EMERGENCE OF THE YOUTH-LED SECTOR

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INTRODUCTION

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, ANOTHER FOUNDATION COLLEAGUE AND I WERE discussing the emerging youth-led sector. Or, rather, I was trying to explain that there was an emerging youth-led sector and why this was exciting. The notion did not sit well with my colleague, who couldn't get her head around who, why, and what youth were doing, why we need to pay attention, and the risk involved.

Today I believe this so-called youth-led sector is no longer emerging. It is here. Now what are emerging are the inevitable changes that will come to the nonprofit and social service sector as a whole. Through a series of interviews with leaders who provide capacity support to youth and youth-led organizations, this article will touch broadly on some of the issues surfacing in the growing youth-led field.

YOUTH-LED ORGANIZATION OR YOUTH ORGANIZING?

There is a difference between youth-led organizations and youth organizing, even though the two terms seem to be used interchangeably. Youth-led organizations are organizations set up by youth; they are usually focused primarily on grassroots service provision. Youth organizing is a set of strategies used to bring young people together for the purpose of social justice. Youth organizing has a longer active history in the United States, usually around specific issues and interests and/or to bring about legislative changes. It incorporates political or organizational development with social change outcomes. In youth organizing, young people are integral leaders and decision-makers in their own lives and communities. The systems and institutions that serve them and their communities are held accountable.

In Canada, youth organizing appears to be growing out of existing youth-led groups that provide services and programs. As these groups begin to collaborate and network, they are finding a commonality in their struggles. Shahina Sayani,[1] program manager with ArtReach Toronto, sees more youth becoming interested in policy, political, and systemic change than there were five years ago. Some of their thinking about how to bring about change is still naïve, but the result is increasing recognition by youth working at the grassroots of the need to research, learn, connect, and network with more established groups.

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Addressing gaps in services

The Laidlaw Foundation has provided funding to youth initiatives across Ontario since the late 1990s. In Toronto in the past four years, there has been an increase in funding to youth initiatives through the province's Youth Challenge Fund, the City's Identify N' Impact program and the collaborative ArtReach Toronto initiative. While these funds are more accessible to young people and have provided youth with opportunities to test out ideas and start their own projects, some of the grants provided are for pilot projects only, and none provide sustaining dollars. Many youth-led initiatives operate on a very short shoestring, yet youth continue to run their projects whether they have funds to be paid or not.

So what is driving young people to start their own initiatives? Paulina O'Kieffe,[2] director of Community Engagement with For Youth Initiative, a youth-led organization in Toronto, believes that youth begin their own programs and organizations initially as a reaction to or critique of what they see happening in their communities. They respond by saying, "I can do this better." O'Kieffe says, "This started from what many saw as a real gap in services in many communities, a real disconnect between the service provider and what was being offered on the ground, and the existence of real turf issues."

The *Youth on Youth* report commissioned by the Grassroots Youth Collaborative in 2005 makes a similar case and goes on to provide a number of reasons why youth-run organizations are more successful at meeting the needs of youth on the ground. In short: "Youth-led organizations know what's going on with the youth and the youth environment."[3] Young staff members communicate more easily with other youth, understand their culture, create more appealing programs, and identify with youth issues more effectively.

Need for self-determination

Andrea Zammit,[4] coordinator at the Grassroots Youth Collaborative, sees the drive behind many youth start-ups as issue-based, stemming from a problem youth see in their community or a sense of general exclusion and the desire to develop their own collective identity as a group. Groups want to play a part in building community and to develop a form of recognition as a group at the same time. Zammit also believes "it's an outlet for self expression, for developing artists, to celebrate ones identity." As a result, there is a lot of event planning, community fundraising, arts festivals, parties, and basketball tournaments. For example, Zammit tells the story of a young man who started a local dance troupe after having horrible experiences growing up. What drove him was the deeply felt need to do something so other young people wouldn't have the same experience he had.

According to Julian Caspari,[5] managing director with youth-run Schools Without Borders, few avenues exist in established organizations for youth who want to live by the values they've set forth for themselves. Stepping into a larger bureaucratic platform squashes creativity and puts youth in a silo, providing little room for personal growth; this can be too confining for someone developing a sense of his or her own role in soci-

ety. For Caspari, it wasn't for lack of trying; there just didn't seem to be avenues for him or other youth he knows to really sink their teeth into an issue. Assaf Weisz,[6] with Youth Social Entrepreneurs of Canada, agrees.

For Weisz, some of the reasons for starting his own organization began with the realization that joining a large nonprofit or NGO would likely result in token volunteerism. "You can volunteer for an OXFAM, but what are you really doing at the end of the day?" he says. What do these organizations provide a young person who really has a desire to take leadership on something or to take action? Wiesz says, "For anyone who wants to change things significantly, they really need to and want to be in an empowered role. It's almost a necessary condition. The initiative might fail and you go work with existing organizations eventually; but it's almost a necessary step."

Caspari also believes that youth have a more individualistic bent – they have stronger desire to follow individual goals rather than aligning with an organization that fits those personal goals and values. Chris Kang,[7] executive director with Schools Without Borders, goes a step further in his analysis. He believes that youth are organizing themselves because of experiences that lead to distrust of existing institutions and a sense of isolation and disconnection from the previous generation. In his mid-20s, he is part of the first generation to grow up in the digital age and to see the mainstreaming of technology. He used computers in kindergarten. Now kids are growing up with cellphones and twitter.

Perhaps this disaffection young people have with older generations is natural, but Kang believes there is a stronger fundamental feeling of loss, betrayal, and disappointment in previous generations, a doomed sense of "what's the point, we're going to get screwed anyway." In this scenario of discontent, a generation is growing up with the Internet, access to information at their finger tips, and the proliferation of on-line communities such as Facebook, Youtube, and Google. The Internet has provided a safe avenue for self-exploration and learning, and a way of taking an expansive journey – electronically. This is the generation that created social networks; it is, in Kang's words, the "user generated generation." These tools are being used as sharp responses to existing frameworks that are not working. Youth are creating their own platforms and communities.

Within this natural social desire to belong to a community, youth create their own communities – either locally, through music (such as hip hop), or online, or, most often, both. The significant shift, Kang is realizing, is the growing recognition of what has come before and, with that, a desire to link and work with elders, to repair relationships with parents, and to form more intergenerational strategies.

New ways of organizing

O'Kieffe, Sayani, and Zammit see shifts emerging that will begin to impact existing systems and structures. In the current scenario, young people do not have a voice, and major institutions and policymakers do not take youth seriously; youth-led groups are not given legitimacy, and youth are not seen as experts. O'Kieffe says, "It's not until someone at that level validates our point of view that we are heard." That may be the case, but out of the need to be heard, more youth groups are organizing to create positive change and challenge local political decisions in efforts to improve conditions in their communities.

Ana Skinner,[8] program manager with the Laidlaw Foundation, feels that there is an interesting buzz and energy coming out of the youth-led sector. Young people are asking themselves very consciously, "How do we do this differently?" O'Kieffe agrees: "We have found a number of ways to organize ourselves without having to look to traditional hierarchies." Young people want to be taken seriously and are organizing themselves, researching, building knowledge, and advocating for themselves – in ways that make sense to them. The shift O'Kieffe and Sayani see is toward analysis of broader issues, going beyond neighbourhood turf issues, and looking at ways to partner and collaborate.

Naturally evolving collaborations and partnerships

Groups like the Grassroots Youth Collaborative are working to strengthen and validate the grassroots youth sector by bringing groups together from across the city. This naturally growing cross-fertilization of activities is particularly positive, says O'Kieffe, because funders seek evidence of collaboration. The youth-led sector can lead by example, showing how to partner in real and organic ways. In O'Kieffe's words, partnerships for youth organizing in communities take on greater urgency: "At the end of the day, if my agency doesn't get funding or doesn't exist any longer, I can get another job. If there is violence in my community, I can be a target tomorrow – my community suffers and I suffer."

Skinner sees greater identification in the youth-led sector, not only with common issues, but also with common structural or institutional barriers that make it hard for any grassroots initiative, especially youth-led grassroots groups, to take root. So a group of youth who knock on another youth group's door are received with a lot of understanding, and there is immediate connection with the issues; relationships form quickly among people who were strangers. It's incredible to watch.

Redundancy?

Despite this, O'Kieffe and Zammit are concerned about duplication of services and wish to see a greater breaking down of barriers between neighbourhoods. Groups such as For Youth Initiative and Grassroots Youth Collaborative try to work across communities and advocate for youth as a whole rather than one community at a time. Youth groups need to strengthen their structures and build greater capacity in the sector. To do this, cross-collaboration and increased networks are vital.

Tides Initiatives Canada comes from the bias that not every new initiative needs to be a new organization. Leslie Wright[9] from Tides would like to see more options for individuals and groups without the imposition of one particular approach. Jillian Witt,[10] also from Tides, sees some groups getting stuck in the traditional way of running a nonprofit or charity once they begin to access public sector funds. They might have started by questioning that structure, but many current funding requirements limit creativity and development of new structures and ways of functioning. On the other hand, says Wright, some youth groups get incorporated and then become disillusioned when they have an administrative structure to maintain, but funding is not readily accessible.

Platform models such as those provided by Tides and, in a more on-the-ground way, by Schools without Borders and For Youth Initiative may be the answer and provide the

new worldview or lens through which groups can organize and focus on working on the issues they are passionate about rather than figuring out how to run an annual general meeting. Wright notes that groups still need to have project management skills, be accountable, and understand the administrative pieces they are entrusting to Tides – but some of the risk is mitigated.

Or entrepreneurial experimentation?

Weisz takes a different view of the so-called problem of duplication – among youth groups and within the nonprofit sector overall. Redundancy, he says, has a bad connotation. In a market-based economy, having a lot of people in a particular field means it is succeeding and vibrant and that there are more innovators pushing that field or issue. The nonprofit world, on the other hand, sees duplication as competition for limited resources rather than as the creation of a field in which many different people are trying out new ideas. There may be redundancy, but how else do you allow for innovation?

Weisz sees room here for social enterprises to grow and create an incubation ground for new ideas. Sayani sees this as one of the many ways youth groups are trying to become more self-reliant and sustainable – both personally and organizationally. The need to build sustainable livelihoods is another reason Weisz and Sayani believe youth are not going to traditional nonprofits. Weisz calls it financially sacrificial. Sayani believes youth are not valued and are not treated equitably, thus they are not paid fairly.

Zammit predicts that, with the establishment of groups like Youth Social Entrepreneurs of Canada and the Social Enterprise Centre of Excellence, social enterprise is about to explode among youth groups. Skinner finds it surprising how many groups are exploring social enterprise options, but believes it is more out of necessity, to allow them to do more advocacy and intervention work. If core support existed for this kind of social change work, the emphasis on social enterprise might feel less urgent. Groups are grasping at the potential in social enterprise because basic programming resources are lacking; people don't have access to physical space to build long-term relationships with their constituents. It is a misperception that young people are getting excited about social enterprise purely due to the potential for income generation. Yet people need an income and some sort of quality of life. Caspari, Witt, and others marvel and worry about how committed the youth they work with are – many will take a part-time job so that they can continue as volunteer leaders of the programs they started.

Caspari points out the paradox of the system within which nonprofits and charities exist. We operate in a market-based economy in which nonprofits are expected to run on a clear business model but are not allowed to build assets. Weisz thinks that we're on the verge of creating a new sector that must begin to think differently. What would it be like if we could get away from a limited perspective, limited resources, and the fight for a few scraps?

Emergence

Witt sees the cultivation of entrepreneurial skills among this generation of young people. This is part of the unique picture that is forming of grassroots youth-led models – youth

are simply trying whatever works. O'Kieffe and Sayani believe that this experimentation will help provide needed legitimacy of youth-led groups and will lead to greater impact on policy. Young people who are now heading up their own initiatives and organizations will eventually move into existing or more traditional organizations. As a result, existing agencies and community organizations will inevitably have to change the way they operate.

For Sayani, thinking about the effect on future generations and envisioning how we want our communities to look 20-30 years from now, this change is crucial. What is needed is a broader perspective on sustainability. At heart, the issue is poverty. Dig deep enough into unemployment, poor housing, violence, drug use, and you find a common root: poverty. Bringing resources into the community and truly creating ways for communities to access these resources, gain real power, and actively participate in addressing these issues are the first steps to positive change.

O'Kieffe, Sayani, and others describe Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze's notion of emergence. Change happens, argue Wheatley and Frieze, as a result of "networks of relationships [formed] among people who share a common cause and vision of what's possible."[11] If we apply our understanding of natural life-cycles to social change, we see that when systems form and occur in isolation, they play out without influencing or changing anything on the whole. But systems that connect or become networks gather strength and become communities of practice that result in sudden new systems emerging on a greater scale. While individuals or separate groups have certain capacities and qualities, these are more evident and have more power and influence in the larger network. These networks become a system of influence that is greater than what might be possible through "small, planned or incremental actions."[12]

CONCLUSION

There has been a plethora of research on healthy youth development since the early 1990s. The conversation has been shifting, more slowly in Canada then in the United States, from a focus on risk and prevention to engagement, participation, leadership, and organizing. Many youth serving programs, implemented to solve problems of dropping out, drug use, violence, and teen pregnancy, among others, focus on fixing problems in youth. Karen Pittman, with the Forum for Youth Investment, made it her mantra that focusing on problems in youth is not the solution: "Problem free is not fully prepared."[13]

Young people need opportunities to be involved in making a difference in their communities. We can create programs to try to get youth engaged, but true engagement and full participation happens only when people are passionate, interested, and invested in the issue or topic, and are given the validation and space to critically develop their thinking, beliefs, and understanding of complex issues, rather than having their opinions diminished, dismissed, and devalued. Not only do fully engaged youth gain competencies necessary for future adult agency but they also become leaders now rather than in the future. Young people have ideas and strategies for addressing issues and solving problems in their own lives, in their communities, and in broader society. The emergence of a youth-led sector is exciting because young people are organizing themselves, exploring different decision-making models, playing with social enterprise notions, rejecting hier-

archical thinking, and appear to be naturally gravitating to collective leadership, action, and change. This means that anyone involved in the nonprofit sector and in social justice change work should be paying attention to what young people are doing.

As funding agencies, our role is to encourage, support, and provide young people with opportunities to test out their ideas. Supporting the processes that allow young people to explore, take calculated risks, and learn builds infrastructure that exists beyond the energy and efforts of individuals and ensures that the collective memory of this work is captured and built upon by the next wave of young people.[14] Our grant criteria often require collaboration. We also look for innovation and, paradoxically, sustainability. We are seeing innovation and a system of networking and collaboration growing organically out of the need to learn and work together.

Our evaluations tend to be focused on end results and products, as if there were some reasonable measurement of human development and social change that could be quantified. At Laidlaw, we've chosen to focus on the process and the opportunities and ideas youth are experimenting with. We wish to capture their stories – because we recognize that individuals and societies cannot be fixed like machines or clocks. Life is chaotic and ever changing, so we have to adapt and evolve. We must listen to one another, learn from one another's experiences, seek diverse experiences and perspectives, and require value-based shifts in how we grant and how we seek to "evaluate" and understand what constitutes successful change in community and society.

NOTES

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[6] Wiesz, Assaf. (2009, December 14). In-person conversation.

[7] Kang, Chris. (2009, December 21). In-person conversation.

[8] Skinner, Ana. (2010, January 6). In-person conversation.

[9] Wright, Leslie. (2009, December 17). Phone conversation.

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Pittman, Karen, Irby, Merita, & Ferber, Thaddeus. (2000). Unfinished business:
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[14] Laidlaw Foundation. (2008). Operational plan. URL: http://www.laidlawfdn.org .