Good, high-quality youth development programs require effective youth organizations. While youth organizations are commonly understood as valuable and supportive of healthy youth development, attention and focus on youth organizations in both scholarship and practice are missing within the youth development field. The authors advocate for a more distinct and clearer focus on youth organizations to foster positive youth development.

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Missing in the youth development literature: The organization as host, cage, and promise

Ross VeLure Robolt, Michael Baizerman, Sheetal Rana, Kathy Korum

Youth development scholarship has a strong and clear focus on theory development and understanding high-quality programs, youth work and youth development practices, and organized activities to support positive youth development.1 Somewhat surprisingly, focus on youth organizations in positive youth development is largely ignored. Most of the recent scholarship is about programs, services, projects, and initiatives, not the host, that is, the agency or organization.2 In the human services, business, international development, and recreation, the study of organizations is prominent; in the youth development literature, these are on the back horizon at best.

Organizations are basic to youth development practice and programming. This is their home, their host, their context. Most youth work and youth programs in the United States exist within and because they receive care and support from their host organi-
zation. Youth organizations also work as cages: they keep certain youth work programming and youth practices viable long after their expiration date and block innovative and responsive practices from gaining the necessary support to flourish. It is important to give scholarly attention to youth organizations—their structure, ethos, culture, social organization, and processes—as hosts to youth-serving programs. Without organizations, these programs would be homeless. To get more and better healthy youth development programs requires housing them in supportive organizations. It is necessary to know about and understand what makes a good organizational host and how such organizations can be developed and sustained.

Typically the organization is not the unit of analysis in the study of youth programs and youth development practice. They are a taken-for-granted, almost invisible context. At best, they are given a nod as necessary; occasionally they are blamed when programs do not work. Too often they are equated with the youth program or programming. We know very little about youth organizations’ social structure, culture, processes, connections to, and influence on them of local communities and government. The crucial question is how organizations, complex and ambiguous social structures, work as hosts and homes to youth development programming work. From the literature on organizations in sociology, business, human services, and recreation, it is clear that host organizations are implicated in the success or failure of youth development work.

Focusing on organization as a primary actor in youth development gives rise to important questions about what organizational supports and legitimacy are necessary for effective youth development programs. Such questions are both scholarly and practical. To introduce these questions, we show that they emerge from everyday scenarios. Using scenarios allows us to raise questions that show the importance of organizations for youth development. These questions have a dual purpose: they show how questions about organization change and development are directly connected to positive youth development efforts, and they provide a
beginning research agenda on youth organizations. We conclude by summarizing and proposing one such research agenda.

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**Scenarios**

**First scenario**

You are the head of a youth program at a large community-based city agency. The mayor has just pushed youth programming and services as priorities. How do you think about your organization and imagine what you will do to bring it into alignment with the mayor’s policies and priorities?

Youth development professionals with even a little experience have probably encountered similar situations. After years of doing good work on the margins and in the shadows, you are pushed, even pulled, to center stage. Since your organization and programs exist in this mayoral, community, union, and public context, what you can do and how is in part connected to local customs, traditions, priorities, and politics. “Organizational theory and managerial wisdom tell us that for an organization to survive it must be compatible with its environment.” Among the questions that can arise immediately in this scenario are these:

- What is the purpose of making this issue a priority now?
- What is going on now in the community that is pushing young people as a priority concern or issue?
- What responses are appropriate and possible given our capacities, history, constituencies, unions, and other city and youth-serving nonprofits?

A common reaction can be disbelief: “We have been around long enough to know that this is just politics.” Another is frenzied action: “How do we capture the moment to move into this new space?” The scenario highlights how a municipal, community-based organization is embedded within a community and a local
political environment. Thus, effective organizational change will depend on whether one can mobilize support from internal and external constituencies. At a minimum, this can be a moment of both opportunity and danger, depending on one’s multiple stakeholders: workers, union, parents, other municipal agencies, and, of course, the young people.

These also are moments when non-youth-serving organizations consider how they too might begin to include youth programming and youth services in their larger catalogue of opportunities. After all, if it is a mayor’s priority, it may be necessary to their survival to become a supporter of youth services, programs, and youth work. At a minimum, it is likely to be an additional source of often badly needed funding to keep staff and organization doing what they have always done. For the director of a youth program with a long history in the city of supporting young people, this moment can be fraught with alarm, even frustration. At this moment, he or she can assess the organization as preparatory to planning how to steer the agency to support the mayor’s initiative. Organization assessment questions usually include at least these:

- What is our mission?
- Who is our customer?
- What does the customer value?
- What are our results?
- What is our plan?

These simple questions can be difficult to answer. While the mayor’s new emphasis on youth may directly relate to the agency’s mission, disagreements between the youth agency and the mayor’s new focus may arise over whom the agency understands as its customers, what those customers value, what results are expected, and how these will be evaluated and understood. A leader of an organization must be a reader of the internal and external environments in political terms, in terms of organizational capacity, and the rest.

For the larger field of youth development, these questions and the way organizational leadership and staff answer them reveal
much about the ethos, structure, and culture of the agency and its leaders and staff. Their responses provide answers to other more scholarly questions:

- What evidence (research, evaluation, folk, or practice wisdom) do youth organizations use to argue for and support their continued work?
- Are young people conceived of as customers, advice givers, program codesigners?
- Even if leaders and staff do not fully grasp what youth development is, do they conceptualize their work in a youth development frame, work in that orientation, talk in that language?
- What other concepts and languages (business, charity, political action) do they use to describe what they do with, for, or on the behalf of young people?

Questions like these point to organizations and local social structures, cultures, intra- and interagency politics, and how youth-serving organizations understand, promote, and evaluate themselves. They do so in complex, overlapping environments within municipal government (in this scenario) and between that and nonprofit and for-profit organizations serving youth.

This scenario was intended to make explicit quickly and easily that organizations matter intensely as hosts and homes to youth programs. In addition, no change in direction or priority is simple, quick, easily attained, or even necessarily long lasting.

**Second scenario**

You are the director of a small municipal organization that serves populations of a variety of ages, such as a municipal library. You have been given a large, long-term grant to improve healthy youth development throughout the library system. How do you make sense of your organization in the context of this grant and think through how you are going to bring about the promised changes?

Starting with an organizational assessment is important, as the director must have clarity on both the will and capacity of staff to
bring about the promised changes. Because the organization’s mission is to work with people of all ages, implementing this grant on youth development may be complicated. How can the organization strengthen its support for healthy youth development without losing its larger, multigenerational service mission?

Among the several necessary assessments, this scenario highlights management style: What will be most effective? Would this change best be met through a collaborative, consultative, directive, or coercive management style? This depends on the social structure and culture of the organization, staff capacity and willingness to work on this grant, and the types of likely resistance.

In a collaborative management style, employees participate in major decisions and are involved in almost all of the change process. The youth development literature advocates this way of working with young people, so this may be the initial choice. But consider these questions:

- Do staff want to be involved with this and other decisions?
- Do staff have the time, energy, or capacity to work collaboratively? Is this my leadership style?
- Do we have experience working in this way?
- Do I have enough political time to work in this democratic way?
- What can I anticipate about this style that could deflect, railroad, block, or otherwise make this style the right or wrong choice?

Answers to such questions can shape what management style to use.

With a consultative management style, staff and employees have a more limited role, often reviewing and considering several proposals, with a management team making the final decision. In both directive and coercive styles, management maintains control of the decision-making process; with a coercive style, management may use threats and force for compliance.

This brief description of management styles in organizational change processes raises additional questions:
• What management style might be most appropriate given the organizational focus on youth development?
• Will this style be effective in bringing about the necessary changes in programs and practices, in this organization, within the designated time frame?
• Will one style produce short-term gains that will be lost in the long term?

Here is the old dilemma on whether one should focus on means or ends or both. When might it be appropriate to use a management style that violates general youth development principles? What issues emerge if the management teams needs to use coercion to bring about a stronger commitment to healthy youth development? What are the longer-term consequences of different management styles used to bring about organizational changes supportive of healthy youth development?

Regardless of management style used, the change process is likely to encounter resistance, or what Argyris called “organizational defenses”: “Organizational defense routines are actions or policies that prevent individuals or segments of the organization from experiencing embarrassment or threat.” These are the typical policies and processes of an organization that work to challenge change efforts, such as innovation or new direction. All work to keep the organization from developing the necessary learning culture to support organizational change. There are several perennial questions here:

• What change process can address these organizational defenses?
• Which change process is likely to build a more coherent, ongoing, and supportive organizational learning culture?
• Who must be included in the change process to keep organizational defenses at a minimum?

These questions are also the focus of management gurus and often the first ones that organizational change and development external consultants ask.
Third scenario

You are a university-based consultant who has been invited by a large municipal recreation agency to help strengthen its youth programs and services. How do you go about trying to understand the organization and developing action hypotheses so that you can propose strategies and plans?

Drawing from the consulting and evaluation literatures, we know that both consultants and advisors can have both advantages and disadvantages during organizational change efforts. As an outsider, the external consultant is a stranger and can often notice what others take for granted. This can be enormously useful in organizational change work because it is these taken-for-granted ways of orienting to the work and doing the work that can become the focus of change efforts. An outsider can usually ask innocent-sounding and yet important questions such as these:

- How come this is the way the program is organized?
- Is this typically how all decisions get made?
- Who is usually responsible for doing what? Why was this person tapped to do the work?
- What are the position titles in use, how are these filled, and how long have workers held each job?

Outside consultants’ comments and suggestions can also quickly be discounted because they may be viewed as outsiders who do not know enough about the local situation. Many organizations and communities prioritize and value local community or practice wisdom developed through long-term local involvement. The outside consultant must tap into this organization, history, social structure, culture, politics, community base, and the rest. Here wisdom from the field of anthropology and sociology can suggest how to proceed: seek first to understand.

Organizations are complex, dynamic, and open systems. Understanding the whole of a large organization may be impossible. This does not mean that it will remain ineffable. Time spent in the organization begins to reveal how it works—how it interacts,
responds to, and is shaped by the larger surrounding environments; how it is socially structured; what methods typically are used to do its work; its culture; how space is physically structured, how decisions are made and by whom; and what conflicts are typical and expected.\textsuperscript{14}

The literature on organizational development provides a large array of questions around these six conceptual ways of understanding organizations:

1. Who are the major stakeholders in the community?
2. What is the relationship between the organization and surrounding community members?
3. What stories does the organization tell about its history and purpose?
4. Who does what, when, and how? What work is understood as less relevant, and who typically does this work?
5. Does the organization have an advisory group or board? If so, who belongs?
6. How do visitors and participants use the space? What is located closest to the front door? What is hidden from general view?

Outside consultants have to learn about the organization as they simultaneously help with organization change development. They come with a preferred theory, models, and strategies of change and may try to apply these to the organization. For example, is change conceptualized as incremental, linear, or continuous? Each of these leads to different ways of working. Increasingly, the idea that one can manage change, that it is a linear process, and that it can be planned and controlled is less supported by research.\textsuperscript{15} Instead, change is seen as “ongoing,” and “does not occur in a neat linear fashion, but is messy, murky, and complicated. It involves twists and loops, turns and returns, omissions and revisions, the foreseen and the unforeseen, and is marked by achievement of planned targets, failures, resistance, celebration, ambivalence, fatigue, conflict and political manoeuvring.”\textsuperscript{16} How one works depends on how these
questions are answered: Does one understand this work as organization change or organizational changing?

Those who are doing organizational changing often create, implement, and evaluate a plan and its success or failure, and then they leave, their work completed. Those who understand their work as organizational changing know that their work is never done; their focus and effort are on creating lasting processes and structures to support questioning, evaluating, reflecting, learning, and redesigning as part of the ongoing way of being in that organization. Although there are volumes devoted to creating a learning organization, especially in the nonprofit literature, questions such as these remain:

- How can a learning culture be created and sustained in this organization?
- What are the barriers to creating and sustaining a culture of learning, and how can these be addressed continuously forever?
- What policies should be created to support learning as a normal and typical staff responsibility and role?
- Is a strategy of using policy correct for this organization now?

A university faculty member who is hired and is treated as an outside consultant can emphasize his or her “outsiderness” rather than faculty status, and with that, his or her discipline, disciplinary models, biases, blindness, and inherent cross-cultural differences. Also only touched lightly are the structural elements and aspects of advice solicitation, giving, and consultancy, one form of advice structure. Crucial to all of this are cost, credentials and legitimacy, allocated time, consultant roles and responsibilities, and the many responsibilities of insiders and outsiders in each organizational change effort.

**Fourth scenario**

You are a community-based organization dissatisfied with the service of the municipal recreation and library services for youth. How do you proceed to influence what goes on in these services?
This scenario addresses how local outsiders have a read on organization and act toward it if they want changes in youth programming, staff, and priorities. Local groups know that organizations in effect host programs. Sometimes change in the fingers of an organization—its services—can be accomplished by working on the fingers; but sometimes change in the fingers has deeper sources and requires changes in other bodily systems. To change metaphors, sometimes one works on the mother ship, that is, the organization as such.

This gets complicated because there are right and wrong ways, as well as related effective and ineffective ways for local residents to challenge a host organization over its programming and services. This is a perennial issue often made complex, unpleasant, and long term because of profound social and cultural differences in knowledge and style between community and organization. One aspect of this is how the community reads, understands, orients toward, and works with or against the organization. All of this can be seen when youth try to change a policy or practice they know in blunt terms or as a gloss.

Efforts to change municipal services are political work in all its meanings of the word, and hence theories of organizational change must be joined to those of the politics of municipal organizations, and both to politics of municipal agency change. Here we simply name these domains.

Research agenda: Questions that will always remain

Using four scenarios, we focused on issues basic to organizational change and development. We drew on the vast literature on organizations, organizational change and development, expertise, advice, consultation, and organizational management to show that organizations are omnipresent; however, they may not always be visible or named in efforts to address positive youth development by changing the organizational home of youth development programs, services, projects, initiatives, and hands-on youth work.
We thus introduced themes on the organizational development literature and used scenarios to illustrate how this literature can be useful for understanding organization as a unit of analysis and focus of change. This review also posed questions that together provide a research agenda for the field of youth development on organizational change and transformation:

1. Are there typical models of youth organizations, as there are in the human services?
2. What are promising practices for ongoing organizational changing to support ongoing community-based healthy youth development?
3. If organization improvement is ongoing and never ending, what are appropriate structures and processes for an organization's legitimacy and to sustain organizational improvement?
4. How might we begin to measure and evaluate organizational change to support healthy youth development?
5. What are the best ways to fail at organizational development and change for community-based youth development?

Notes


ROSS VELURE ROHOLT is associate professor in the School of Social Work, Youth Studies, University of Minnesota.

MICHAEL BAIZERMAN is professor in the School of Social Work, Youth Studies, University of Minnesota.
Sheetal Rana is a recent graduate of the School of Social Work, University of Minnesota.

Kathy Korum is the deputy director for the Saint Paul Parks and Recreation Department.