Inclusivity, Engagement, Voice:
A Youth-Centered Approach to Creating Professional Development Networks
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In fifth grade I told my parents I wanted to go to a school that gave grades. I left a K-12 open school where we worked in the woodshop as kindergartners, chose from intersession topics like ice skating and Minnesota History, did darkroom photography, and learned at our own pace in reading and math. I entered my neighborhood school with no darkroom, woodshop, ice skating or art classes, but with new things like grades, writing sentences as punishment, and leveled classrooms for reading and math. The culture was very different. In this new school I wasn't just one of the kids, I was one of the "smart" kids. My first friend in this new school sat next to me in our "pod." I could feel the energy of his desk-trapped body next to me as his imagination tried to dance its way out of his skin. He sang "Going Back to Cali" and "Lowrider" all the time and was constantly in trouble. At Christmas, I wrote my teacher a card saying, "Happy Christmas, Ms. Channing. I hope you have a good break. I also wanted to tell you that John is very smart. He was the first person to be nice to me when I started this school. It makes me sad when he's sitting by the wall."[1]

I can identify many points in my professional career where I developed clarity around what I believe and value as a youth worker. In fifth grade, the juxtaposition of my two elementary schools is what put me on the path to youth work. Being able to identify the inequities in my classroom and advocate against them solidified the type of youth-worker voice I would strive to walk with.

In 2011, I was invited to be a part of the Minnesota Walkabout Youth Worker Fellowship, co-sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Education and University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Our charge was to examine, discuss, debate and write about questions related to professional identity in the field of youth work. I committed to looking at problems and possibilities related to professional training and development. The question resonated with me for two reasons. First, in my current role as a community education coordinator for Saint Paul Public Schools, it has felt impossible to provide adequate professional development for our part-time staff.[2] Second, the Sprockets Saint Paul Network was emerging as a provider of professional development for youth workers in Saint Paul; as both a person at the table and observer often positioned outside the room, I was witnessing great gains in opportunities, as well as, significant tensions around power and voice.

Increasing accessibility to professional development for youth workers will strengthen the experiences of youth in our programs and communities (Wisman, 2011). To increase accessibility, particularly in a context where more and more youth workers are part-time, agencies must work together to build professional development networks. I interviewed seven youth workers in the Twin Cities and asked them what is integral to a building a successful professional development network. Interviewees confirmed that professional development networks could provide the support and training part-time youth workers need and are not receiving from most agencies. Further, they described a professional development network that would meet the needs of youth workers and function in a manner that mirrors youth work values. They described a youth-centered approach to facilitating professional development networks where youth and youth worker inclusivity,

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[1] All names have been altered. Also note, "Ms. Channing" was one of my favorite teachers. She thanked me for that note and gave it to my dad at spring conferences.

[2] For the purpose of this paper, I will focus primarily on the challenge of professional development opportunities for part-time youth workers. I do this for two reasons:(1) article length and (2), in my position and for most of my interviewees, the challenge of providing adequate professional development for part-time staff is paramount.

engagement and voice would guide the content and structure.

MY YOUTH WORK CONTEXT

My first "real" job in youth work was as a program specialist at the YWCA of Minneapolis. My team of 20 full-time, direct service youth workers supported each other in our professional growth and the evolution of our organization. Three jobs and three agencies later, I am now a youth programs coordinator for Saint Paul Public Schools Community Education. I work with one full-time program assistant and a clerk. Annually, we employ over 50 part-time youth workers with various levels of experience. They are licensed teachers, retired teachers, community members with a unique skill, and college- or high-school-aged students. Our staff has a high turnover rate and many of them work as little as one week per year; moreover, they are primarily subject matter experts who do not identify as youth workers.

I have been overwhelmed with the question of how to provide coaching and professional development to this group of very part-time staff. In my role, I have implemented instructor expectations that communicate a youth development approach to instruction, an instructor observation tool designed to create conversation, peer reviews and have my staff evaluate me. We involve instructors in interviewing other instructors and hold an annual summer program staff meeting to rally enthusiasm and clarify expectation during our largest programming season. Though impactful, these gains have been incremental. Due to conflicting schedules and skill levels of our instructors, we were unable to sustain meaningful or cost effective staff training. My professional path reflects a pattern in our field. In ten years, I went from a team of full-time youth workers to supervising very part-time youth workers. Like many other organizations, in this time period, financial limitations and funder expectations have moved the YWCA of Minneapolis from a team of full-time youth workers to primarily part-time youth workers.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As financial resources for program delivery continue to dwindle and full-time positions continue to shrink, we can work across agencies to limit redundancies at the systems level and free up resources to create more opportunities for youth and youth workers. Professional development is one area where shared resources are easily implemented. For example, if I pay someone to facilitate a training on youth engagement, I can open it up to other agencies at no additional cost to my organization. At the same time, my staff benefits from increased perspectives and diversity of expertise in the room. Further, we know youth workers move from agency to agency for full-time employment or advancement. In this context, it is beneficial for all agencies to work together to provide professional development opportunities that build our field and future leaders.

Professional development takes many forms, including: trainings, annual evaluations, collaborative relationship-building, peer relationships, conferences, mentorship, as well as opportunities to teach, lead, and collaborate across agencies. The depth and scope of professional development opportunities varies widely at youth-serving agencies in the Twin Cities. The youth work supervisors I interviewed work primarily at mid-sized to large organizations, but their access to professional development varies from national-level modules to unstructured internal development. These supervisors cited their central challenges to providing the type of professional development they envision for their staff as: time, money, conflicts (staff with multiple jobs) and staff turnover. Most interviewees felt comfortable with the level of development that was being given to full-time youth workers, but felt challenged to even provide an impactful level of communication with their part-time staff members. One interviewee talked about the impacts of staff resigning in the middle of the program year. She shared the ongoing tension of having to choose between filling the position quickly to accomplish grant goals or providing adequate training to ensure a quality program.

In *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Conversations*, Dana Fusco (2012) documents a conversation she has with Ellen Gannett, director of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST). Discussing the high turnover rate of youth workers Gannett says, "They are not supported; they don't know what their job is, what is expected of them and how they are supposed to learn their craft" (Fusco and Gannett, 2012, p.8). This assertion, like the tensions shared by my interviewees, is reflective of a structure that heavily relies on part-time youth workers who do not receive adequate opportunities to grow. Gannett and many writers in *Advancing Youth Work,* focus primarily on academic solutions to lack of professional development such as degrees, certifications and accreditations. However, for most part-time youth workers the cost and time barriers associated with these solutions are impractical. Each of the seasoned youth workers I interviewed noted the lack of communal growth or group reflection available to newer youth workers. Like me, these seasoned youth workers had received some intentional professional development (training, supervision, etc.), but built their skills and knowledge of youth work within teams of youth workers who challenged them to be better on a regular basis. In "Establishing Expertise in an Emerging Field," Joyce Walker and Kate Walker (2012) explain that key components of learning for youth workers include working on real-world problems; working alongside peers; placing their knowledge in a context of public or field knowledge; and strengthened understanding of their own values and ethics in relation to their work. Overwhelmingly, these are the factors that interviewees stated they gained in teams of full-time youth workers. As one interviewee stated he had "…people that were really different from me, they came from different places and had different strengths. They made me a better youth worker because we challenged each other's understanding of the world and the youth we work with" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 10, 2012).

Our field is full of highly impactful youth workers with years of experience, expertise and clarity about what good youth work is and how

to do it. These talented individuals honed their skills in teams of youth workers. Professional development networks can provide spaces for youth workers to push and pull and grow with other youth workers when independent agencies cannot do it alone.

Reach out and say – you've got things to teach us.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORKS

The purpose of a network of agencies working collaboratively to create professional development opportunities is to create results that would not have been accomplished independently. As one youth worker explained it, the benefit of a network is that individual agencies "bring resources and materials and experiences together so that more people have access to them so that we can provide better programming and support [for youth]" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 6, 2012). Another interviewee explained the potential of a network is to "…share resources, share expertise…that's when it's really rockin'" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 6, 2012). As youth work networks continue to emerge in communities throughout the United States, many have incorporated professional development as an aspect of their work. In communities like Providence, Boston, Harlem,

San Francisco and Saint Paul networks have taken various shapes and their professional development systems have varying degrees of collaborative creation.

Saint Paul has a history of youth-serving agencies networking together to build collaborative relationships around transportation, field trips, co-created programming, initiatives and professional development. Much of this work has been neighborhood-based (e.g. LEAP Forward, East Side Network Café, Neighborhood Learning Community). Over a span of about seven years, the city of Saint Paul took on a convening role with leadership from Saint Paul Public Schools, the City of Saint Paul and community-based organizations to create an out-of-school-time network modeled after communities like Harlem and Providence. The network was named Sprockets Saint Paul in the spring of 2011.[3] The Sprockets network began offering free professional development opportunities for youth workers in Saint Paul in fall 2011. As a partner within the network, Saint Paul Public Schools has been integral in forming aspects of Sprockets. My participation in the network has been at neighborhood-based meetings and, primarily, within the professional development group. Community Education handles the registration process and funded four trainings last year. In 2011-12, 513 youth workers attended one or more of 16 trainings offered through the Sprockets network. In Community Education we developed an internal system to compensate our part-time staff for meaningful participation in these trainings. Twelve Community Education instructors participated in trainings, reported back and were paid for their time. Without the professional development opportunities created within Sprockets these 12 youth workers would not have participated in trainings that met their unique needs, learned alongside youth workers from other agencies or had access to a large selection of free training opportunities.

Youth-serving agencies need to work together to create development opportunities for and with youth workers.

The emergence of youth work networks and intermediaries throughout communities in the United States has brought gains in integrated youth services, collaborative programming, professional development and transportation. However, many of these processes have been laden with tensions around power, access and voice. One interviewee talked about attending a neighborhood-based meeting and being repeatedly shut down by the facilitator. The youth worker said, "It was like [the facilitator] didn't want to hear anything from youth workers from the neighborhood. I never went back" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 10, 2012). Another youth worker shared that she felt like there were public network meetings and "secret" meetings where "real" decisions were made. For a professional development network to thrive it must engage youth workers at all levels of decision-making and creation. As in the relationship between a youth and youth worker; a network's failure to truly engage youth workers creates an imbalance of power that leads to distrust of the network intending to serve them.

In the fall of 2011, Dana Fusco visited a Walkabout Fellowship meeting at the Minnesota Department of Education. Discussing youth work networks, she warned that there is a

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[3] Additional networks of youth-serving agencies exist within the Twin Cities; I have limited the discussion within the body of the paper because this is not a survey of youth networks. The Beacons Network is organized around a shared approach to out-of-school time programming and linked funding sources; the Youth Coordinating Board in Minneapolis and the Saint. Paul Children's Collaborative are networks of primarily government-funded agencies; Minneapolis' North Side Achievement Zone and Saint Paul's Promise Neighborhood are geographically structured networks that incorporate youth programming as part of their efforts to strengthen a community.

tipping point at which the network stops working in the interest of youth and youth-serving organizations and becomes primarily focused on its own existence. At this point, she explained, the majority of the fundraising and resources go to supporting the continuance of the network and the network turns into a bureaucracy. I believe this is because, despite good intentions, some networks have failed to adopt a youth-centered approach to their work. Commitment to inclusivity, engagement and voice could defend against devolvement from network to bureaucracy. An intentional youth-centered practice would ensure diversity of thought and retain focus on the needs of youth and youth workers.

A YOUTH-CENTERED APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORKS

Before I could ask my first question, one interviewee stopped me and said, "Before we even start talking about this, I have two questions for you. What is the youth's role in it? What is the actual need?" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 10, 2012). These two questions emanate from experiences with systems, structures and/or agencies that create programs, legislation and/or spaces without the voices, expertise or leadership of the youth they intend to serve. These fundamental questions come from an expert youth worker who recognizes youth workers' instinct to resist systems that are counterintuitive to their daily work with youth. Great youth workers get out of the way so youth can lead; we provide spaces and opportunities but we do not dictate absolutes. This youth worker intentionally rearranged the interview to let me know that a professional development network is irrelevant without youth and youth worker voices and needs being central to its design. When asked to describe the components of a collaborative professional development network all of the youth workers I interviewed described a youth-centered approach.

Lindsay Walz (2012) identifies youth-centered as the overarching value shared by youth workers. Youth-centered is most often described as the practice of youth being agents

in the design, outcomes and evaluation of youth programs. In program quality evaluations like the Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Assessment, aspects of a youth-centeredness emerge in themes like interaction and engagement. I believe that youth-centered is also an approach that can be utilized in the design of systems, in the practice of supervision or as a research methodology. Further, I believe that youth-centered is an ontology for great youth workers and they live it whether they are in direct service, leadership, research or instruction.

In "On Being Youth Centered: A Guideline for Individuals and Organizations," Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Protection [NSHPP] (2009), provides five elements of a youth-centered approach: strengths-based, valuing diversity, youth-adult partnerships, organizational dedication to approach, and continuous evaluation. NSHPP's elements reflect what youth workers told me a professional development network would need to be, but what emerged in my interviews was simpler. Youth-centered is: inclusivity, engagement and voice. These elements are mutually dependent and require an intentional, systems-level commitment to a youth-centered approach, as well as, ongoing collaborative evaluation.

INCLUSIVITY

I define inclusivity as an ongoing commitment to intentionally welcoming spaces. In a youth work network this means being inclusive of markers of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, family structure, language, and community origin. It also means being dedicated to inclusion of the various types of youth work (juvenile justice, enrichment, after-school, resolution and prevention, faith-based, mentoring, street work) and people who work with youth in professions that do not traditionally identify as youth workers (police officers, social workers, teachers, child care workers). It means upsetting power differentials across leadership, frontline staff and volunteers so that youth workers can grow and learn together. A youth-

centered, inclusive approach to network building would not prioritize the needs or voices of select agencies. And, it means being inclusive of both seasoned and new youth workers.

One interviewee described the application of inclusivity as valuing all of voices and getting them to the table. For that to be sustained, once they arrive, the table has to already be an inclusive environment. As one interviewee explained, a proactively inclusive network would have no dominant way of knowing. The intention behind her statement was not to say that there should not be shared network vision or shared approach, but to say that the multiple ways that people know and experience their world must be seen as integral to group success.

Finally, an inclusive environment would necessitate spaces for youth. Youth roles in a professional development network could take many forms: a youth board, evaluations or observations conducted by youth, a needs assessment, youth facilitating meetings and/or trainings, or a co-led network with youth in paid positions of leadership. To be authentically inclusive youth and youth workers would need to be engaged on multiple levels.

ENGAGEMENT

Interviewees repeatedly stated that a professional development network would need to be collaborative and engage all voices. The youth worker mentioned earlier who never went back to a network meeting after feeling shut down stated, "[the network] isn't shaped to meet my needs and doesn't include my voice" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 10, 2012). In other words, youth workers don't want to be invited to the table without also having decision making power to shape the network. Another interviewee said that youth workers at all levels of organizational power would need to feel that the network is a safe space to speak up. For engagement to happen, five of the interviewees said that leaders/facilitators of the network would have

to be authentic and that this would be communicated through transparency and a dedication to engaging youth and youth workers in decision making.

A genius for meaningful play and making connections

Another youth worker described an engaging environment as being led or facilitated by a leader who listens to all. I believe this hits the heart of a philosophical alignment with youth work. Great youth workers strive daily to create democratic, youth-centered spaces in their programs. For youth workers to engage actively in a professional development network they need to experience that same dedication to engagement from those facilitating the network. As I stated earlier, one interviewee shared her impression that network discussions happened publicly and decisions were made privately. A good youth worker would not do this in practice with a group of youth; they would not brainstorm and vote on field trip options and then make the decision for them or select a location the youth didn't choose. For youth workers to engage in a network, the processes and practices of the

network must align with their youth work values.

Engagement also requires meaningful work and outcomes. One interviewee called it "meaningful partners at the table" who can make things happen. Another warned against misuse of time, explaining that youth workers' plates are very full, and collaborative meetings must make good use of their time. Youth workers want to see results from their input. Further, as one youth worker stated, the network must "be driven by youth workers and their agencies" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 11, 2012). To remain engaged in a professional development network the opportunities must meet their needs and capitalize on their knowledge base. As another interviewee so clearly stated, "youth workers must have a definitive voice in the process" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 11, 2012).

VOICE

In a youth-centered approach voice identifies youth and youth workers as producers of knowledge. In a professional development network the knowledge base of youth and youth workers is integral to growth. Six interviewees discussed the lack of meaningful professional development opportunities for seasoned youth workers including themselves. One interviewee who supervises a team of three seasoned youth workers shared that her staff no longer attends trainings in the community. She explained that when they attend trainings they become the teachers or provide all of the real-life examples. She suggested that becoming the creators of professional development opportunities, sharing their expertise with other youth workers, would be more impactful on their professional growth.

This sentiment was echoed by another youth worker who explained that for seasoned youth workers to feel connected to a professional development network, the network would have to "reach out and say, 'you have things to teach us'" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 6, 2012). A youth-centered approach

appreciates that knowledge is everywhere, not locked in consultants or academia. A network facilitator I interviewed, who has successfully tapped into multiple knowledge bases to provide professional trainings stated, "Expertise abounds both within and outside the group" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 12, 2012). She admitted that by wholly welcoming all voices as trainers, there had been some missteps, but also feels the open format has given youth workers the opportunity to find their own voice within a variety of youth work approaches.

We have serious expertise among frontline, seasoned youth workers that is not ordinarily tapped into or prioritized. A youth-centered network would include their voices as trainers and experts. Further, it would support those who need help in translating their expertise to a training format. As one youth worker said, "The most meaningful professional developments are run by youth workers" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 6, 2012). *Commitment to Youth-Centered Approach through Collaborative Evaluation*

Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Prevention explains that for a youth-centered approach to be successfully implemented it must be infused into all aspects of organizational practice: "strategic planning, facilities design, human resources planning, fiscal planning, and organizational policies and procedures" (p.9). A professional development network can only, as one youth worker stated, "exist because it is relevant." In the context of Dana Fusco's warning, if a network is primarily fueled by its own self-interest it will become irrelevant to the growth of youth work.

A network designed to be inclusive and engaging—that prioritizes the voices of youth and youth workers—will continually change to meet the needs of the group. Interviewees further explained that for a professional development network to be successful over time it would need to be adaptable. Over the past ten years, youth workers in Minnesota's Twin Cities have seen significant shifts in funding resources, evaluation and outcome

requirements, agency collaboration, and in the racial and ethnic makeup of the youth we serve. Youth workers I interviewed have proactively adapted through these shifts over time. They also make daily work decisions to adapt to the needs, interests, passions and moods of their youth. One interviewee talked about his relationship to printed curriculums, saying, "You know, if someone got shot yesterday, we are not doing a curriculum" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 10, 2012). It is no surprise that youth workers would require adaptability as a key component to the daily practice and long-term success of a professional development network. The network must resist bureaucracy or regulation and require itself to be adaptable to the changing needs of the group.

Four interviewees explained that a network would have to be self-reflective to ensure its success and relevance. NSHPP calls this continuous evaluation, saying, "Because the process of evaluation is continuous, changes in programs and services can be made on an ongoing basis as necessary to respond to evaluation findings" (p. 11). In a network, this would need to be accomplished through ongoing evaluation with youth, youth workers families and agency leadership. Perhaps the network would create a charter or strategic approach that requires itself to annually evaluate on a series of markers so that, independent of changing leadership, the network is continually evaluating its' own youth-centeredness.

CONCLUSION

The word that repeatedly surfaced in my interviews was "trust." Trust was discussed in the context of partnership, collaboration, leadership, trainer expertise, and supervision. As youth must trust the intentions or authenticity of a youth worker; youth workers must feel trust in a network designed to serve them. As one interviewee stated, "We would have to trust that the network has been formed and is making decisions in our vision and interest, *and* in the vision and interest of youth" (Twin Cities youth worker interview, April 12, 2012). I believe that an authentic

youth-centered approach to a professional development network engenders trust. This trust is developed through a mutual dedication to inclusivity, engagement and voice as well as an understanding that the system is consistently re-evaluating its own purpose, plan and effectiveness.

Many may say the idea of a youth-centered professional development network seems very utopian. Perhaps it is. But, I have witnessed and been a part of successful implementation of a youth-centered approach with youth and youth workers, in inter-agency partnerships and at a network level. I know that I cannot create the professional development opportunities I would like to see for my staff alone and believe that we can, and are, doing it better together.

REFLECTION

Samuel was a kindergartner at a school I worked at. He was one of three black kindergartners in a primarily white, economically privileged, private school. Like my elementary friend John, Samuel's imagination was trying to dance its way out of him all day. Also like John, he got in trouble with his teachers a lot. One day, when we were walking back from the cafeteria, he said, "Ms. Walsh, did you know that under Samuel's black skin is Samuel's white skin?!"

"Really? How did it get there?" I replied. My tone was curious, but my stomach jumped to my throat. I was walking down the hall with 20 kindergartners, about to have an important discussion about race, and I had about 50 yards to go before I would have to hand Samuel off to his teachers.

"It's always been there." As he said this, Samuel's gaze dropped to the floor. The excitement he had originally expressed in sharing a secret was replaced with a face that showed how deeply this idea affected him.

"What do you think about your two sets of skin?" I asked.

"I wish my white skin was on top so I would get

treated like Annie," he said matter-of-factly. Annie was a blonde white girl who was often chosen for leadership roles by her teachers. Samuel had translated his experience of being in trouble because of his energy level into a message on race (though, honestly, it was likely also a message on race and racism). I asked, "How do you think your brown skin would feel if you put it away?"

"Sad, probably." At this point, we were right outside the kindergarten room door, I ushered the rest of the kids through and kneeled down. "Samuel, it's ok to feel however you want about your two skins, but I just want you to know that I think you are great exactly how you are. You are fun and smart and have a fabulous imagination." And with that he walked into his classroom.[4]

I have never asked my friend John what messages he may have interpreted about his own identity and ability from his elementary experiences. When we were twenty, I told him about the card to our teacher and he teared up. As people who work with youth, we can never forget that the things we say and do impact the ways youth see the world and how they understand themselves. Without my group of peers at the YWCA, I would have likely been unprepared for this moment. I may never have become a person that Samuel wanted to share his secret with. I am thankful for each learning opportunity I have had as a youth worker and remain dedicated to a youth-centered approach in all its forms.

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[4] Following this interaction I met with the principal, who had hired me to be on her team partially due to my background in racial equity work. She asked me to document the interaction Samuel and I had. We sent it to his teachers and the principal included general ideas about how to change the atmosphere of the classroom. The rest of the follow-through was disappointing.

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AUTHOR NOTE

AUTHOR BIO

Shaun Kelley Walsh is a youth worker who was born and raised on the West Side of St. Paul. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Women's Studies and has been a paid youth worker since 1999. Shaun is currently a community education coordinator with St. Paul Public Schools striving to take a youth-centered approach in a program-driven position.