of course, a striking programmatic innovation. In fact there has been significant, if chronically inadequate, official support and funding for such art programs (see, notably, Costello, 1995). The FNP Art Center does demonstrate, however, a number of features that are unique at least in their combination: the delinquency prevention focus; the use of professional artists to deliver programs; the agency context of diverse individual and family support services; direction by school of social work faculty; and the broad-based network of supporting partners.

While the program is still in a formative stage and faces significant challenges, results to date are strongly encouraging. Both the quantity and quality of programming has been satisfying—more than 380 hours of art programs provided to roughly as many youth (many repeaters, especially in the community) at the two primary sites. These numbers will of course increase steadily over the next year as programs continue and perhaps expand further.

With very minor exceptions the experience of key participants—youth, artists, FNP social workers, members of the partnership—has been unequivocally positive. Systematic evaluation to date has been limited, and exclusively in the form of a series of open-ended questions put to selected stakeholders. (A quantitatively oriented evaluation conducted by the Mississippi Arts Commission through a consultant is currently underway; results will not be known for some time, however.)

While clear-cut criteria of program "success" remain elusive, common threads in the questionnaires include the impact on youth of art activities, and changes in perception of youth. Both artists and detention center personnel have reported behavioral and emotional changes in youth, as they become engaged with activities, realize their creative potential, seem to increase their attention spans, and look forward to future art experiences. Artists and detention workers themselves find their views "softening" toward the young people, as they become less "threats" and more "just kids" with a predictably mixed array of strengths and vulnerabilities. Participating youth are less verbal on their experiences, but consistently report that they enjoy the creative process and look forward to continuing in community-based programs. At the same time, anticipated obstacles, notably regarding the acceptance of the program by housing authority and detention center personnel, have not materialized; on the contrary, the programs have been warmly embraced by all parties involved.

In addition to group experiences, participation in art programs, in some cases with a defined bridge to the home setting, has figured prominently into individual case plans managed by FNP workers. Virtually all individual youth and family plans since inception of the Art Center have included distinct art-related objectives, on a par with educational, recreational and behavioral objectives. Moreover, some community youth have already bridged to "outside" art experiences; one group participated in a community theater project; another connected with the National Dance Institute via a university program (one young man was selected to attend an intensive summer program).

As might be expected, art "products" have begun to multiply—in the form of drawings and paintings, poems and stories, pottery and sculpture, as well as more ephemeral performances (primarily dance). Artwork created in the community program is permanently on display at one of the agency sites. Three major exhibits of work, including drawings, pottery and poetry, produced by youth at the detention center, have been held at various community sites, including a formal gallery; more are planned.

In the long run, of course, it is expected that engagement with the arts will significantly decrease rates of juvenile delinquency and recidivism. It will be some time, however, before effectiveness in this regard can be assessed.

VALUE OF JOINING PROFESSIONAL YOUTH WORK AND THE ARTS

While the FNP arts program remains new and in development, with no formal evaluation of either process or outcome completed to date, indications are that the marriage of professional youth work and the arts will a good and lasting one. Following are brief reflections on this theme.

The arts program fits well with the general intervention philosophy of the Family Network Partnership and nicely complements and enriches other dimensions of a program designed to create a pro-social "alternate culture" for troubled and at-risk youth. Indeed, each of the three general "strategies" employed by the agency—early intervention with delinquent youth, competency development with high-risk, pre-delinquent youth, and community capacity-building—relate well to the Art Center. It emphasizes prevention, promotes positive youth development, and contributes to community development. These strategies are, of course, fully consistent with the positive, "asset-building" orientation of contemporary youth development work (Morrison, Alcorn & Nelums, 1997).

A building body of literature suggests that art programs, sadly fallen away or minimized in most public education settings, ramify into a broad range of positive social and cognitive effects (see, e.g., Murphee, 1995), including improved reasoning ability, keener perception of reality and appreciation of the human condition, better awareness of personal values and modulation of emotion. In a U.S. Department of Justice publication on "Conflict Resolution and the Arts," to cite just one specific example, Klink and Crawford (1998) emphasized the social competency impact of art programs, calling the experientially oriented arts "a natural forum for teaching, modeling, and using" conflict resolution and other pro-social competencies. Youth involvement with the arts is favorably received by parents and provides an effective bridge to the home environment. In individual cases, as noted, participation in art programs may relate to one or more intervention objectives.

It is FNP's experience, however, that the arts do not stand well alone. Professional youth work significantly amplifies and extends any impact the arts may have by themselves on delinquent youth or youth at risk of delinquency. Surely arts programs provide no "magic bullet" for delinquency (nor do their advocates claim that they do). A community-based form of intervention is ideally suited to seize and build upon those openings for change and positive relationship development offered by a youth engaged with the arts. This benefit is nowhere more evident than in the detention setting, where services of all types are in exceptionally short supply. While extension beyond the detention center experience poses a significant challenge to FNP (see below), the new art program not only introduces valuable programming into the detention center, but provides a "relationship beachhead" with these often very difficult youth from which to move into other forms of intervention.

Existence of the arts program within FNP, moreover, significantly enriches the field experience of students placed with the agency. While students do not generally engage in art activities themselves, they are involved with overall program planning, interact with artists, and frequently incorporate art programs into individual case plans. They conduct groups, moreover, with the same youth in the detention center participating in the arts program and are able to build upon youths'

experience with the art activities. The “life space” and youth development dimensions of the social work student’s educational experience are significantly reinforced by engagement with the arts program.

More dramatic implications for the formal social work curriculum may well result. Most notably, the existence of the art program under FNP auspices has sparked a new awareness of the potency of the arts as a means of engaging clients, especially involuntary clients. FNP is a popular field placement selection for students, who highly rate its capacity to provide practice experience across the curriculum, and has drawn the attention of faculty members with diverse teaching and research interests. The program has, moreover, generated exciting discussions about the prospect of a new certificate program, “The Arts and Social Change,” aimed at both social work and art students.

The highly visual nature of the art program, combined of course with the focus on delinquent youth, makes for excellent media coverage—not only of the program itself, but of Family Network Partnership, the School of Social Work, and the University of Southern Mississippi.

CHALLENGES

Despite its promise, a number of significant challenges face this fledgling effort to join professional youth work and the arts to combat juvenile delinquency. Among them are the following:

Funder Education

While accepting the development of the arts program under FNP auspices, the principal funding source for the project, the Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC), remains unsure of the value of youth work services not directly tied to the delivery of art programs. MAC’s central vision remains, understandably, that of committed artists “connecting” with youth offenders to spark personal life change. In this sense its perspective is highly individualistic, in contrast to the comprehensive “life space” sensibilities of youth development work. The funder has been, as a result, somewhat reluctant to endorse FNP’s requirement that development of the art program must proceed hand in hand with development of other forms of youth, family and community service. Ongoing education is required.

Sustainability

Financial stability in the face of limited short-term funding is a priority concern—for FNP as a whole, and for the art program specifically. The current funding steam is limited to perhaps another year at the current level, and as yet no significant replacement dollars have been identified. A requirement of the grant is that the program plan for sustainability immediately, and pressure from the funder on this point has steadily built. Other funds for FNP are equally short-term, year-to-year in fact, and no part of them may be re-directed to support the arts program.

Program Development

Two paramount challenges are apparent here. First is the need to follow-up effectively on youth released from the county detention center. Any attempt to build upon the "beachhead" gained through a brief exposure to the arts while in detention depends on FNP's ability to provide post-release services. At present, however, we have no means to do so, unless detention center youth happen to reside in the FNP community catchment area. Also at issue is the voluntary status of clients. To date, all FNP clients, youth and families alike, have been voluntary; this approach has served the agency well both philosophically and as a mean of "marketing" the program to a community suspicious of authority and "outsiders." Adequate follow-up on detention center youth may require a court order for cooperation with community based services, however. Implications of such a substantial program change, notably for the image of agency (the risk being that FNP will be perceived as merely an arm of law enforcement), have yet to be fully explored.

Collaboration with Partners

Despite the impressive success of the project, collaboration with the key partners—youth court, detention center, housing authority, local arts council, and university arts college—remains challenging and administratively time-consuming. Common issues include priorities for action, control of resources, fair sharing of responsibilities and credit for accomplishments, and effective on-going communication among the partners (cf. Mulroy, 1997). As the acknowledged leader of the project, the FNP bears the principal burden for assuring the coherence and integrity of the art program while sustaining the motivation and commitment of the partners. Vital though collaboration is, its many requirements tax the limited administrative resources of the agency.

Evaluation

First efforts at what is essentially formative evaluation have been mentioned above. Largely remaining is a significant challenge of outcome-oriented evaluation. To date, two behavioral outcomes have been identified for Detention Center youth. These are, first, reduced number "disruptive incidents" on days of programming in comparison to days without arts programming; and, second, increased participation in community-based programming following detention, of those youth who participated in arts programs, in comparison to detained youth who did not participate in arts programs. Three outcomes have been identified for community at-risk youth: participation in subsequent arts programs (at FNP and elsewhere); increased participation in other (non-arts) FNP programs; and, reduced delinquency-related behaviors (e.g., truancy) in comparison to youth who do not participate in arts programs.

Articulating such outcomes is only a beginning, however. The design of a thorough evaluation for the FNP arts program must address a number

of particular challenges, including agreement on appropriate outcomes, differentiation of short—and long-term gains, and empirical linkage of community work to delinquency prevention with at-risk youth.

CONCLUSION

Accumulating evidence—both anecdotal and systematically collected data—suggests that the arts offer valuable tools in delinquency prevention work. We contend that those tools are more likely to generate good results when used in conjunction with a range of individual, family and community support programs and services. This paper has attempted to provide a sketch of one agency's incorporation of the arts into its existing framework of community-based programming.

In all likelihood, direct replication of the Family Network Partnership program will remain limited, due to its inherent tie to a university program of professional education. Essential elements of the model, however—notably the adoption of a youth development perspective by a partnership network including artists, delinquency-focused youth workers, and law enforcement/juvenile justice agents—may be applied anywhere to good effect. With their practical knowledge of youth development and life-space intervention, professional youth workers are, we believe, ideally positioned to spearhead network-building efforts with youth courts and local arts councils.

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