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Teaching Law as a Life Skill

How Street Law Helps Youth Make the Transition to Adult Citizenship

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Suzanne showed up at the Washington, D.C., shelter after a long history of problems—time in the juvenile justice system, deep poverty, and, most recently, living under a bridge with her two young children. The shelter staff offered her a wide variety of services, including a Street Law class, co-taught by a teacher and a lawyer that provided her with important practical legal information. When she was ready to leave the shelter, her caseworker asked her if she wanted someone to come with her to look for an apartment. Suzanne shook her head and pulled out photocopied handouts from her Street Law course about what to look for in an apartment, how to read a lease and what to ask the landlord. She felt prepared for the task, not only with knowledge, but also with skills she developed through relevant classroom practice.

Introduction

Not all young people make a smooth and successful transition into adulthood. When faced with difficult circumstances, some young people drop out of school, abuse drugs, participate in criminal activity, or become violent toward others or themselves. News reports regularly highlight the “problems” with American youth—from school shootings to high rates of drug use. The picture painted is bleak.

However, the reality is that most youth, even youth facing incredible difficulty, do succeed. In the face of adversity, the majority of youth go on to become productive workers, parents, neighbors and citizens (Bernard 1991). Why do some succeed where others do not?

Decades of work and research in prevention, intervention and life-skills training have made one fact eminently clear: there is no single answer. Research into what makes successful youth has taken many forms. “Successful” young people are identified variously as those that do well in school, find employment, avoid delinquency and drug addiction, find their way out of poverty, or go on to raise children of their own who are successful. No matter how success is measured, studies show that youth are more likely to succeed if they have practical knowledge, cognitive and social skills, and meaningful opportunities in and connections to the community.

In this article, we review a variety of research with a focus on the major studies related to resiliency, prevention (violence, substance abuse, and delinquency), and employment. We also explain the thinking behind Street Law programs and how they relate to these key research findings and participate in the work of helping youth make successful transitions. Our hope is that others will find these connections useful and see potential for new and different programming. We look forward to furthering our model of collaboration with youth serving organizations to continue developing successful and active young participants in a democracy.

What is “Street Law”?

Street Law began in 1972 when law students at Georgetown University decided to bring law out of the courtrooms and into the underserved public school classrooms of Washington, DC. Over the past 30 years, Street Law has become both an international organization and an educational philosophy. The core concepts in Street Law programs are three fold:

- **Knowledge:** teach young people practical information about law, democracy and human rights.
- **Skills:** using innovative and participatory instructional strategies, develop the skills young people need in order to use this knowledge in their community and in their lives.
- **Community Resources:** deepen young people’s commitment to their communities through meaningful partnerships with caring adults and involvement in community activities.



Based on these core goals, Street Law, Inc. has helped educators set up programs in every U.S. state and 30 countries worldwide. Through major educational partnerships with government agencies, nonprofit organizations, judges, lawyers, educators, and communities across the globe, Street Law’s programs have reached millions of young people in a multitude of settings—public and private schools, community centers, juvenile justice facilities, hospitals, teen-parent programs, police agencies, etc. Programs provide lessons and activities that focus on the elimination of risks for violence, delinquency, and conflict, and help develop basic youth assets.

Currently, Street Law, Inc. is focusing on helping young people make the transition to adulthood. As youth move from childhood—both social and legal—into a world where the government, police, and the community expect them to be “independent,” important knowledge, skills, and community connections need to be developed.

This transitional process is especially difficult for youth lacking the necessary support systems. Youth aging out of the foster care system have neither the support of family nor the foster care system. Homeless and runaway youth often have fled abusive or unstable families and must move toward adulthood on their own. Youth exiting the juvenile justice system may have entered as children, but often emerge as legal adults, facing very different expectations and obligations. In a law-saturated society, Street Law aims to provide these youth with some of what they need to succeed.

Knowledge

Society is full of rules—laws—that order our civic lives. Without knowledge of these rules, navigating successfully through life is impossible. If you are caught violating a law you did not understand, you can still be arrested and convicted. If someone violates a right you don’t know you have, you may not be able to protect yourself. For example, if a young person does not understand

what the text of a lease means, he may not be able to avoid violating its provisions or may not know that he is entitled to a safe and secure home.

As identified by Project Competence, a 20-year longitudinal study, one of the key characteristics of youth who succeed in the face of adversity is that they learn “to follow the rules and, later, the laws of society” (Masten, 2000). The Department of Labor’s SCANS 2000 commission surveyed leaders of industry, employers, employees, educators, and the public in order to identify what young people need in order to be successful in the dynamic, high-performance workplace. Central among these was an understanding of social and organizational systems (SCANS, 1992). Both of these studies suggest that knowledge of rules and laws are central to success.

Street Law’s law-related education programs have been shown to increase students’ knowledge about the law and legal systems (Giese, 1997; Clawson & Sheldon, 1998). These programs cover a wide variety of legal knowledge, with a focus on the practical information that young people need to know in everyday life. The idea is not to create lawyers, but to teach “preventative law,” which can help young people solve or avoid legal problems as they arise.

Street Law lesson topics include housing; employment; child custody, abuse and neglect; consumer law; criminal law; the juvenile justice system; police procedures; domestic violence and rape; gun laws, facts and myths; and many more. These subjects are not only important, but also engaging—teachers and youth workers report that students who do not attend to any other subject often become interested, active learners when the topic is the law. Studies link Street Law to improved classroom participation, attendance and enthusiasm for school (Johnson, 1992).

In addition to essential legal knowledge, Street Law programs also teach young people where rules and laws come from, how they can be changed, and why they are essential to society. This understanding helps young people see the system of rules as necessary, useful and just, rather than unnecessary, alien and unfair. As bonding theory (Hirschi, 1969) suggests, comprehension of the importance of law can lead to greater rule adherence among youth. Indeed, formal evaluations as well as anecdotal reports from teachers and administrators show that Street Law programs increase understanding and belief in laws, increase bonding to school and system officials, and decrease incidence of rule-breaking (Hunter & Turner, 1982; SPEC, 1998). This alone is incredibly valuable. However, in addition, research consistently has found that “rule-governed behavior” leads to higher academic achievement, which is key to success in all spheres (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Skills

Successful adults must be armed not just with knowledge but also with the skills to use that knowledge. In a study of several schools in high-risk environments, Wehlage (1989) found that those schools that promoted problem solving, decision-making, goal setting, planning and helping others, had significantly higher graduation rates than did other schools with similar risk factors. Violence, drug abuse, and delinquency prevention programs that focus on individual skills related to problem solving, moral reasoning, decision-making, and self-control show themselves to be highly effective (Elliot, 1998; Surgeon General, 2001). Youth facing adverse circumstances have increased resiliency when taught problem solving skills, including “the ability to think abstractly, reflectively, and flexibly and to be able to attempt alternate solutions for both cognitive and social problems” (Bernard 1991). Success in employment, as identified by the SCANS 2000 study, requires a variety of competencies and foundational skills including the ability to work as a team, negotiate to arrive at a

decision, organize and evaluate information, communicate effectively, think creatively, listen to others, teach and help others, identify problems and generate multiple solutions.

Regardless of how you define success, the same or similar skills reappear time and again.

Street Law programs infuse practice of these skills in every lesson. Evaluations show that effectively implemented Street Law programs improve participants' skills in all these areas. (Clawson & Sheldon, 1998; SPEC, 1998; Caliber, 1998; Buzzell, 1994).

For example, one Street Law lesson used in juvenile justice programs focuses on the difference between the adult and juvenile justice systems. Students role-play mock hearings about whether to waive a series of young defendants into the adult/criminal court system. Working together in small groups—with one group being prosecutors, another being defense attorneys, and a third being judges—students must agree on what they will do in each case. Cooperative small-group learning, identified as a key method for encouraging resiliency in youth (Bernard, 1991), builds the ability to organize and evaluate information (the case); plan; reason out moral problems; help others; work cooperatively as a team; listen to peers; and generate multiple solutions. Youth must use conflict resolution skills to reach consensus and response control and tolerance in order to participate respectfully in the discussion. At the same time, they learn important information about how the court works, how decisions are made and the criteria for waivers or transfers.

The groups are then split up into “triads” in which one student from each of the job groups come together to role-play the transfer hearing. The attorneys present, the judge questions, and a decision is made. This activity allows students to practice their individual communication skills, decision-making abilities, and flexible thinking. Students also develop empathy for “real life” judges and lawyers as they are given the responsibility and power involved in these jobs.

Students are brought back together for a final group discussion about whether they think waivers to adult courts are a good or bad idea and why. Participants' must think abstractly and reflectively, communicate effectively, advocate a position, listen to others, and evaluate information.

Internalization of skills to affect daily behavior requires more than just a drill. Serious and active engagement in practice is the best way for youth to adopt real behavior change. Skills become meaningful when students must reason out moral problems that they can relate to their own lives, which is why Street Law programs focus on skill-based learning in concert with high-interest legal content. Catalano et al. found, in their review of effective programs, that the combination offered by Street Law—specific knowledge, skills training, and applied learning—“may be the most effective way to prevent particular psychosocial problems” (2002).

Community Resources

Street Law instructors and resource people come from a variety of backgrounds—classroom teachers, social workers, parole officers, business people, lawyers and law students, and other varieties of interested people. Adult involvement allows students to see adult professionals in another role—a role that clearly demonstrates that the instructor or the resource person chose to offer their time and care to the participating students in a positive learning environment. Often the first question from the students is, “Why are you teaching us?” The question offers an important teaching moment, the opportunity to discuss the role of community adults in “rearing” youth and the youth's importance to the community. As Deborah Meier has demonstrated, positive time to

connect with trusted adults is among the most important elements of educational programs that produce successful young people (2002).

Inviting “community resources people” into the classroom is an important opportunity for youth to interact with positive adults. Instructors are encouraged to bring lawyers, law students, judges, social workers, police officers, consumer rights advocates, human resource managers, government officials, etc. into their classroom to provide additional legal content and procedure. Not only does this provide accurate information to students, it also models many essential skills for young people. First, it demonstrates information gathering. Students learn the important lesson that instructors, like themselves, do not know everything. By using community resource people, teachers model how to find, request, and receive help and information. Second, bringing resource people into the classroom models adult cooperation and shows students that people from different backgrounds and with different skills can collaborate and work together effectively.

Third, this practice provides opportunities for youth to find mentors and create connections they may call upon in the future. These connections with pro-social adults have been found to be a crucial characteristic of youth who are able to escape poverty and overcome adversity (Masten, 1997; Jarrett, 1995). As Bernard, a researcher of resilient young people, writes, “The formal and informal networks in which individuals develop their competencies and which provide links within the community are a source of strengths (i.e. health and resiliency)...” (1991).

Relevant Practice

What works for birds does not work for people. We cannot expect our young people to be pushed out of the nest and immediately fly. Youth transitioning to adulthood need time and programs that attend to that transition. They need meaningful opportunities, like the interactive and supportive environment of a Street Law class, to practice what they have acquired. This opportunity for practice is essential in helping youth gain a sense of self-efficacy and hope for the future, which are keys to successful adulthood (Masten 1997; Bernard 1991). It is essential, too, that students have enough time to practice. Effective programs teach knowledge and allow students to practice what they have learned regularly for significant blocks of time (Hunter and Turner, 1982).

Conclusion

In order for young people to be successful and contributing adults they will probably have to know how to balance a check book each month, change a diaper, cook spaghetti, avoid salmonella poisoning, and on and on. However, they will also have to know what a lease means; what their rights and responsibilities are and how to solve disputes in the workplace; how to avoid consumer and credit problems; what to do if they are stopped by the police; how to communicate effectively with those in authority; how to work collaboratively and think abstractly; and how to get help from social service, legal, and government systems when they need it. It is important that youth know how to navigate these tasks and, if conflicts arise, know how to generate alternatives.

Street Law is not a fix-all—it cannot give young people all the skills and knowledge they need to be effective and successful members of their communities. Street Law can, however, fill in important pieces of the puzzle.

Knowledge, skills and community interaction are especially important for youth who are leaving the juvenile justice system, exiting the foster care system, or struggling to find their way after being

homeless. Street Law can be a key component in job-training programs and any life-skills programming.

Whether in the mainstream school classroom, an alternative or community program, or a juvenile justice setting Street Law, Inc. can help connect professionals with specialized materials, training, and programs to create a practical legal education program for the youth with whom they work. Giving young people the tools they need to negotiate in the adult legal world is an important step in preparing active, engaged, and successful young adults who can meet the challenges of the future.

Authors

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Street Law Inc. can be contacted at (301) 589.1130 or on the web at www.streetlaw.org, where a variety of information, lessons, and resources are available. Sarah Zogby, program coordinator at Street Law provided additional editorial work on this article.

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