Towards a Culture of Collaboration:
Transforming the Youth Services Sector

Reflection Note

Many organizations and agencies have developed effective programs that help young people to transition into the workforce, and to support and mentor them as they move forward into adulthood.[1] Nevertheless, there is a culture of competition that has developed within the sector that holds back further progress. Some organizations are seeking new ways to overcome these challenges with fresh approaches to collaboration and partnership. Strengthening a pattern and culture of collaboration within the sector has emerged as a key area of learning.

At a Community of Practice convened by the Youth Research and Evaluation Exchange (YouthREX) and the Bahá'í Community of Canada, some two dozen stakeholders in the youth services sector considered the question of how to transform the work of their agencies and organizations. This gathering built upon the conversations held over two previous meetings of the Community of Practice. Over the course of the day, themes of partnership, mutual support, and new models of evaluation emerged as primary areas of discussion.

Strengthening partnership

As young people walk along the path towards employment, they are influenced by social service agencies, schools, and the changing structure and workforce demands of the local economy. Agencies and organizations working in the field of youth employment find that their work is more effective when they seek out ways to partner and collaborate with other actors that shape outcomes and opportunities for young people. In Toronto, some sectors of the economy – for example, in entertainment and film production – are growing quickly and creating new opportunities for young people to seek employment. However, partnership and collaboration between schools, front-line workers, and employers need to be strengthened to make clear how to move into new and growing areas of work.

When youth-serving organizations collaborate and complement each other, the resulting services better support young people in the full context of their lives. Not every agency is best suited for every opportunity; yet, the ongoing pursuit of funding can divert attention from building on organizational strengths. Some organizations are creating a different mode of operations that identifies the combined assets and experience required to "move the needle" on a target issue. As a population, young people face different kinds of challenges with accessing employment, including immigration status, racialization, disability, homelessness, poverty, addiction, and contact with the criminal justice system. Organizational capacity to address all of these factors cannot be found in one organization alone. A greater awareness within the sector of the strengths of various organizations can help them to cater to the specialized needs of populations encountering different intersecting challenges.

While many organizations talk about partnership as an aspiration, too often the concept is given lip-service. There is a need to consider the values that define an authentic partnership. A shared framework

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[1] See previous Reflection Notes on these topics: https://opa.bahai.ca/en_documents/a-place-to-land-addressing-barriers-to-youth-employment-2019/ and https://opa.bahai.ca/en_documents/a-culture-of-mutual-support-characteristics-of-youth-mentoring-relationships-2019/

of common values helps to strengthen collaboration by providing guidelines for decision-making and generating a common language for partners. Examples of such values include placing the wellbeing and engagement of youth at the centre; acting with integrity and mutual support; seeking out knowledge and experience from the wider community; and working with transparency, honesty, and accountability. It is not enough to simply talk about values; it is necessary to also describe examples of how they have been put into practice within the context of partnerships.

Choosing what to evaluate

Among the obstacles faced by organizations seeking to move towards more collaborative work are the demands of formal program evaluation. While evaluation should help to improve organizational effectiveness and improve accountability for the achievement of results, in practice it often focuses on a narrow set of indicators that create incentives for counter-productive actions. Many front-line staff and managers recognize that measuring outputs alone – the number of individuals moving through the system into jobs – is often ineffective at tracking core goals of quality and long-term success. Funding agencies, however, generally focus on outputs over qualitative outcomes, which can fuel a competitive culture within the sector. Boosting short-term numbers at the expense of long-term outcomes is a tempting hazard for many organizations.

From the standpoint of many workers in the sector, however, employment services should be oriented toward long-term capacity building that seeks to address intersecting barriers and opportunities that enable young people to thrive in their chosen work. In pursuit of this vision, it is helpful to consider an alternative index of indicators that measure steps towards long-term outcomes. At a macro-level, measuring such indicators across the sector could generate a picture of the overall health of the youth employment landscape and identify key contributors to this system, promoting and rewarding a focus on providing high quality services. This is an area of ongoing learning and exploration.

Building cultures of collaboration

When we consider the youth sector as a whole, there is a disconnect between informal conversations that laud collaboration and the actions of organizations that reflect a mindset of competition and scarce resources. While most people hope for more collaboration, there is a sense that organizational survival requires tough decisions in competition with other agencies serving the same population. What can be done to create a culture of collaboration?

One of the practical ways in which collaboration can be nurtured is by creating structures and spaces in which relationships are fostered across the sector. These kinds of spaces need to be carefully designed so that they are not simply "show and tell," where representatives of organizations simply report on their work. There needs to be significant time devoted to structured reflection on practice, and informal periods in which friendship and mutual understanding can easily grow. Through these kinds of conversations and natural steps towards relationship-building, growing familiarity and respect can take root. These are essential elements of a culture of collaboration. When the staff and leadership of different organizations come to know and respect one another, then collaboration comes naturally and the impulse to compete is more easily resisted. Existing spaces such as youth-employment conferences, city-wide meetings for employment sector stakeholders, and accessible opportunities for professional development can all contribute to a more collaborative culture of mutual support.

Another area that requires attention is that of evaluation. Is it possible to widen the scope of program evaluation to account for collaborative approaches to employment services that support and reward

partnerships? How can funding models be more oriented towards long-term outcomes for youth that are strengthened through collaboration, rather than short-term outputs that incentivize competition? At a more general level, is it possible to re-think existing modalities of evaluation, so that it becomes more oriented towards the generation of practical knowledge about how to foster long-term capacity building among young people seeking employment? Are there alternative ways to systematize learning that incorporates narratives and qualitative outcomes, while still meeting the need for accountability to funders?

It is clear that many people working in the field of youth employment are already building a transformative culture that is based on collaboration and mutual learning. The challenge ahead is learning how to find validation and support for this culture among policy-makers and funding organizations, so that it can gain strength and come to influence the sector at large.

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On 19 November 2019, more then two dozen people from various agencies and organizations concerned with youth and work gathered in Toronto to consider vital questions facing their organizations and the young people they serve. This space was created as a component of the YouthREX communities of practice initiative and was co-organized and hosted by the Bahá'í community. For more information, read: https://news.bahai.ca/en/articles/community-of-practice-reflects-on-a-culture-of-collaboration.html