

Taking a Societal Sector Perspective on Youth Learning and Development

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Chapter description:

A “societal sector” perspective looks to a broad array of actors and agencies responsible for creating the community contexts that affect youth learning and development. We demonstrate the efficacy of this perspective by describing the Youth Data Archive, which allows community partners to define issues affecting youth that transcend specific institutional responsibilities, and to ask and answer questions using combined administrative records in an effort identify opportunities for joint action.

## **AUTHOR BIOS**

### **Executive Summary**

#### **Introduction: A Societal Sector Approach**

Despite their common focus on young people, youth-serving institutions—schools, health and welfare services, juvenile justice agencies—typically are disconnected from, and uninformed about, each other’s programs, policies, and approaches. Yet youth’s cognitive, social, emotional and physical development does not divide neatly into institutional domains, but instead takes place over time and across diverse contexts of family, neighborhood, school, and community that youth experience. Sometimes the institutional resources available to youth are integrated in ways that reinforce developmental supports, but more typically, they are not. The result is a set of institutional silos that each work to support different areas of development in ways that often do not support integration with other areas, conceptually, technically or administratively. This problem of institutional balkanization is borne out not only in youth-serving agencies, but also in the research that informs their work.

These practical, institutional and conceptual challenges speak to the need for a broader perspective that frames youth development in terms of the multiple groups, organizations and institutions that together make up the contexts within and through which young people move. We argue that new cross-sector tools are necessary to support cross-institutional collaboration for youth. We describe the Youth Data Archive (YDA), an integrated longitudinal data system comprised of administrative records from community agencies and organizations linked together at the level of individual youth. The YDA adopts a “societal sector” perspective that attends to the broad sector of actors and agencies responsible for creating the young people’s community

contexts and allows community partners to define cross-institutional issues affecting youth and identify opportunities for joint action.

### **Design Based Implementation Research and the Societal Sector**

A societal sector framework connects with design based implementation research along several dimensions: (1) engagement of multiple stakeholders and active attention to their points of view, including reliance upon multiple disciplines; (2) iterative processes of analysis and response ; (3) an intentional focus on capacity building among partners; and (4) a design/build model of research, implementation and deepening understanding.

Working within a societal sector framework presents particular conceptual, political and technical challenges. Research and implementation adopting a *sector* as the relevant unit of action encounter problems of a substantively different stripe than do research or recommendations located within a single institutional space. We provide specific examples from the YDA work in two northern California communities, Redwood City and San Francisco, to highlight the various practical and theoretical issues we encountered.

### **How the Youth Data Archive Supports a Societal Sector Perspective**

The YDA combines administrative records matched at the individual level from a variety of public and non-profit institutions to form a *virtual youth sector* that provides a comprehensive view of the opportunities and resources available to the community's youth. It also promotes the creation of an actual youth sector by focusing on questions of relevance across agencies and enabling contributing partners to understand and act on resulting analyses. The YDA's cross-institutional data allow for analyses about youth experiences and outcomes that no single agency could undertake on its own. The ultimate goal of the initiative is to make available actionable

information at the youth-sector level in order to build knowledge about resources, supports, and policies for youth development.

The YDA is a capacity-building resource that allows partners to see, sometimes for the first time, a new framework for understanding the ways their own agency addresses youth needs and shapes youth outcomes outside of their own agency's domain. Partners are supported to identify actionable research questions to which they are poised to respond collaboratively.

### **A Focus on Action**

The YDA team defines action as taking many forms along a continuum: action can be a change in policy, practice, or programming, a determination to continue existing efforts, or even the intention to use research to discuss making these changes or continuing with the status quo. Many political and economic obstacles to action exist at a community level, and this broad definition acknowledges that even when concrete steps have not been taken, the community has engaged in a process of data-based inquiry that has allowed them to make informed decisions within their constraints.

The YDA has supported community action at all places on the continuum. For instance, in San Francisco, the findings from analyses of math and English remediation led collaborative subject-area teams to consider changes that could be made to the community college placement process to allow more students to place into courses for which they would accrue college credit. Two "pilots" will be launched in the 2012-13 school year and partners have already begun to think about what they need to know in order to ensure success for participating students. Because relevant actors were at the table and bought into the collaborative process, action followed immediately from YDA analyses. In other cases, partners' engagement with the YDA

prompted their increased engagement with each other as their new relationships enable understanding of others' perspectives, action frameworks, and constraints. For example, the YDA analyzed the educational outcomes of foster youth in collaboration with a multi-agency group comprised of child welfare advocates and service providers, juvenile court judges, county and district educational leaders and funders interested in supporting this group of vulnerable youth. The collaborative group convened the YDA to conduct the analysis, but the process of gathering data, responding to findings, and planning a course of action brought the group together with greater purpose. The iterative data analysis process helped them to stay focused on the goals that they established together at the outset of the project.

### **Strengthening the Youth Sector**

In partner communities, the YDA has strengthened the broader youth sector. For instance, the focus on cross-agency framing, analysis, and response has supported implementation networks for response. A recent analysis that examined chronic absenteeism in Redwood City's two participating school districts led partners from school districts and other city and county agencies to collaboratively consider appropriate responses to the underlying student and family barriers that appear to be behind the absence problem.

The YDA also supports and strengthens a youth-serving sector is by providing opportunities for continuous learning and capacity building that allow partners to not only digest a current set of findings, but to look together toward the next set of questions. In a study of full-service community schools in Redwood City, we helped the elementary district establish a data system beyond the administrative records normally collected, to gather information on students' and families' participation. In addition, we held "data talks" with community school

coordinators and other front-line staff to present findings, help partners understand the results, consider the implications, and work with partners to identify follow-up questions for analysis.

### **Lessons for Supporting a Youth-Serving Sector**

The Youth Data Archive experiences offer lessons for supporting a youth sector.

- *Motivation matters.* A problem salient to all stakeholders spurs collaboration, learning and joint action among members of the youth sector. The most actionable YDA research projects involved pressing problems that required information in order for partners to act.
- *A situated lens focuses action.* The YDA team acts on the principle that human activity is context dependent and reflects local practices, institutional histories and relationships, and political and economic realities. Knowledge about problems associated with youth development as well as effective supports for growth is locally situated and embedded in existing instructional arrangements and resources.
- *Process is product.* A collaborative stance within a youth sector requires a fundamental shift in perspective from one defined by specific institutional goals to one that focuses on broad, cross-institutional goals of youth development. The process of cross-agency collaboration toward a goal of data sharing and querying is itself a product. The structures and relationships built, if solid, will carry forward to support a youth sector beyond analysis and reporting of shared data, toward genuine collaboration and mutual goal development so as to support improved youth outcomes not only within, but across traditional silos.
- *Trust and credibility build over time.* Through its emphasis on relationship building, iterative analysis and reporting, and sharing findings when partners are ready to do so, the

YDA team establishes credibility with contributors as partners and collaborators. The YDA team becomes part of the process, embedded in the collaboration and responsive to stakeholder questions and concerns.

- *Knowledge production is interactive and collaborative.* In contrast to views of knowledge as fixed or absolute, collaborations like the YDA see knowledge as changing, changeable, and sometimes inconsistent—the result of a locally adaptive process. Notions of reciprocity, pooled knowledge and feedback are core to effective cross-institutional knowledge and learning; the resulting understandings and frames for action differ from those any single institutional could or would have developed on their own.
- *Capacity develops collectively.* The new relationships and frames for action underlying the YDA and its community partnerships require leadership and attention from collective capacity builders. Collective capacity builders take the *system* as the unit of action, and view the processes of making and sustaining change in those systems in terms of relationships, joint action and investment.