Managing the Disconnect: A Critical Case Study of Neoliberalism in Youth Development Practice

"Emotional wellbeing is essential for development, its artificial separation from critical consciousness development results in educational practices that promote youths' conformity to, rather than liberation from, an unjust status quo" (p. 2).

1. What is the research about?
This research examines the influence of *neoliberalism*, a theory of political economy that favours unrestricted markets and limitations, on mainstream education and social services. Neoliberalism assumes that the problems marginalized youth face can be solved with market-based solutions, and reinforces destructive, socially-regressive policies that promote deficit-based approaches. In this study, researchers assess the impact of neoliberal ideology on youth development practice by examining how racialized and class-based power dynamics manifest in policy and practice at a large youth-serving agency.

2. Where did the research take place?
This study took place in a large Midwestern city in the United States.

3. Who is this research about?
This research is about youth and staff at a large agency that provides in-school and afterschool programs in marginalized low-income communities. Many of the youth identified as Black (48%) and Latinx (31%). The majority (75%) lived in poverty. Agency staff included directors, managers, staff, and interns.

4. How was the research done?
This study is *a critical ethnography*, a form of narrative-based research that explores dominant biases held by individuals and social organizations. As a participant observer, the researcher was able to identify formal and informal policies, practices, and processes during staff meetings, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) sessions, and 'down time' at the agency. The YPAR program, which took place at the agency, was developed to engage young men in research and activism related to gang violence and police brutality. Data sources included field notes, audio recordings of YPAR sessions, interviews with youth participants and staff, as well as documents provided by the agency. The researcher used the *constant comparative method*, which involves identifying themes throughout the research process, and using these themes to generate additional questions, inform data collection, and code data.

5. What are the key findings?
The study found a disconnect between professionalized youth development practice and the lived experiences of youth. This disconnect was evident in policies and practices, and in the behaviour of agency staff. Staff were forced to balance competing interests and worldviews, and reconcile the need for funding with social justice aims. In particular, the study identified eight key themes:

i) The disconnect between staff and clients can lead to **a misunderstanding of the experiences of marginalized communities of colour,** and result in services that only offer market-based solutions to structural issues (e.g., violence prevention programs that focus predominantly on job training).

ii) Services are driven by scarce funding rather than community knowledge and relationships. Neglecting existing and potential **relationships with communities** undervalues their contribution.

iii) Scarce funding forces the agency to shift their focus away from program delivery to **chase funding**. This limits the availability of funding to single issues instead of building community partnerships to transform unjust systems.

iv) Program assessment requirements result in **funding limits on programming** and resources. The burden falls on burnt-out frontline staff to administer surveys and report measured outcomes at the expense of their programs.

v) Funders that enforce the separation of service provision and political action place pressure on agencies to **create parameters around youth voices** and community-led political organizing activities.

vi) **Tracking compliance regulations and behaviour norms** can be disruptive and inconvenient for staff, and create power dynamics between staff and youth clients.

vii) Underfunded programs require staff to link various services, and collaborate with other departments to fill funding shortfalls. The need to **balance competing interests** adds to the psychological burden carried by staff, and distorts the reality that marginalized youth face.

viii) The prioritization of quantifiable outcomes can push staff members to **'prove their value'** or question their place within the organization. This increases the pressure to perform, and shifts staff focus from program delivery to measurable outcomes.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?
Neoliberalism contributes to **an *epistemic* (relating to knowledge) form of violence** by intensifying the disconnect between youth development practice and youth experience. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of drawing on the experiences of marginalized youth in program and policy development.

Youth agencies must **deconstruct dominant ideologies** that influence everyday experiences within 'normalized' asymmetric power relationships between agency staff and clients in order to maintain the status quo. It is also important to critically examine the **historical and cultural ignorance** that causes people to misinterpret or deny institutionalized oppression. The **recovery of historical memory** may provide staff with the opportunity to critique their assumptions and develop programs within a critical youth development paradigm that is oriented toward social justice.

Direct community involvement can **promote psychological development, genuine care, and communal ties**. Organizations should meaningfully collaborate with marginalized populations by **utilizing people's virtues** without reifying their oppression through tokenism and exploitation.

Consider forming strategic alliances with social movements in order to **enhance emotional wellbeing and critical consciousness** within the organization, and, in so doing, improve the lives of youth in marginalized communities.

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