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**Youth Cultural Competence: A Pathway for Achieving Outcomes with Youth**

**by Josh Weber**
*The employment and training community has educated out-of-school youth and prepared them for the workforce since the 1960s. As the adult basic education (ABE) system serves increasing numbers of young adult learners, the ABE community should learn from the mistakes of past programmatic efforts to serve this population. In this article, I review the challenges experienced by the youth employment and training field likely to be relevant for the ABE community and discuss an innovative programmatic framework � Youth Cultural Competence � for addressing these concerns.*

Employment and training programs for out-of-school youth in the United States have not had a strong record of success (Bloom et al., 1997; LaLonde, 1995; Department of Labor, 1995). As even the [Department of Labor](http://www.dol.gov/) states: "the existing research on the training strategies, program structures and supportive services tried in the past leads to sobering conclusions…there is no evidence that any of the programs have had more than a modest and short-term effect" (Department of Labor, p. 5). The poor outcomes of the employment and training field include average General Educational Development (GED) attainment rates of only 30 percent and a failure to increase markedly the long term earnings of out-of-school youth. Three factors are the primary source of these difficulties and are also likely challenges for the ABE community.

First, employment and training programs have struggled to retain youth participants across an array of program structures and sequences. Evaluations of various youth service initiatives have found attrition rates as high as 30 to 50 percent (Higgins, 1992). Indeed, programs serving youth who have rejected traditional forms of education and dropped out of school often fail to prevent them from dropping out a second time, this time from the out-of-school youth program. Thus, the retention challenges of the youth employment and training field suggest that the ABE community needs to find concrete mechanisms for attaching young adults to educational programs and making them feel comfortable with, and engaged by, their learning environment.

Second, employment and training programs have frequently been overwhelmed by the number and intensity of the problems confronting their youth participants (Department of Labor, 1992). Traditionally, employment and training programs have been constructed with the single-minded focus of preparing out-of-school youth for work and connecting them with the labor market. However, youth do not participate in these interventions in a vacuum. Out-of-school youth from disadvantaged communities generally face a host of problems, including poverty, inadequate housing, dysfunctional families, substance abuse, and physical and mental health issues, that prevent them from fully participating in programs and reaping the benefits. As a result, a key lesson for youth initiatives is that employment services or GED preparation alone are not sufficient to achieve strong outcomes. Instead, ABE programs should either offer a comprehensive array of services that address young people's total developmental needs or find a way to link youth with existing community services and supports. Teachers will be likewise challenged to expand their role as educators and develop a skill set more often associated with social workers, counselors, and even parents.

Third, and perhaps the dominant undercurrent in the difficulties already discussed, employment and training programs have struggled to recognize the difference between serving youth and adults and to adapt accordingly. For much of the field's history, youth programs have not been developed, structured, or staffed in a substantively different fashion than are adult programs. A common manifestation of this disconnect has been an inability to motivate and engage youth. Adults who participate in employment and training or GED programs are driven by immediate economic concerns and therefore are often relatively goal-directed and self-motivated. In contrast, youth who dropped out of school struggle to appreciate the value of training or education, do not necessarily connect short-term difficulties with long-term rewards, and are uninspired by traditional instructional techniques and training/curricula removed from their daily experiences and popular interests (Higgins, 1992; National Academy of Sciences, 2002). Thus, while it is intuitively obvious that youth are different from adults, ABE programs will have to transform this platitude into a commitment to understanding how youth and adult learners are different and to developing organizational and pedagogical practices to serve young learners' needs.

**Youth Cultural Competence**
In response to the struggles of the youth employment and training field and a "nothing works" mentality in many policy circles, researchers and practitioners have proffered a host of empirically tested practices for addressing youth's needs. In my experience, this "best practices" improvement approach has met with tepid results. This is because effective replication depends upon a host of intangible variables such as program context, leadership, and teamwork. ABE programs need a cohesive organizational vision: an operating belief system around which teachers and administrators can build a reinforcing set of strategies designed to motivate, engage, and effectively educate youth participants. [Youth Cultural Competence](http://www.ydrf.com/ycc/) (YCC) is one such platform that is not only grounded in empirical evidence but also is based upon and resonates with the experiences and insights of the youth practitioners and educators who work directly with youth on a daily basis.

Youth Cultural Competence is both a belief system and a series of programmatic strategies targeted at helping programs to retain, engage, and educate youth. YCC is grounded in the concept of youth development and has three major programmatic components: youth involvement, positive peer influence, and youth popular culture. It was coined and conceptualized by the [Youth Development and Research Fund](http://www.ydrf.com/) (YDRF), a youth policy organization that improves programs and policies for at-risk youth through research, training, and an emphasis on best practices and youth popular culture.

**Youth Development**
Youth development is an asset-based approach that recognizes that young adults have distinct developmental needs and strives to meet these needs through a comprehensive set of educational, social, cognitive, and support services. In practical terms, adopting a youth development framework as part of attaining YCC means recognizing that young adult learners are developmentally different from adult learners and making a commitment to make organization-wide changes to the structure of classroom learning, curricula, and instructional practices. Teachers and administrators need to plan together to devise a structure for reform that does not burden teachers with an excessive array of new responsibilities and also includes a way to evaluate new practices.

ABE teachers also need to become a conduit for connecting young adults with the support services they need to overcome multiple barriers to educational achievement. Teachers and administrators should strive to identify youths' personal and institutional obstacles to success, develop relationships with community service providers, and make an active effort to involve youths' families and/or support networks in the educational process. Working together, ABE programs must provide teachers with the professional development they need to prepare for these new roles.

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| **Promising Practices***The National Youth and Employment Coalition's Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNeT) is an assessment system for evaluating youth development programs. They suggest that six programmatic aspects of youth development have a demonstrated link with improved outcomes for youth:** *Nurturing adult/youth relationships*
* *Building youths' responsibility and leadership*
* *Having an individual focus and age/stage-appropriate outlook*
* *Facilitating family and peer support*
* *Providing support services and opportunities*
* *Building a sense of self*

*Source:* [*http://www.nyec.org/pepnet/*](http://www.nyec.org/pepnet/) |

**Youth Involvement**

One of YCC's three core tenets is that young adults must be actively involved in and given ownership of the educational process. This kind of youth involvement directly addresses young people's developmental needs for "opportunities to belong" and "feelings of efficacy and mattering." As the [National Academy of Sciences](http://www.nas.edu/) has noted, "older students desire increasing opportunities to have input into classroom and school governance and rules. Evidence suggests that their motivation is optimized when they experience this type of change in classroom and school management" (2002, p. 92). The most authentic way for youth programs to ensure that they engage and educate young adults effectively is to give youth a substantive role in shaping, managing, and even facilitating educational practices and organizational procedures.

Genuine youth involvement results in other important benefits for young adult learners. First, youth who are given a leadership role in shaping educational and management practices will likely find it difficult to fault teachers or the organization for not caring about them or for being insensitive to their needs. In this way, youth involvement is both a motivational technique and a retention strategy. Second, youth who are invested with decision-making power are apt to develop the confidence they need to tackle academic challenges they may have shied away from in the past. Third, youth involvement can foster a learning environment that promotes achievement. Adolescents, more than adults, are heavily influenced by and conform to cues in their surroundings that suggest social norms of behavior (National Academy of Sciences, 2002). Consequently, programs that can create a culture of active youth involvement will automatically socialize new students into a powerful ethos of achievement.

Teachers and administrators can incorporate youth involvement into their programs in concrete ways. Most critically, any reforms designed to make educational practices more YCC should be driven by the input of youth participants. ABE programs should form a youth consulting team, leadership group, or student government structure (with corresponding incentives) designed to guide the program on how to meet better the educational and developmental needs of young adult learners on a continuing basis.

Youth should also be involved with classroom management and the delivery of educational content. ABE teachers should continuously ask themselves: "Do I need to make this decision, teach this lesson, do this evaluation, etc., or can I involve the students in my class to take on these roles instead?" For example, students can be tapped to lead discussions, master a specific lesson module and teach other students, construct their own individualized education plans, and design an incentive system. Any mechanisms that ABE programs can use to transform students into active participants and decision-makers will improve student retention and engagement and, ultimately, students' educational achievement.

**Positive Peer Influence**
Academics and the media alike have focused on the powerful role of peer pressure in encouraging youth to adopt harmful behaviors. If youth's peers are such a strong influence then peer pressure also can and should be utilized as a mechanism for encouraging positive development (Parr, 2002). Research has demonstrated that youth whose peers have or are perceived to have higher educational aspirations are more likely to have higher educational aspirations themselves, to possess more positive academic self-concepts, and to be more engaged in school (Child Trends, 2002). In addition, peer-mediated educational strategiesb including peer tutoring, cooperative learning and an emphasis on group achievement, and peer modelingb have proven to be correlated with significant increases in student achievement and often to be more effective than traditional teacher-mediated instruction (Parr, 2002; Utely, 1997; Department of Labor, 1992).

A reliance on positive peer influence as an instructional strategy is particularly useful for programs that work with dropouts. These students may resist achievement messages that they perceive as unrealistic or unrelated to their personal struggles. An easy way to navigate this credibility challenge is for teachers to draw on student leaders in the classroom to act as their motivational mouthpieces. Out-of-school youth may also struggle to believe that they can succeed, given their past academic frustrations, and thus be reluctant to invest too much of their self-concept (and therefore the needed time and energy) into their studies for fear that they might fail again. In this case, peers' encouragement, testimonies of success, and modeling of achievement-related behaviors can be the "social proof" that young adults need to believe that success is possible.

ABE teachers can harness positive peer influence through peer-mediated instructional strategies. Teachers can encourage study groups and student-led discussion sessions, organize group projects, match students for peer tutoring and mentoring around specific lesson modules, and establish supportive forums for peer feedback and evaluation. Teachers can also foster a collaborative learning environment in which students, rather than teachers, are seen as the experts. In a peer-driven learning environment, students simultaneously feel pressured to master educational content so they can shine in front of their classmates while unconsciously modeling for each other the attitudinal and behavioral norms that promote educational achievement and positive development.

**Youth Popular Culture**
Youth popular cultureb which includes movies, music, magazines, dress, language, attitudes, and activities such as skateboarding and rappingb can be a powerful tool for engaging young adult learners and promoting achievement. While the research is inconclusive about whether young adults' actions can be directly attributed to these influences, it is almost impossible to deny that youth's values, behaviors, and perceptions of social norms are heavily influenced by their popular culture (National Academy of Sciences, 2002; Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2001). Practitioners who work with youth may not like, for example, hip-hop music, but hip-hop often connects with and influences out-of-school youth in a way in which traditional forms of communication have been unable. As a result, any youth program that is serious about finding a way to engage young adults cannot ignore the power of this cultural medium.

Educators would rightly balk at the notion of playing pop music in an educational setting or letting youth "freestyle" in the back of a classroom simply because it would make them and the program seem more YCC. Instead, youth popular culture should be viewed as a bridge for reaching young adults "where they are" and connecting them to academic content that might otherwise be boring or abstract. Youth popular culture can be an important enhancement to traditional instructional techniques because young learners' academic outcomes are directly connected to their ability to feel safe, comfortable, and respected (National Academy of Sciences, 2002).

Youth popular culture can be used as an instructional strategy in a number of ways. First, teachers should try to bring youth popular culture into the classroom (or better yet, challenge students to find a way to apply their popular culture to classroom activities) and use it as a starting point for discussion and analysis. For example, students who live in an inner-city neighborhood might watch clips from a movie that relates to their experiences, such as *Boyz in the Hood* or *Menace II Society*, and then write an essay analyzing the main themes or characters' choices. Students might also be more receptive to reading aloud from magazines that reflect their interests, such as *Sports Illustrated* or *Rolling Stone Magazine*, than from a standard English textbook. Second, instructors can use youth popular culture as a connector to more rigorous material. Music lyrics are another form of poetry, a discussion on the evolution of youth culture can turn into a history lesson, and an analysis of record sales and profit margins can be used to teach basic math skills.

An emphasis on engaging students through their popular culture should not be confused with the need for a multicultural, multilingual approach. Sensitivity to students' ethnic cultures is an important part of making youth feel comfortable and respected. However, youth popular cultures often cut across ethnic lines. Educators concerned with becoming more YCC cannot assume that students will be motivated by hip-hop simply because they are African-American or won't be engaged by hip-hop because they are white and live in the suburbs. Instead, a YCC approach challenges ABE teachers to maintain an appreciation for students' multicultural backgrounds and multilingual needs while separately identifying and harnessing the forms of youth popular culture most relevant to students' specific popular interests.

Finally, youth popular culture can be used to promote positive youth development. While many movies or song lyrics highlight notions that are antithetical to achievement, youth popular culture is replete with messages that encourage youth to invest in behaviors that will facilitate positive development. Teachers can engage students to analyze positive song lyrics and use the words of popular singers, such as Mos Def, Beyoncé, or Kid Rock, for example, to promote the beliefs and behaviors needed for academic achievement: messages that students might ignore when expressed through more traditional outlets.

**In Conclusion**
Youth cultural competence is not a cure-all intervention or a substitute for rigorous academic preparation and time-tested instructional practices. Instead, YCC is an operating framework through which ABE programs can assess the educational and developmental services they provide to young adult learners. It is a set of toolsb youth development, youth involvement, positive peer influence, and youth popular cultureb for achieving improved outcomes with youth given their distinct educational and developmental needs. YCC offers ABE programs a pathway for harnessing youth's assets, and for using young people themselves as assets, to promote both their own and their peers' educational success.

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