

Food for Thought: An After-School Program Based on Youth Development Principles

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Often times you hear students at my school, especially middle school girls, complaining that there are not any extracurricular programs for them to partake in. Currently, I teach at Universal School, which is a Pre-Kindergarten to 12th grade private Islamic school in Bridgeview, Illinois. The school has been in existence for 18 years and still has many areas in need of improvement. There are programs for middle school boys and high school boys and girls, but the only extracurricular activities for middle school girls are basketball and volleyball. If a student is not interested in sports, which is the case for many of the middle school girls, then there is nothing else available. For the past four years that I have been teaching middle school, I have been hearing this complaint year after year, so I thought it was a good time for me to launch my program, Food for Thought, for this underserved group. I wanted my program to be beneficial for the students, so I reviewed several journal articles to acquire a better understanding of youth development principles.

In the first section of this paper, I will explain what experts in the field of youth development believe are the fundamental principles which should be present in any youth program. Then, I will describe my design for an after-school program which embodies these principles. I will explain how the principles will be applied to promote youth development. In the last section, I will provide suggestions for ways to incorporate youth development principles during the school, and in other interactions with youth.

Youth Development Principles

After reviewing the literature on youth development, it became clear that youth should be the main focus of any youth development program. There are programs such that all the details are organized by adults and youth are asked only to participate

superficially; this goes against the spirit of youth development. It is important to have structure in activities for youth, but the structure should not be imposed by adults and should instead be decided on together with youth and adults. Larson (2000) explains that activities need to be structured and voluntary in order for youth to take initiative and participate in these activities. If programs are not structured, then you will end up with a group of young people sitting around and wasting their time. Also, if youth are forced to participate, then they will not benefit as much. Youth programs need to be youth-based so that youth are actively involved in deciding on goals for the program and given other responsibilities (Larson, 2000). Youth need to be made aware of real-life constraints, such as rules they need to follow. If programs are not structured and youth are allowed to do as they please, then they will get the incorrect impression that there are not rules and regulations that need to be adhered to. Also, youth need to be involved in the arc of activity (Larson, 2000), which is the planning and execution process of a program. Youth need to be involved in the initiation of a program, as well as the execution and evaluation phase.

The National Youth Development Information Center explains that youth development programs should be youth-centered, knowledge-centered, and care-centered. It is crucial for youth programs to be focused on youth and their positive development. Programs should be designed around the needs of youth. Also, youth should get something out of a program, instead of spending time with friends. Either the youth program should be an extension of the knowledge acquired during the school day, or it should be information that will benefit them in the long run, such as social and personal responsibility.

When people think of youth, they usually think of a troubled group who is on their way to getting in trouble. Youth development is about focusing on the positive characteristics, rather than on the negative aspects. Many studies have been done to study negative aspects of youths' lives, however few study positive outcomes. Moore and Glei (1995) developed a measure, the Positive Well-Being Index, to assess the well-being of youth by assessing the presence of positive characteristics in the lives of youth. For example, youth have a higher level of well-being if they have a better relationship with their parents, if they are more satisfied with life in general, and if they have healthy relationships with their peers. For youth program coordinators this implies that the focus should shift from solely helping at-risk youth and working with all youth to inspire them to develop positive characteristics and outcomes.

Blyth (2006) has developed an analogy to better understand youth development. Just like a human being needs a specific combination of diet and exercise to remain healthy, youth need certain developmental 'nutrients' and need to strengthen certain 'muscles' in order to have a healthy development. The developmental nutrients that are needed are caring people, constructive places, and challenging possibilities (Blyth, 2006). For youth to develop in a positive way, they need to have people who genuinely care for their well-being. Also, they should be able to create sustainable relationships with positive role models. Youth programs need to take place in environments where the youth feel safe to express themselves. Youth also need to be presented with challenges that require them to think creatively to arrive at a solution. Blyth (2006) believes that developmental muscles need to be strengthened through thinking, mastery of skills, making connections, and contributing to the program. Youth need to actively be

involved in all aspects of the program, and only then is it truly a youth development program.

Walker (2006) writes about six fundamental principles that should be incorporated in any youth development program. It is crucial for youth programs to be built around the basic needs of youth. Program coordinators should design programs once they have assessed the needs of the youth they are working with. Programs need to provide choice and flexibility. They should not be so limited that if the youth want to change a part of the program, then the entire program fails to continue. Also, the program should be created as a joint effort between the adults and youth. It should not be that the program coordinators work out the details of the program and then ask the youth to participate in the activities the youth had no part in organizing. Programs should also include opportunities for the youth to learn something, either as an extension of what they learn in school or life skills, which are essential skills for youth to possess. Walker (2006) also encourages program coordinators to embrace an asset-based approach and to adopt a cohesive approach to learning. Instead of focusing on negative characteristics of youth and trying to alleviate those problems, coordinators should make the youths' assets the focal point of the program. Also, rather than focusing on one single goal for the program, youth and program coordinators should strive to achieve a wide range of goals.

When designing an after-school program, coordinators might be faced with the issue of whether or not it is necessary to initiate after school programs and if they really do benefit youth. Kahne and his colleagues (2001) studied the effectiveness of after-school programs by comparing school-day and after-school experience. They found that certain elements which are not available to youth during the school-day are available to

them after-school. After-school programs provide an affective context for the youth which lead them to have more favorable experiences. When a person feels safe and comfortable in an environment, they will be able to grow and develop more positively. Also, programs should support youth development. Instead of allowing youth to simply spend time with friends, after-school programs should offer activities and opportunities for youth to develop. A high-quality program also engages youth as resources. Instead of having youth participate in the program, they should be given responsibilities and be made to play an active role in the program.

Program Framework

Based on the abovementioned youth development principles I have designed an after-school program, which I will initiate at my school. My program, Food for Thought, is a ten week program in which ten middle school girls will learn some basic cooking techniques as well as learn about personal and social responsibility through discussions and reflection.

Participants. This program is limited to 7th grade girls, all of whom will be informed about my program. Participation will be on a first-come first-serve basis. I will limit the number of participants to a maximum of ten students, because having more will not be conducive to meaningful discussions.

Funding and Space. Participants will pay a \$10 registration fee to cover the cost of supplies. The program will take place in the school's cafeteria, and we will use the cafeteria kitchen for the cooking.

Meeting schedule. We will meet once a week for ten weeks for two hours after school. We will spend the first hour cooking and we will have a discussion in the second hour.

Culminating Event. At the end of the ten weeks, participating students will organize and host a banquet for their parents to showcase what they have learned throughout the course of the program. I will be there to supervise the process, but students will be in charge of the whole program.

Embedded Themes

An effective program is one in which the participants get more out of than just the simple activity. For example, in Food for Thought, if the participants only learn some basic cooking skills it will not be a successful program. For it to be most effective, participants should get more out of it than just some basic cooking skills. There are three themes embedded in Food for Thought: participants will improve their basic math skills through cooking, practice cooperative learning by working with other students, and enhance their leadership skills in the course of the program.

Math. Math plays an important role in cooking. For example, students can work with concepts such as measurements, conversion between units, fractions and other math concepts while cooking. Since math will be part of the embedded curriculum, students will not necessarily have to complete worksheets as they would in traditional math classes, but they would work with these concepts hands on, which would be very effective. If participants were to practice math in the usual “drill and kill” method, they would lose interest in the program as a whole, so it is important to subtly incorporate math in such a way that participants realize they need to use math rather than being

required to do so. Also, it provides students a relevant context for math, rather than doing math in the abstract, as in the classroom. I will present math problems in such a way that they will have no choice but to use their math knowledge. For example, I will present a recipe that yields the food for four people and students will have to adjust the recipe to yield food for ten people. They will have to understand fractions well enough to be able to do that. If a student does not know how to do that, which will most likely be the case, I will ask a student who knows how to do it to show the others. If no one knows how to do it, then I will explain it to them.

Students will also get practice with measurements. When students are taught about units of measurement in traditional math classes, they do not acquire a deep understanding of what each unit is. Using cups, ounces, etcetera in the kitchen will give the participants a true understanding of the various units of measurement. Also, students will be given the opportunity to work with metric as well as standard units and they will be able to convert between the two systems of units. We will also discuss the history of the various systems, why there are different systems, and what this means to people who travel in countries which use different systems.

For the embedded theme to be effective, I will have to make sure that math does not become the main focus of my program. Math should be prevalent, but should not overpower the cooking element of the activities. I will have to integrate math with cooking so the two activities are seamlessly bound together.

Cooperative Learning. Another embedded theme which will be part of Food for Thought is to teach students about cooperation and working well with others. I mentioned in the last section that students will teach one another how to use their math skills in

order to cook. Other ways in which students will experience cooperative learning is through learning to share their workspace. The school's kitchen, where the program will take place, is not large enough to have ten separate cooking stations, so students will have to share their space with one another.

Students will be put in groups of three, and they will work together to follow the recipe to create the desired food item. Students will realize that each one of them plays an important role in ensuring the success of the group as a whole. In the first session I will explain to students the five important elements of cooperative learning, which are positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual and group accountability, interpersonal and small-group skills, and group processing. These five elements will be explained in depth and modeled for the groups. Each group member will be expected to learn how to follow the recipe as well as to make sure that the other two members also know how to get the job done. Every week each group will decide on a rotation for who will be in charge of preparing and gathering the supplies required for the recipe, who will be mainly in charge of the actual cooking, and who will be responsible for cleaning up the work station. Even though all three members will have to perform these tasks, the person in charge for that week will ensure that the task gets completed. Also, students will be required to explain the procedure to group members who do not understand and each group will be responsible for completing the task jointly. Students will also be given strategies to evaluate their group work. For example, if something is not going well, they will have to decide together as a group what the best course of action should be. Since the participants of the program are my students, I will be able to construct the groups based on each person's ability to follow directions and their knowledge of math.

For cooperative learning to work, there must be the correct combination of skills that each member brings to the group.

Leadership. Another theme embedded in the program will be leadership. Before we actually start the program, a student-selected advisory board will decide on what food items they will like to prepare, as well as what topics to discuss each week. Also, students will teach each other if a group member does not know how to follow the recipe correctly or is having trouble with anything else. Students will also be responsible for organizing the banquet, which will be held at the end of the program. Students will be given the opportunity to exercise their leadership skills in all aspects of our program. As mentioned above, students will be given at least three opportunities during the course of the program to lead their group in accomplishing the task at hand.

Embedded Mentoring

Even though Food for Thought is not intended to be a mentoring program, I will act as a mentor. We will make it clear from the onset of the program that if there is anything participants need to discuss, or if they need advice for anything they can confide in me or the other program worker. During the second half of the program, which is the discussion part, students can talk about conflicts they are encountering or anything else they need to share. The program organizers, as well as participants will act as mentors and advise each other on various issues. Mentoring will take place when students need help in figuring out how to follow the recipe as well as when students need help with an issue that they share with members of the program. Again, the main focus of the group is not mentoring, but it inevitably takes place when people of any age get together.

Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility

A main focus of Food for Thought is to teach participants personal and social responsibility. TPSR is not part of the embedded curriculum and will be openly explained to the students. The main idea of the TPSR model is to give students an active voice and share the decision-making power with them (Hellison, 1995). There are five levels in the model. I will briefly describe the focus of each level and give examples of how I will incorporate them into the program.

Respect. In Level 1, participants are taught about respecting themselves, everyone and everything around them. This concept must be introduced first in order for students to understand the remaining concepts. The idea of respect is not something that can be taught by filling out worksheets, but can only be taught through discussion and reflection. Students will discuss the importance of respect, ways they can respect themselves and those around them. Students will be told that to respect those around them, they will have to share their supplies and make sure to clean up after themselves. We will also discuss how a person's actions impact those around them and that this thought process needs to take place before taking any action.

Participation and Effort. In Level 2, students should learn that the amount of effort they put in to an activity is directly related to the outcomes and the more effort they exert, the better the outcomes. Students need to realize that they have control over their outcomes by putting in more or less effort. Through discussing and reflecting, students will come to realize that they can be successful if they put forth the effort that is required to get any job done.

Self-direction. If students take more responsibility for their work, they will realize that they can complete tasks without much help or direction. In Food for Thought, students will be given tasks that they will be able to complete with little or no adult supervision. This will give participants a sense of accomplishment and they will be motivated to put forth effort.

Caring and Helping Others. Because participants will be working in groups of three, they have to make sure that all group members are in agreement. If a member does not understand the task, then it must be explained in order for the group to succeed as a whole. Students also have to realize that what they learn in this after school program can and should be applied to all aspects of their lives.

Transfer. Students will learn that they can and are expected to be socially and personally responsible in all aspects of their lives, not just in our after-school sessions. We will discuss the benefits and ways to apply these ideas to everyday life.

Program Evaluation

This program will be evaluated by me as well as by the participants. I will keep a running journal of each week's sessions to track how things are going. Students will also keep a weekly journal to express what they would like to get out of the program. At the end of each cooking session, students will self-evaluate each level of TPSR to see if they applied each idea while working. After self-evaluating, each student will decide on what they will work to improve for the following week. I will also have students reflect on the frequency and types of conflict they encountered. If students are reporting less conflict, then I will consider the program to be effective.

Youth Development?

Is Food for Thought a youth development program? Youth development programs are ones in which the youth have a voice, they share power with the adults, and are given responsibilities. Specifically, the following principles should be apparent in a program for it to truly be youth development: empowerment-based, active learning, holistic and developmental, relational, and flexible.

Empowerment-based. Students will play an active role in Food for Thought. After I have students registered in the program, we will select an advisory board to decide what we will cook and what topics we will discuss. Students will be responsible for getting the ingredients as well as setting up the kitchen for the day's session. Also, students will have full responsibility of organizing the end-of-program banquet. They will plan out the menu, design and distribute invitations, and be responsible for all of the details of the actual event.

Active Learning. Students will be learning math in a hands-on method which will enable them to retain the information. Also, students will be learning from each other.

Holistic and Developmental. Food for Thought is a holistic and developmentally appropriate program because it addresses a variety of issues such as improving math skills, performing cooperative learning, putting into effect leadership skills, and teaching personal and social responsibility.

Relational. The success of Food for Thought lies in developing healthy and meaningful relationships with other participants. If group members are not getting along, then we will have to mediate and resolve the issue.

Flexible. Our program is flexible enough to accommodate any issues that may arise which students would like to discuss. I will have several topics to discuss in case there is not a specific topic students have in mind, but if the students bring up a topic, then that is what we will discuss.

Implications for Educators and Practitioners

Youth development principles may seem easy to apply to an after-school where there are no worries of completing a curriculum in a given period of time or of high-stakes tests, but can they be applied to students during the school day? First and foremost, educators must rethink their role in the education of youth. If they believe they are all-knowing and they possess all of the power in the class, then they have to realize that their students have a lot to offer. Teachers need to practice power-sharing in order to allow their students to play a more integral role in the classroom. This may create a feeling of uneasiness in teachers because sharing power may lead to loss of control. Sharing power in the classroom is the first step in making youth development part of the school-day.

These days with the focus on teaching material rather than on developing relationships with youth, the focus has shifted from teaching students to teaching information. The information which needs to be conveyed is more important than the recipient of the information. For youth development to take place in the classroom, the focus has to be brought back on the youth.

Classrooms also need to increase youth involvement and have the youth play a more integral and active role. Teachers can assign tasks to the students. This way some of the teacher's burden is lessened and the students are more involved in their education. From my teaching experience, classroom management issues can be resolved when

students are given more responsibility and they feel they have a stake in the classroom. The traditional classroom is one in which the teacher orchestrates all of the activities in the classroom. A classroom that adheres to the principles of youth development requires the teacher to step aside while her students are allowed to be more involved in a genuine way.

Additionally, a classroom that incorporates the principles of youth development needs to have time for students, as well as teachers, to reflect on their practice. In the hustle-and-bustle of school, students are not given a chance to take a pause and reflect on their work. In effect, students are going through the motions of school without giving their actions any thought.

Extending these principles to the school-day may be challenging; however, the outcomes will benefit both teachers and students equally.

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