

Consideration Without Pity: Leading With Empathy in a Post-Pandemic World

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Abstract

This commentary provides thought leadership on employing empathy authentically in a post-pandemic world. Dr. Johnson makes the case for empathy leaders to adopt a perspective of "consideration without pity," a relational instructional strategy that expects youth development professionals to meet youth where they are yet hold each other accountable for set goals and objectives—academic and otherwise. Recommendations for practice and training are included as examples of explicit practices to cultivate a culture and ecosystem of high-quality youth development.

Key words: after-school, out-of-school time, empathy, standards, youth development

Introduction

In today's 21st century world, youth experience childhood contextualized in a climate in which violence and hatred are preeminent and success—whether it be in the White House or on the school grounds—is also often most experienced by those who embody charisma and a certain “je ne sais quoi” flair for bringing others together around a common agenda or goal. Although these qualities are not new, in modern times the compounded tumult woven through the developmental milestones of childhood, especially during adolescence, necessitates a call to action that requires both emotional intelligence and empathy from teachers and learners. Youth development practitioners must show up with the skills, attitudes, and behaviors characteristic of emotional intelligence and empathy at all times, with all youth, every day, all day. That is a tall order for even the most competent and qualified professionals; however, for youth that are under-engaged or disengaged and let down by systems, practices, and policies, I assert they need two things from adults: (a) that they bring their most authentic, best selves to youth work and (b) that they remember the adult they needed as a child.



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Fostering this type of belonging and mattering will be messy. Expect that the “scruffiness” of balancing the efficiencies of the most coveted resources of youth-serving organizations—people, time, and money—will tax youth practitioners and youth as they negotiate the human condition. “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then is not an act but a habit” (Durant, 1926, p.87). Thus, if youth and youth practitioners internalize the habits of mind and practices of excellence, then an essential question to explore is what are the behaviors and mindsets needed to obtain greatness? In other words, how can one start the journey of youth development through authentic learning and move from OK to good, good to great, and great to exemplary? The first step to answering this question begins with adopting a philosophy of consideration without pity. When working with youth, one should consider the impact of imperialism, colonialism, and racism, on youth. How have these and other “isms” impressed the policies, practices, and programs that aspire to serve youth? The answer, I assert, should define, demonstrate, and hold youth developers accountable for teaching and honoring a standard of excellence—consideration without pity. In other words, youth developers should elevate and address the harm and consequences invoked on those most vulnerable, but not lower standards or limit what youth can do because of this historical narrative.

By considering the context in which childhood takes place without pity, youth developers will equip youth with the resilient skills needed to practice agency and find their voice. For example, if a practitioner learns that youth do not have access to a safe place, free from distractions, to complete homework after school, the practitioner can secure scholarships for youth to attend an after-school program (presuming a program is fee-based) or arrange for those youth to return to a classroom after dismissal and work on homework. Not only does this offer youth and youth developers more opportunities to build relationships and get to know one another as people, it also holds both youth and the adults responsible. The youth maintains responsibility for standards such as following through, staying committed to a goal, task or objective, and showing up regularly because they belong, while the adult is responsible for maintaining a “with-it-ness”—understanding and responding to where youth are and showing up for them well planned and ready to serve—every day, all day, in every way.

For What You Do Not Hire, You Must Prepare

Consideration without pity cannot be accomplished authentically without empathy and emotional intelligence. But the realities of youth development work are that many staff—although well intentioned—particularly in this era of the “Great Resignation,” do not bring or

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have not mastered the attributes of perspective taking, compassion, and emotion management to the extent that youth development practitioners can, in situation, demonstrate and organize real-life practice for youth during program and in the classroom. This gap between skill and will requires organizations to focus on training and developing others; in other words, for what they do not hire, they must prepare. Staff turnover, funding inconsistencies, and demands to meet accountability metrics (i.e., state testing demands, licensure/credentialing, and ratio requirements) present perennial challenges that limit practitioners' ability to show up daily, plan for, and instruct with this intent. However, these barriers to excellence cannot become an excuse for not equipping youth for their 21st century world and not ours. That is to say, in spite of the retention challenges to include mobility of staff and volunteers and an ever-moving target of resources (people, time and money), youth-serving organizations must make meeting youth where they are, supporting them with quality, and defining and developing youth toward co-constructed standards ordinary—something that is a part of how business is conducted rather than an addition or “special” feature.

As the oxygen in the atmosphere or fluoride in the water, consideration without pity should be a part of what practitioners do to build relationships; walk in their youths' footsteps; and modify and adjust practices, programs, and policies to support youth when needed. No uniqueness or “unicorn”-like experiences are necessary but rather, youth development practitioners should meet youth where they are, do what it takes to support youths' needs while maintaining high standards towards co-constructed goals. In other words, consideration without pity should become business as usual. Yet, when examining various training material for onboarding experiences for several youth-serving organizations, to include my own, content other than risk and safety (CPR, child abuse awareness); behavior management; and a crash course in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has little to no real estate on the training agenda. For example, semi-annually, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe affiliate of the Boys and Girls Club of America (BGCA) conducts after-school and summer training on character, first aid and CPR, transportation, and food handling, among several other operational requirements to implement their model. Even though nationally, BGCA (n.d.) does “whatever it takes to build great futures for America's young people” (para. 1), it is not evident in their training that this mantra materializes.

Searching through several legacy youth development organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America, YMCA, and several other legacy youth development organizations, one finds they, too, teeter-totter between offering well-intentioned focus areas for onboarding and/or training in

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content related to leading others, active listening strategies, dimensions of diversity, et cetera and compliance subject matter. One standout out among these legacy organizations is the training curriculum for National 4-H. Upon review, 4-H offers one of the more extensive examples in the out-of-school time space of training curricula; their diversity and inclusion resources include in-depth materials on race, religion, special needs, and their various intersections upon which an Extension volunteer may draw when working with youth, such as “building content to reach diverse youth,” “making adaptations,” “the role of risk,” and so forth (Washington State University Extension, n.d.). However, as a field, out-of-school-time organizations, with limited exception, devote the least amount of training content to preparing staff and volunteers to relate to youth in a holistic way. This is in stark contrast to training for K-12 educators; for example, Teach for America’s (TFA) summer preservice institute instructs on diversity, equity, and inclusion content with a focus on anti-racist teacher leadership and several local school districts provide professional development modules normalizing equity team meetings or discussions about social emotional learning and racial trauma as an adverse childhood experience (TFA, n.d.). Nevertheless, regardless of the sector, the Freirean reminder rings true: “The solution is not to ‘integrate’ the oppressed into the structure of oppression but to transform that structure so they can be beings for themselves” (Freire, 1972, p. 55).

When You Know Better, You Do Better—Now What?

One of my colleagues closes his emails with the following, “We must equip the skill to build the public will.” Every time I read this signature tag I am reminded of the delicate balance between skill and will and the shift between teaching as an art or science. In practice, so much of what is learned as a “best or promising” practice is buried and becomes hard to retrieve when faced with crisis, challenged by youthful obstinance, or weighted down by the bureaucracy of institutionalized rules and regulations in youth programs. Thus, to overcome default behaviors and not return to learning the way you were taught, youth development professionals must become equipped to straddle the fence, going between teaching as an art—heart and soul work that builds relationships and leads with empathy—and teaching as science—instructing within the boundaries or parameters of the content, time constraints, and program/classroom space and conditions. Consideration without pity modifies place, positions, and practices and represents a “human act layered with symbolic meanings that represent complex strategies for coping with life’s troubles and opportunities” (Gillen, 2014, p.26). If teaching is the purest form of love, consideration without pity symbolizes equity in action.

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“Just right” training and development can bridge skill and will, especially when knowledge is co-constructed, effort and growth are celebrated, and continuous improvement is ordinary and not extraordinary. For example, between 2017 and 2020, the YMCA surveyed youth developers about their confidence to display the attitudes, skills, and behaviors demonstrable of empathy leadership. At the beginning of various youth programs (e.g., swimming, after-school tutoring, camp) only 22% to 30% of the respondents during this 3-year period indicated they were able to display empathy with youth; however, with more professional development to include synchronous webinars, access to guidebooks and toolkits, and annual “harvest” practice-sharing sessions, these same practitioners grew more confident in empathy skills (from 86% to 97%, an increase of up to 67 percentage points) by the end of a typical youth program period.¹ Even though the average practitioner enters her role with likely fewer of the skills required to navigate the challenges of youth development and face managing the day-to-day responsibilities, positive change can occur with intentional, quality, rigorous, and relevant training and development. Therefore, when we know better, we do better, and we support better. Next—now what?

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¹ Each participating YMCA program operated for a minimum of 4 weeks.