The Contribution of the Use of Dialogue, Self-expression and Choice Methods on the Success of Different Types of Youth Units

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of youth units and examine the impact of the application of the methodic principles of dialog, self-expression, and free choice on the success of different types of youth units. Thus, beginning to fill the gap in the literature on youth units as educational institutions. Success was measured here through the evaluation of the youths and the frequency of their participation. These methodic principles draw on the intersection of the critical theory of Paulo Freire and a structural analysis of Reuven Kahane's code of informal education.

This project was divided into two parts. The first part mapped the diverse youth units, their institutional alignment, the scope of their activities, their infrastructure, the nature of their programs, the methodic principles they apply, and domains of engagement. The conclusion of this mapping was a three by two typology, suggesting six types of youth units. Rather than following an administrative division, this typology was based on the content of the educational activity. This typology allowed for the articulation of generalizable insights without thereby erasing or ignoring the important diversity of the youth units. The second part of this project examined the contribution of three methodic principle to the success of the units.

The methodic principles of dialog, self-expression, and choice are central to Freire's critical pedagogy, a pedagogy that had shaped the activities of community centered and varied youth-oriented programs for over two decades. Critical theory in education begins with the insight that institutionalized educational systems tend to preserve the status-quo. When some group is marginalized, oppressed, and excluded, education offers a prime route towards change, made possible with the inclusion of group-specific contents, such as culture, language, special needs, etc.

Cohen's structural analysis of Kahane's code of informality classified the elements of the code following two criteria. First, the different elements can be distinguished by their subject: activity, goal, or group. The second criteria is the predictable effect of the elements: identification, experimentation, and commitment. According to Cohen, this is a continuum, an educational process that began with identification and ended with commitment. Voluntarism and symmetry are tightly connected to the formulation of commitment to the group and the organization. These were the same principles that grounded the three methodic principles of dialog, self-expression, and choice.

In accordance with the continuum identified by Cohen, this study assumed that informal education aspired to generate commitment. Therefore, a successful youth unit is a unit that succeeds in building the youth's commitment. Such commitment, to the group, the institution, and the community, will be reflected by frequent and regular participation in the different activities, which is thus taken here as a proxy. The second parameter of success, youth evaluation, draws from the centrality of the youths' experienced that characterizes critical education.

Thus far, no in-depth study was conducted of youth units across Israel, while there were several local analyses that wished to address particular practical questions of policy. One of the key challenges to the study of youth units was the great diversity and difference between the varied units. The institutional affiliation of the units didn't reflect this great diversity, nor the dissimilarity in the contents and methods used by different units. This study is the first to offer an exhaustive conceptual mapping of youth units, according to their educational content, and examined a systematic way to increase the frequency of participation and the satisfaction of the youths.

Part one offered a preliminary study of youth units that concluded with a proposed typology for the highly heterogeneous youth units. For that purpose, facet theory was used in order to generate a typology of the different unit types without ignoring or simplifying their diversity. The study first identified the policies of 101 youth units via questionnaires filled by youth unit managers. An M-POSAC analysis of the data showed six main types of youth units, based on types of programs (cultural, leadership, social-personal) and the diversity of facilities in the youth unit. The types of youth units were: (a) Formative, (b) Enabling, (c) Diverse Cultural, (d) Local Cultural, (e) Communal Leadership, and (f) Declared Leadership.

Using this typology, part two collected data from youths (N993) in 22 units to evaluate the degree to which the units used the methodic principles, the evaluation of the unit by the youths, and the frequency of their participation. One thousand teenagers filled the survey, with a final sample of N=939. The data was analyzed using different statistical tools, including variance and factor analyses and structural equation modeling (SEM).

The project examined three types of hypotheses. The relational hypotheses stipulate that will be a significant positive relationship between the three methodic principle and the satisfaction of the youths and the frequency of their participation throughout the sample and when considered by the different unit types. The

comparative hypotheses stipulate that enabling units, which emphasize youth resilience and local culture and who focus on social activities will score higher on the methodic principles and youth satisfaction, relative to other unit types. The model hypothesis stipulates that youth satisfaction is a mediating variable between the use of the three methodic principles and frequency of participation.

The study found out a strong relationship between the methodic principles and satisfaction. The findings showed that dialog, self-expression, and choice positively predict youth satisfaction. Additionally, the study examined and grounded the claim that satisfaction is an intermediary variable, as the model hypothesis stipulates. In other words, the study verified the dynamics between the variables such that an increase in the methodic principles effects satisfaction and satisfaction in turn contributes to more frequent participation.

Finally, the study found out that the type of unit explains both the use of the methodic principles and the relationship between the methodic principles and satisfaction. Different types of units offered different interpretations of the methodic principles, and used them in different degrees. While all unit types used the methodic principles of dialog, self-expression, and choice, different unit types implemented these in different ways. Furthermore, the type of unit also shaped the manner and extended to which the use of the methodic principles contributed to satisfaction.

While all unit types used the methodic principles, according to the testimony of their managers collected for part one, different types interpreted these principles differently and implemented them in alternative manners. For example, declared leadership units expressed the methodic principle of choice by offering a plethora of diverse activities, while local cultural units implemented choice by maintaining a low-pressure environment and reduced the compulsion of conformity. The study found out that dialog and self-expression rank higher in formative and enabled unit types, while choice is exercised more in declared leadership and local cultural types.

These findings contributed our understanding of the mechanisms that effected the success rate of youth units. The study increased the ability of policy makers to shape successful programs that will improve the experiences of youths and the functionality of the units. Additionally, the findings promoted the study of informal education and expanded the domain of activities and institutions that ought to be included in the field. There were still many unanswered questions when it comes to the activity of youth units. Further research is needed in order to better understand and improve them.