

Moving Youth Work Forward: Reflections on Youth-Centered Practice in Minnesota

A COLLECTION OF WORKING PAPERS PRODUCED BY THE MINNESOTA WALKABOUT FELLOWSHIP



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Let's Celebrate the Walkabout

Carol Thomas and Joyce Walker

This volume gives testimony to the success of the 2011-12 Walkabout Practitioners Fellowship Program. The nine papers illustrate the blossoming of practice wisdom and reflective inquiry that can occur when youth workers commit to a joint year-long exploration, and carve time from their work day to grapple with the tough questions critical to the field and their own practice. The initial Fellowship goals include advancing shared frameworks to explain our work; affirming the commitment to high quality practice; reaching some accord on important issues of the day; and, exploring authentic avenues for accountability and excellence that are not onerous to practitioners and that can be realistically supported and financed. The papers illustrate how seriously these goals were embraced and approached.

Initially presented with three questions, the group settled on two important issues for focus:

- What would happen to youth work in Minnesota if we adopted a broadly shared understanding of youth work values, principles and ethics?
- What would it look like if Minnesota had a creative system of expectations and accountability for youth workers?

It's fair to say the Walkabout Fellows identified "youth-centeredness" as the essential gold standard with which to guide the philosophy, actions, outcomes, dilemma-solving, professional development and ultimate accountability for youth work. Youth-centeredness shows up in articles about youth at the center of the social contract; about the centrality of authentic, mutually respectful relationships; about the need to bring professional development closer to practitioner wisdom that is anchored in a belief in young people; and about supervising and managing youth work with the same value set we use in work directly with young people.

Each Walkabout Fellow exhibited personal leadership as she studied an issue, completed a piece of action research, debated with other fellows, and finally communicated important ideas to a broader group in the community through writing. These voices of practice have a great deal to tell us, and for this we are grateful.

Introduction: The Walkabout

Janet Madzey-Akale and Sheila Oehrlein

Who are we? What do we want to become? These questions were raised at the 2010 History of Youth and Community Work Conference. It was there that the idea for providing youth workers the space in their lives to take a Walkabout was born. The Walkabout Fellowship was built on the idea of tracing the 'songlines' of our youth work 'ancestors' so youth workers could build upon their heroic deeds. It was about recognizing practitioners as knowledge generators by collecting and documenting their wisdom around youth worker preparation and practice in Minnesota.

The first four months of the Walkabout were spent creating a cohort learning environment by establishing a safe space to nurture ideas and share the experience. The Fellowship was designed to ground the group in common literature and vocabulary by reading and discussing the knowledge and experience of our youth work predecessors. Emerging issues and tensions in youth work today were also explored. These issues include: agreement on definitions of our field; values and ethics; regulation and standards; modes of accountability; credentialing; and avenues for high quality professional preparation.

During the next four months the Fellows focused on inquiry – individually the Fellows grappled with what the group had learned and considered the relevance in their local environments. They branched off into their own discoveries through additional readings and intentional conversations with others in the field. Working independently the fellowship offered a place for group dialogue about what their inquiries were revealing for themselves and for the field.

The final four months were about writing, rewriting, polishing, rewriting and editing. The impetus for rewrites was stimulated by group conversations with Fellows, facilitators and through an informal process of inviting guests in to hear initial ideas and positions. Individuals met with facilitators and others from the Walkabout planning committee to gain clarity about their writing.

As we moved from group-building to individual explorations and acts of writing we often returned to the built-in support the group provided. While all voices might not represent the same journey or discoveries, taken together they harmoniously reflect the complexities of the youth work landscape. The Fellows produced papers that discuss: the need for innovations in developing networks and systems to support youth workers; the shared values of those who work with a youth-centered approach; and how internal accountability is thriving and is an area that deserves more exploration.

The Walkabout Fellows are not the first group to attempt to answer questions about youth worker accountability, professional development and values. These questions are being asked and answered across the country. However, the papers produced by the Fellows represent a truly Minnesotan view of these issues, grounded in practitioner wisdom. It is our hope that they provide readers with a starting point on their own journeys.

Looking Back to Move Forward: Songlines of Youth Work in Minnesota

Cece Gran

Human movement to reflect, contemplate, learn, and know takes many forms and has been practiced and perfected since the beginning of time. The monastic labyrinth, the many forms of Native American vision quests, and the traditional Maya rites of passage rituals are all examples of contemplative movement for the purposes of learning and knowing. The Aboriginal Walkabout is the form of contemplative practice that provided a framework for this writing Fellowship sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Education and the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development.

Learning the songlines of the land is critical to the success of a Walkabout. One must know the songlines of the land in order to know where one is and where one might be going. Language in the Aboriginal culture began as song. The songlines are songs that relate to a series of sacred, indigenous, geographical locations from one Australian coast to another. They are maps to the land that trace the history of people and place. Children learn all of the country's tribal songlines so that as they travel life's journey, they can sing out the map of their route and tell the stories of the sacred sites they encounter.

The use of the concept of songlines is an apt way to think about looking back to move forward. It is a lovely metaphor for the Walkabout Fellows' journey to learn and understand the history and geography of youth work. What are the songlines of this field? What are the historical pathways we can travel to find our place in the world of the caring professions? The Fellows looked back at past and current efforts to professionalize youth work in order to explore the breadth of creative future possibilities that could strengthen the field and affect public perceptions of the value of youth work.

Thank you for your hard work, Fellows.

Think About It: An Exploration of Values, Principles and Ethics of Youth Work

Deena M. McKinney M.Ed.

It is my belief that values, principles and ethics are the foundational pieces of how youth work is practiced and how a philosophical approach is developed. While participating in the Walkabout Fellowship over the past year, I have enjoyed the informal conversations with colleagues about the meaning or implications of the values, principles and ethics of our work. I also formally interviewed five local professionals who were either doing direct service youth work or were managers overseeing youth services programming.

For the purpose of this paper I will look at youth work practice among youth services. Youth Services is outside the work being done within education, park and recreation, and out-of-school time. Youth Services is an arena where services are voluntary and can include residential programming, group work, individual counseling, life skill development, community engagement and case management services. It is important to identify the role of youth services because it indicates the purpose of the relationship. Young people often show up to youth services looking to get their basic needs of safety, food and shelter met first. From there youth services provide opportunities for family work and/or independent living. There is a concentrated effort for young people to explore their strengths and set their own goals.

VALUES

In exploring what values, principles and ethics look like within youth services, it is vital to understand how youth workers define their role in a young person's life. First, most often the youth worker is being paid to have a relationship with this young person. The connection between the youth and youth worker is through an organization or agency. It must be recognized that this relationship is one of a professional nature. The youth worker has

a two-fold sense of power: he or she is an adult and holds control of whatever services the young person is receiving. The youth workers get to make decisions that affect the young person's programming experience.

Society often sees youth as individuals or groups to fear. It is the youth workers' experience to challenge this idea. They must see youth differently than the rest of society. Youth workers create a safe place by seeing young people with a lens that reflects their strengths; respects their ideas, stories, relationships and experiences; and views them as individuals who have something to offer. Mark Krueger (2005) described four themes of youth work practice that reflect these values in how a youth worker should approach youth work:

- Presence—The ability to bring self (youth worker) to the moment. "I am here, I will go with you."
- Rhythmic Interaction— The human connection; movement toward resolution, moment of connection, discovery, empowerment.
- Meaning Making—An understanding of youth contextual reality; construct and deconstruct; moving-talking- and being together.
- Atmosphere—The tone, mood, space, and place.

This lens also changes how youth workers should talk about young people, especially when they are not in the room. The youth worker becomes the advocate, is conscious of the young person's voice and cautious to impose his or her own ideas on what needs to or should happen in the life of a young person.

The common themes discovered in identifying youth work values included:

- Believe in young people.
- Consider diversity.
- Be consistent.
- Find ways to stay creative.
- Utilize a strength-based philosophy.

Think about it: To sit in a room with a young person. Maybe you have met this person before, maybe not. To share a space that has been purposefully and intentionally entered into. To sit silently in quiet and stillness leaving room for the young person to decide when it is time to speak, to decide where to begin, to decide the words to choose. The story (and there is never just one) may be told all at once maybe even without breath or it may be told slowly and carefully. It is a privilege to be in that kind of space with a young person. It is vital, once this relationship-oriented kind of interaction begins, that the youth worker hears, sees and feels what is being given to them. This is how we begin to truly believe in young people.

PRINCIPLES

The most common language utilized among Youth Services is in talking about positive youth development. In the *Positive Youth Development Toolkit*, Ansell et al. (2008) describe four principal areas of concentration: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. Belonging is a result of having “a positive relationship with a trustworthy adult, being in an inclusive program and having a safe environment” p. 13). Mastery includes “developing knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes then being given the opportunity to demonstrate them in a proficient manner” (p. 14). Independence is about “self-reliance, self-determination, and capturing one’s own hope and optimism and believing that one has some impact or control over life’s events” (p.15). Generosity means “providing youth with opportunity to participate in something larger

than themselves” (p. 15).

Let’s not forget these principles have been in the making for over 40 years. This does not make them irrelevant, but a solid cornerstone on which to build a common understanding of youth work principles. In 1973, Gisela Konopka worked with colleagues to develop a framework of basic need requirements for work with adolescents. Konopka’s, *Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth* has influenced and shaped the positive youth development approach. These basic needs are: feel a sense of safety; experience active participation; develop self-worth through contribution; experiment to discover self and gain independence; develop significant quality relationships particularly with at least one caring adult; discuss conflicting values to develop own personal values; feel pride of competence and mastery; and expand capacity to enjoy life and know success is possible.

Think about it: It only takes 24 hours. Within the first 24 hours of being on the street a young person is approached to participate in some sort of sexual exploitation. It doesn’t matter why this young person has found his or her way to this situation. For some running away seems easier than the fight. For others the doors are locked and they are not wanted at home.

It takes a significant amount of courage for this young person to walk in the door of your agency. They are welcomed without judgment. There are caring adults and peers with similar stories. There is safety. There is listening. There are conversations that explore where they have been, what’s important to them, and where they want to go. There is a relentless curiosity. Everything is intentional and purposeful. This young person is given the freedom to explore, wrestle with new ideas, and encounter new experiences.

ETHICS

Youth work in the United States at this point in time does not have a code of ethical conduct. It relies more on a philosophical approach for dealing with human conduct or the right/wrongness of behavior. In the chapter *Ethics and Values in Work with Young People* (Banks, 2009), there are two questions to ask when considering an ethical situation. One side asks, "How should we act?" while the other side asks, "What sorts of people we should be?" (p. 48). Both are vital questions, yet in exploring professional ethics the *how should we act* is what usually develops into a professional code of conduct.

One youth worker I interviewed stated "Ethics is common sense," yet ethical dilemmas are a constant area of conversation, consultation, and training among youth-serving agencies. A youth work professional manager was very clear when she stated, "Most mistakes in youth work are in ethics or boundaries."

The philosophical conduct behind youth work ethics has been influenced by social work and psychology ethical codes of conduct. These codes of conduct include: boundaries between the youth worker and young person; safety and well-being of young people; respect or valuing the young person as an individual with experiences, ideas and relationships that are meaningful; and accountability for the adults in young people's lives.

Think about it: When there is a discussion about ethics it is advised to ask one's self a question: "Whose needs are being met by the interaction?" Or "What purpose is this specific course of interaction, conversation, or activity serving?" In an age of social media there is greater and more constant exposure to images, photos, intimate thoughts or expression that is immediately public with world wide access. Individually there is no issue. People can choose how they publically present their person, personality, ideas and experiences. There becomes an ethical dilemma when a youth-serving organization puts out into the world, for the purpose and gain of the organization

(fundraising), the image, identifiable story, idea, or experience of a young person who is currently receiving services. This action serves the needs and interest of the organization. The dilemma arises when the justification argues that the young people are benefiting because fundraising keeps the doors of the organization open therefore helping young people. Or another justification can argue that young people are "empowered" by sharing their image, identifiable story-idea-experiences.

It is our responsibility as a community of youth service providers to make some decisions regarding the ethics of fundraising using our young people's intimate life stories. These are their real lives and using their stories for the benefit of the organizations has unseen consequences on the healing, personal growth development and self-image of our young people over time.

Most youth workers begin their careers as an entry level job some with college education some with life experience. Youth workers are not "youth workers" when they start the first day. These "professional" skills are developed through the agency in which they work. There is teaching, training and mentoring from supervisors and peers. Throughout the learning process consultation and debriefing are vital. Consultation and debriefing provide opportunities to process challenging situations, explore bias, discover opportunities to try different tools or skills, and ensure ethical conduct. This experience can be challenging and leads the youth worker to self-reflection. Self-reflection is an essential learning model in youth work. Learning to understand *what* we bring to this work influences the way in which we can be purposeful and intentional in *how* we do this work.

Youth Work is at the center of people work. It is influenced by the professional worlds of social work, education, justice, and even medicine by looking to those fields for professionalization. Maybe even more importantly, those professions are influenced by youth work as many young adults move from their first jobs as youth workers into

those career arenas. They bring with them the foundational philosophies—the values, principles and ethics—learned from youth work practice which is their professional identity.

“No educational courses, training, programs, or text books can give you what you need in order to be with, understand, and guide a young person through fear, pain, chaos, and anger once those demons are at work...being in relationship means that we have what it takes to remain open and responsive in conditions where most mortals and professionals quickly distance themselves, become ‘objective’ and look for the external fix” (Fewster, 2004).

Think about it: A thriving community that provides a continuum of services for our young people: prevention-to crisis interventions-shelter-housing-life skills-leadership-and connections to community. We can be with youth without fearing them. We can honor the relationships and identities they define. We can do what we say we are going to do. We can look for the exceptions, focus on the possibilities and remind young people of their hope. We can be creative and enjoy this work. We can celebrate moments of success.

Our programs can provide a safe place to tell a story or connect with an adult. We can provide opportunities that expose young people to new ideas and new experiences. Our programs can give young people a chance to determine their own path. We can provide community context where young people can find ways to participate, lead and give of themselves. As youth workers we can hold one another to a standard that respects a young person's voice that goes beyond setting goals or having a youth advisory panel. The youth's voice can be respected with every interaction. We can pause and check our own bias, our adult need to control, or enforce a rule. We can be purposeful and intentional as we welcome young people into our organizations.

We, as providers of services to young people, can ask ourselves why and how are we

doing this work? We must consult, debrief, challenge one another and support each other. There are vital questions to consider: how should we act and what kind of agencies do we want to be?

Youth work is often done in isolation, yet there has been considerable effort among Youth Services to be more collaborative and share resources. As conversations unfold and new initiatives are pursued, it is my hope that the values, principles and ethics of youth work be the solid driving force of any decisions regarding why and how young people are served in our community. The why and how is truly what is important about working with young people.

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AUTHOR BIO

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Youth Worker Values and Approaches

Angelina Peluso

For the past three years, I have been systematically gathering observations, interviews, informal conversations, surveys, and reflections from youth workers both at my urban Minneapolis community organization and at a few similar organizations. The goal in this data gathering for me was to learn what it takes to be a great youth worker supervisor. From this data and numerous secondary research sources, I have compiled a set of values that echo the voices of these community youth workers in Minneapolis.

The values and approaches that arose were the same or similar to those which quality research shows achieve positive outcomes for youth. These positive outcomes include increased confidence and skills, community culture reinforcement, health and emotional resiliency, increased self-worth and contribution, leadership for change, and positive role models for future generations. Minneapolis youth workers know what quality is and how to achieve it.

YOUTH WORKER WORKPLACE VALUES AND APPROACHES

Interestingly, what began to emerge was a common sense of frustration with the personal and professional dissonance youth workers felt when their deep commitment to these values in practice conflicted with the business management style of professionalism expected by their employers. Situated in the role of the youth worker supervisor, I chose to ground my supervision style in the values and approaches proven successful in developing quality outcomes for youth. Would the transposition of these youth work values and approaches to the workplace environment have an impact on the professionalism of the youth workers I supervise?

The answer was overwhelmingly yes. Employee, volunteer, and youth retention steadily

increased, with those who stayed increasing their capabilities and confidence, and taking on more responsibility. A number of college student youth workers were inspired to change their major or add a minor in youth studies, and at least four chose to apply for career youth work jobs with our agency after receiving a 4-year degree (one of whom also had an employment offer from Google and chose youth work).

Staff attributed this increased professionalism to the values and approaches I had used with them. They also increasingly expressed an understanding that these same attributes represent youth work values and approaches. I saw my positive youth development approach with the staff change our program from one that promotes youth leadership development to one that also provides professional leadership development.

YOUTH-SERVING AGENCY WORKPLACE VALUES AND APPROACHES

A dilemma remains that is crucial to the professionalization of the field as well as for the creation of quality programs through youth worker professional development. For a former direct service youth worker, it was almost second nature to provide this type of positive workplace environment for my supervisees. But, when I found myself most in tune with my team, and them with each other and the participants, I found myself feeling at risk within the agency. I became bitter when my supervisor or other agency leader asked me to do things because I didn't feel respected in the way I valued so highly for the team I had created and the youth in the programs.

Requests for work came through email or a quick interruption, many times in an urgent flurry from individuals who did not take the time to get to know me, or ask my opinion,

even when decisions were being made about our programs. The type and level of engagement I had worked so hard to foster within the programs and my team felt in opposition to the style of communication and decision making that was expected of me within the agency.

I am passionate and committed to this work, as evidenced by my very personal investment in the professionalism of the workers. Now, the dilemma of the front line was not gone. I had lifted it from the daily experience of the workers and begun to carry it myself. Worse, the impact of negotiating this dissonance from my position held an amplified risk due to the nature of my role and experience as non-temporary and career-committed. My livelihood depends on my ability to work as a full time youth programs coordinator, a rare position. This dissonance, for me, was personal and painful, leaving me feeling that if I were not able to have a voice within the agency in the way in which I so strongly believed for youth and staff, I would no longer have the option of staying. I would have to change jobs, and would have to start a new career.

Most direct service supervisors have come from direct service themselves, and many struggle with the transition into this role. Some find it unfulfilling. A number of frontline supervisors I interviewed also expressed the feeling that they were faced with expectations from non-youth-serving supervisors that were misaligned with the values they know achieve the highest outcomes for youth.

Assuming that the David P. Weikart Center's research is accurate, the direct service supervisor holds the most critical role in the facilitation and execution of quality improvement initiatives (Smith, 2012). With this role being so crucial to the quality of programs, doesn't it seem just as crucial to support and retain youth workers at this level? In fact, why not begin viewing our nonprofit, social change, youth-serving agencies as a model of human leadership development not only for participants, but for employees as well? I am fortunate to work for Pillsbury United

Communities, because I was not forced to make the decision to change careers. The president of our agency took the time to listen to us youth workers, and together we have taken the first steps to begin to incorporate these values into our approaches, policies, and procedures within the agency. Another, even more challenging and wide reaching example of this type of organizational restructuring is the Saint Paul Department of Parks and Recreation. In her action research, Kathy Korum (2012) describes how through her cognitive and behavioral shift from a management perspective to a youth worker-oriented leadership role, she and her organization were able to increase quality and engagement in youth programs:

Invite quality youth workers to teach you about working effectively with young people and be open to the learning. It is a time to recognize and acknowledge the strengths in those around you, regardless of their role in the organization (p.22).

If more community-based, youth-serving organizations begin to operate under these values for all staff as well as their youth, we will be creating a generation of resilient, skilled, confident, seasoned youth work professionals. Not only will this strengthen the quality of community youth programs in Minneapolis, but our shared value of reflective practice will create authentic, useable knowledge to lead the discipline toward academic professionalization.

NEW MILLENNIUM LEADERSHIP FOR RACIAL JUSTICE VALUES & APPROACHES

The shift that I am proposing is not unique to youth work. It is a shift that is occurring as businesses and large corporations are beginning to see the value of shared leadership, professional development, and caring workplace policies (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2008). In a global economy, those of us who are in our late twenties have a unique view of interconnected relationships, power, knowledge, and voice (Myers and Sadajhiani, 2010). We were the first generation to grow up

using the Internet, and we are more prepared for a global world where teams and relationships are more effective than American individualism.

So what does community youth work have to do with the global economy? The sad truth about this field is that full-time community youth work careers are scarce and uncertain. Our country has not adopted the United Nations Rights of the Child, nor have we created a governmental branch dedicated to the healthy development of our young people. We are behind in this area and do not currently support community youth work as we know it. So we are subject to shifting funding streams and expectations on a regular basis, and an environment where turnover is expected and youth workers are seen as low-paid, young adults with little experience and no expertise.

However, within this reality is the interesting opportunity for utilizing our strengths in leadership development to create career ladders for the field. What I propose is that by aligning our agencies with the approaches and values of youth workers, we will create a unique experience for workers that has the potential to slingshot them to any leadership position they wish to achieve, regardless of industry. The best part of this concept is that the youth worker values listed above are exactly in step with the leadership competencies defined by Keleher et al. (2010) and affirm the values of youth workers as values for racial justice leadership education.

- Many programs promote the individual model of leadership, which is associated with leadership “over” others, creates relationships of dominance, and has historically applied coercion, force, or influence to reinforce power and privilege. Leadership needs to be reframed as the process by which individuals and groups align their values and mission, build relationships, organize and take action, and learn from their experiences to achieve shared goals (p.9).

YOUTH WORK VALUES ARE MILLENNIAL, RACIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP VALUES

The Annie E. Casey Foundation published a report called “Next Shift: Beyond the Nonprofit Leadership Crisis.” When I started this inquiry, I did not expect that it would be connected to what some are calling a crisis. However the Casey research, which focuses on young, emerging leaders in the nonprofit field, reported that “[Young leaders] are frustrated that older leaders give them responsibility without delegating the authority they need to get the job done. These young leaders are looking to be included, but instead find their ideas and skills overlooked” (Kunreuther and Corvington, 2007, p. 8).

Wolfred (2008) suggested that those young millennial leaders who do take on executive roles in nonprofits “may seek to restructure the executive role, creating collaborative or shared leadership models and job expectations that allow for a healthier balance between work and life” (p. 4). The human development that comes from expanding the youth development approaches and values to the workplace is the answer to attracting, retaining, and preparing the next generation of nonprofit, social change leadership on a playing field that promotes health, learning, and equity for all. Infusing youth worker values at the organizational level is strategic leader development for the organization, as well as a potential future funding shift. Kunreuther and Corvington (2007) recommended, “Seek out and reward innovative organizations, including convening and tapping the knowledge of their leaders, no matter their age” (p.10).

By integrating the approaches and values of quality youth work into the structure of social change nonprofits through the corresponding leadership development approaches, a new generation of global leaders will emerge from the ranks of those passionate and hardworking enough to be youth workers. Done successfully, this model could create mobile career ladders for the field, as youth work experience becomes synonymous with participatory leadership experience in the eyes of employers from a variety of industries. It

will prevent burnout and transitions out of the field by seasoned professionals, thus building on knowledge and reflective practice, and increasing quality of programming. It could also provide future funding, potentially in the area of training for-profit businesses to utilize these approaches. Most importantly, it will model the workplace in which we are preparing youth in our programs to thrive. Organizations that mirror the youth work approach to leadership will attract and retain millennial leaders who have the skills to make change toward a more just and equitable global world.

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AUTHOR BIO

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Toward a Youth-Centered Approach: Creating a (New) Standard Operating Procedure through Shared Values

Lindsay Walz

In 2010, the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development hosted a history conference and critical conversation retreat which gathered youth workers from across the field—at a state, national and even international level—to reflect and discuss some of the current issues and trends of this emerging profession. This conference, titled “Looking Backward to Move Forward: Who and What Do We Want to Become?” was the basis for the creation of this Walkabout Fellowship. The Fellowship focused on three specific questions pertinent to the field. This paper addresses one of those questions: What would happen to youth work in Minnesota if we had a shared understanding of values, principles and ethics? For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on values.

LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

This Walkabout has truly been a journey of *looking back to move forward*. By sitting in conversation with other youth workers, I was able to examine the roots, or songlines of the field of youth work as well as my own practice. Asking tough questions, such as, “What *is* youth work?” and only finding more questions meant that there was a lot of unpacking of the terms we had all taken for granted. This “soul searching” was challenging and a bit daunting, but ultimately helped me find the path I needed to walk.

In beginning my journey, I became increasingly aware of the different experiences that brought my colleagues to youth work. Some of them received an education in teaching but found that type of work with young people unfulfilling. Others just happened upon this work through an internship or similar venture and had the fortune of turning it into a career—all of it seemingly unintentional. In order to move forward in my work, I needed to examine

my own youth worker identity and what my experience meant in the broader conversation about the field.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Even before I knew what a youth worker was, I knew I wanted to be one. As a young person, I had the opportunity to experience values I believe are at the heart of youth work when I was empowered to participate in the leadership of an emerging nonprofit as vice president of the board of directors. As I left high school and moved away to college, I knew that I wanted to create similar opportunities for other young people. Initially, I wanted to be a social worker with the clear intention of working with young people, but during my first semester I was introduced to the world of youth work. Ever since then I have made clear, purposeful steps in the direction of youth work, first as a freshman when I declared my minor in Youth Studies and then again when I enrolled in the Youth Development Leadership M.Ed. program at the University of Minnesota. My career has run the gamut of working in school settings as an educational assistant to working in restrictive residential settings with youth who have significant emotional or behavioral needs. Whatever my job title, my professional identity has always been that of a youth worker.

My professional experience helped shape my perspective as I began this Walkabout. I came to our discussions from the standpoint that *anyone* who interacts with a young person has the potential to be a youth worker. This was in contrast with others who sought a more manageable, but perhaps also more limiting understanding of the frame of out-of-school time work with young people. This language is defined as the scope of work done during non-school hours and encompasses opportunities for youth to experience coordinated activities

that help them “grow, learn and develop” (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006).

As we started sharing our experiences, understandings and perceptions, I began to question my own identity as a youth worker. We began dissecting the nature of youth work, who youth workers are and who they are not. Making distinctions and establishing boundaries seemed to be an important component in order to move forward with the bigger questions.

These discussions left me to ponder my identity. How could I, as a person who has worked in educational, therapeutic and social service settings be considered a youth worker? After all, isn't one of the fundamental frameworks of youth work its voluntary nature? (Jeffs & Smith, 2008). The idea that young people can enter into relationship with a youth worker of their own volition and choose to end that relationship at any time is a key distinction for some (Smith, 1999, 2002). Yet none of the young people I have worked with have ever truly come to me of their own free will. They were required by the state to attend school, required by their social workers to live in the group home and automatically assigned to my services as an Educational Support Advocate because their family received a housing subsidy.

After grappling with this I have concluded that my *approach* and the *values* that influence it are what has made me a youth worker. I believe that the strength of youth work is not necessarily the content of the work, but the approach, and that this approach is guided by values that can be shared across professions.

RESEARCH ASSERTIONS

The initial question, “What would happen to youth work in Minnesota if we had a shared understanding of values, principles and ethics?” offers a lot to digest. There is the question of what youth work even means—who are youth workers? It's hard to figure out what a “shared understanding” looks like, until we know *who* is sharing it.

In order to tackle this question and go into the world to find answers, I needed to make a couple of critical assertions about my viewpoint. The first is that I believe there is a potential youth worker in any person who serves as a guide in a young person's life, be it a professional or a caring neighbor. Though this statement is overly simplified, it is the root of my understanding and my values around the work. To maintain clear distinctions in my language, I will refer to the traditional out-of-school time professional as a **youth worker** and will use **youth-serving professional** when speaking of the broader set of disciplines that include people working in education, law enforcement, social work and counseling.

My second assertion is that the field of youth work is uniquely positioned to create a shared understanding of values across other youth-serving professions, which can be harnessed to have a profound impact on young people. Youth work is interdisciplinary—utilizing the knowledge of multiple disciplines to inform its own best practices. It is that interdisciplinary nature that can be a bridge builder, a means of creating permeable boundaries between distinct professions.

MAKING CONNECTIONS IN THE BROADER CONTEXT

The field of medicine, like youth-serving disciplines, has not been immune from professional silos. It has gone through a long evolution, from ancient, holistic practices like acupuncture and reiki, to the modern, specialized practice we often see today. As technology has advanced, it has given the field more and more information about each organ in the body. So much so that medical practitioners may be experts on the brain, but have nothing more than a superficial understanding of the organs that brain operates. A parallel can be drawn to the adults who are prominent in the lives of young people. A teacher is an expert at teaching, but may have very little understanding of the life experiences and circumstances that each learner brings with them as they walk into the classroom.

Improved outcomes and efficient service delivery are concerns across many disciplines. As the medical field has attempted to address these co-concerns, there has been an increase in literature related to what workforce experts are calling *interprofessional* training, a strategy that “seeks to encourage researchers, students, educators and professionals to integrate the expertise and methodology from two or more disciplines in the pursuit of a common task” (Health Workforce Information Center, 2012). Health care professionals have made a between their current multidisciplinary practice, and a new interdisciplinary practice. An article in the *Journal of Interprofessional Care* (Pecukonis, Doyle, & Bliss, 2008) made the following distinction between these two forms of practice:

Multidisciplinary: Several disciplines working in parallel, each implementing its own plan of action based on discipline-specific outcomes. Team members are only responsible for the activities related to their discipline and there is little sense of shared responsibility for patient outcomes or team development.

Interdisciplinary: Incorporates a collaborative and integrated program of care that celebrates and utilizes the interdependent knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and methods each professional brings to the health care system.

These definitions serve us well, whether our focus is the health of the human body or the human spirit. Professionals across the spectrum of youth-serving systems are likely to have broad experience with the multidisciplinary approach, where a common saying is, “That’s not my job.” This attitude can arise when too much emphasis is placed on content rather than approach, creating a tangle of criticism and blame for the youth-related concerns in society such as achievement gaps, teen pregnancy, juvenile crime, and others.

LEARNING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

The history of youth work is filled with the influences of luminaries in other disciplines—some of whom were social workers like Gisela

Konopka, others educators such as John Dewey and psychologists like G. Stanley Hall. These pioneers forged new pathways of thought about young people, pathways that have helped to create this discipline called youth work. By its very nature, youth work is interdisciplinary, because it uses a vast network of thoughts and ideas to influence a practice that takes a holistic view of youth.

The method for the field, thus far has been to seek the wisdom of others, to tread down the paths they worked to establish and expound upon their ideas. These songlines— or contributions to the field—range from Gisela Konopka’s conditions for healthy development to John Dewey’s philosophy of experiential education. Both embrace an interdisciplinary approach to working with young people so that the wholeness of the human experience is not lost.

As we look to the future, some believe that the only way to find strength is to distinguish our work—make it separate or distinct from the work of other professions. I would argue that our interdisciplinary nature is our strength and is essential to working with young people in an authentic, meaningful way and that creating another siloed professional structure would do nothing for the advancement of youth workers or the young people they serve. Gisela Konopka would likely feel the same, as she once wrote, “Work with people cannot be looked upon only from the viewpoint of separated professions. We must build far more integrated knowledge and methods” (Andrews, 2000, Minnesota section para. 15).

It is important to maintain differentiation between disciplines; however, this differentiation often creates barriers for effective collaboration. One way to address this need is to separate content from approach. Some disciplines, such as education, are highly structured around the content that is being delivered, which can develop expertise in one’s career. This expertise becomes a grounding source for interdisciplinary work. Teachers have knowledge and skills about academic learning that have influenced how youth workers promote educational success.

I contend that the expertise of youth workers—what grounds their work, amidst their complex web of content—is their youth-centered approach. This discipline has paved the way to promote an interdisciplinary practice, and is well positioned to create a shared understanding of values that can have a positive impact on the lives of young people and enhance the work of more content-driven disciplines. By bringing together these interdependent disciplines, and encouraging a collaborative and integrated response through shared values, we can ensure positive outcomes for youth—which in turn, means positive outcomes for education, for health care, for juvenile justice and for all other stakeholders.

VALUES

My first research assertion—that anyone has the potential to be a youth worker—led me to ponder the set of shared values that may already exist amongst different youth-serving professionals. I began my research by speaking with professionals who work with young people but whose primary identity may not lie in the traditional sense of youth work. I interviewed a police officer, two teachers, two social workers, someone in juvenile justice reform and another working in youth intervention (an area some contend is not youth work). In addition to connecting with these professionals, I also interviewed two youth workers and surveyed 16 more to find out what values they bring to their work with young people.

Values are an aspect of our personal and professional identities that often guide the decisions that we make throughout the day and the way in which we behave. They can help us find common ground and remove barriers of understanding. There were numerous values that came out in the interviews that I conducted with professionals from other fields: integrity, community, relationships, connections, equality, education, honesty, golden rule, forgiveness, and restoration. Youth workers reiterated many of these and added the following: youth voice, mutual respect, and “respect for youth as people, not blobs to form.” None of these values are mutually exclusive of one another; they each rely on the

other to become fully realized.

The everyday lives of young people are touched by adults from all different educational and professional backgrounds—there are police officers in their schools and on their streets, teachers and other staff in their classrooms, shopkeepers at the corner store, and depending on life’s circumstances countless other helpers such as social workers, therapists and probation officers. Each one of these adults, whether they intend to or not, has the potential to have a deep impact on the life of a young person and a practice grounded in shared values

YOUTH-CENTERED APPROACH: CORE VALUES WORTH SHARING

Two separate surveys were conducted of youth workers over the course of this fellowship. One, designed by another fellow, asked youth workers to complete the following sentences: “Youth work is _____” and “The skill/talent youth workers share is _____”. The second survey was designed and implemented as part of my research and asked youth workers about the values they bring to their work and in what ways, if any, they would like to influence the practice of other youth-serving professionals.

A number of themes began to emerge as I combed through the data from both surveys. Youth workers consistently used the following words to describe their work and the kind of influence they would like to have on the work of others: relationships, collaborative, empowering and human. I would assert that these are four core values of the discipline and are central to maintaining a youth-centered approach. These values mirror what Walker and Larson (2012) have identified as the four dimensions of a youth-centered response:

- 1) engaging directly with youth,
- 2) turning the dilemma into an opportunity for youth’s development,
- 3) incorporating youth into the solution or response to the situation, and
- 4) advocating on behalf of youth as well as teaching youth to advocate for themselves (p. 11)

Youth work is steeped in *relationships*. Many youth workers used the words connection, support, encouragement, and communication to describe their practice. The relationship between youth worker and youth is central to being effective guides, mentors, and advocates. As stated in *The Art of Youth Work* (Young, 2006):

The relationship is everything because personal growth, development, learning about values are human tasks that can only be done within a relationship. Actually, the relationship is not only a base for sharing values but also the environment within which young people construct their sense of self..." (p. 61).

For many youth workers, it is essential that the relationships that they form with young people are *collaborative*. The hierarchical structure that often pervades adult-youth interactions is contrary to the value many youth workers share—that young people are capable and competent as they are, not vacuous “blobs to be formed” as stated by one interviewee. Youth workers tend to see young people as equals, partners, teammates, who deserve the same respect that they (as adults) expect. In many cases, youth workers described the need to understand and appreciate the lived experience of young people so that they can “meet [youth] where they are at.” A ubiquitous statement, often followed by, “... and help them go where they want to go.” This complete idea forms a solid foundation for collaborative work with young people.

Part of this collaborative relationship is the value many youth workers shared for the principles around *empowerment*. Youth workers often spoke of sharing their power with young people to use their voice, become leaders, and make meaningful contributions to their community. Youth are often marginalized by adults and made to believe that their perspective is unimportant. In *The Art of Youth Work*, Kerry Young (2006) states, “...one consistent experience shared by [youth] is the imbalance of power between young people and adults, which means that despite wanting to be shown respect, young people often feel that

their views are not taken seriously” (p. 32). The youth workers surveyed spoke of challenging social norms and engaging young people in ways that help them “recognize their inner strength.”

The final value that emerged from the surveys was the notion of *human* development. A number of youth workers described the need to “honor [youth] as human,” “approach them first as people,” and to “value them as people with experiences and knowledge and opinions.” There is a shared sense that youth development is really human development and that growth and learning happens through experiences across a lifetime-- that youth are not a work in progress, but instead that their present (rather than future) lives are something to be valued (Young, 2006). This value was solidified in *Requirements For Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth* which states, “Basic to our view is the concept that adolescents are growing, developing persons in a particular age group—not pre-adults, pre-parents, or pre-workers, but human beings participating in the activities of the world around them” (Konopka, 1973, p. 6).

This youth-centered approach, commonly shared by youth workers, puts a youth worker alongside a young person as an ally, working in collaboration with them to navigate their everyday lives. I would distinguish this from a content-centered approach that other youth-serving professionals may use, like academics, behavior reform, or health care. These are all essential aspects of a young person’s well-being, but when the content is the focus, the young person becomes a label like student or delinquent or patient rather than a whole person with “...experiences and knowledge and opinions,” as one youth worker described.

YOUTH-CENTERED WORK IN ACTION

Despite the fact that a vast majority of professional training for teachers is related to content and its delivery (The Finance Project and Public Education Network, 2004), I have witnessed teachers that I would also identify as highly skilled youth workers. There are numerous examples of these professionals

among social services, law enforcement, and others who have also made deliberate and intentional steps toward a youth-centered approach. I had the opportunity to interview a number of these individuals over the course of this Walkabout.

I interviewed a teacher who had a pivotal experience as a child. She watched as her teacher placed limitations on the abilities of special needs students in her class, stating, “Oh they can’t do that.” After having the opportunity to work side-by-side with those students in their special education classroom, she was able to recognize that they could do that and decided in second grade that she would be a special education teacher so she could give kids the opportunities other adults may disregard. Like this teacher, many youth workers want to give young people opportunities that others think they cannot do and “...to practice with limited hurt if they fail, because while their inexperience does not make them inferior to adults, it does make them different” (Konopka, 1973, p. 10).

I talked with a police officer who went out of her way to learn how to be more effective in her work with young people, stating:

As police officers, we’re not trained in that kind of thing. Nobody tells you, “Well this is how you deal with a little person and this is how you deal with a big person.” It’s all good or bad people. I saw a need for a more diverse training in working with kids.

I spoke with a social worker who takes a holistic approach to her work with young people by valuing each youth she encounters, developing authentic relationships, creating a sense of belonging, and providing a setting for open and honest communication. She has taken the stance that, “I might not have the answers, but I do have the ear,” and in doing so creates space for the wholeness of the young person’s experience and how that experience can inform the decisions that are best for them.

The personal values of the youth-serving professionals I have highlighted led them to

embody characteristics of a youth-centered approach. Their experiences in life and in work created a need for an intentional practice that went beyond the standard trainings within their discipline. In many ways, they are the exception rather than the rule. Their personal values encouraged them to move beyond the narrow, content-focused expectations of their professional systems.

As professionals, we could learn much from examining the values that we bring to our own work. Instead of creating exclusive “clubs” of understanding, we could be building common ground, keeping our values and our desire to encourage the healthy growth and development of young people at the center of our intention. Creating a shared understanding and common language is essential to supporting the teacher who believes in her students’ abilities no matter the test score, and encouraging the police officer to move beyond the labels of good or bad.

Individuals can make a difference when their personal values are supported by professional practice. Enrique, a youth worker in St. Paul, has spent years working with the police in his community to build bridges—bridges that began with relationships, creating a shared understanding that has led to an interdisciplinary, youth-centered approach to dealing with gangs in the community. As he described:

The gang unit has always had a suppression plan and [the police chief] realized that suppression works to a certain extent, but you keep chasing these guys over and over and over again—not getting results—just a cat and mouse game. [The chief] realized that he needed to connect with people in youth development to come help them, because [the police] didn’t have youth development [experience].

Enrique began working with the police, encouraging them to move away from suppression-only tactics. Youth workers are helping the police develop intervention, prevention, and re-entry strategies. This shift in

approach is evident at Cinco de Mayo, an annual community celebration that has been interrupted by gang violence in the past. “Two years ago they did a gang injunction where, if you were a Sueño 13 [member], you would be arrested on the spot.” That year, the police and the community worked separately to address the concerns of violence.

As a youth development person, I was really mad because I thought, “Wow, if I’m a Latino kid and just happened to be rolling with 13’s, I’m not allowed to come to my own cultural celebration?” and as a parent, I thought, “Wow, no Sueño 13’s? Safe place.” How can we change that so I don’t feel so bad on either side?

The following year, Enrique worked with police to find an alternative that addressed the concerns without prohibiting participation of young people in this important cultural event. In preparation for the event, the gang unit picked up the young people who were on their list—who had a warrant, were at-risk, in a gang or had started trouble—and brought them to the community center to meet with Enrique and other members of the community. Enrique described how the gang unit said to the youth, “We have this on you, this on you and this on you; we could put you in jail today... [but] we’re going to give you the opportunity to listen to these people.” Community members offered the young people resources and alternatives and if they chose to participate in the Gang Reduction and Intervention Program (GRIP) they wouldn’t be arrested. “They were given a choice they didn’t have before.”

The success of this interdisciplinary response opened the door for a truly youth-centered approach at this year’s event. The police department implemented a community-policing model that drew on community members as additional eyes at the celebration. Previously, this Cinco de Mayo celebration had a lack of activities for young people so youth workers from the neighborhood went a step further and created a free Sports Zone that engaged the young people’s interests. These youth workers, who “aren’t scared to walk up to a group of kids and engage them and may be connected to

[the youth] already,” walked the event and redirected young people to the Sports Zone if they appeared to be “doing something naughty.”

By collaborating and utilizing the knowledge and skills of both police and youth workers, the community was able to shift the emphasis away from fear and exclusion and instead, embrace a model that was inclusive of the community while still maintaining safety for everybody. Enrique’s interdisciplinary training in youth development, gave him the knowledge and the skills he needed to work in partnership with police to advocate for youth in the community, and in the process encouraging the police department to develop more practices that foster a youth-centered approach.

FROM INDIVIDUAL VALUES TO CULTURAL NORMS

Values can shift from individually held beliefs to collectively shared cultural and societal norms. Those in the field of youth work have an opportunity to promote their core values to other youth-serving systems in order to develop a broadly held culture of youth-centered work, and in turn support the personal values that many of these professionals already try to maintain and weave into their work with youth.

New Zealand is one country that has sought to develop a common vision for their young people, as “A country where young people are vibrant and optimistic through being supported and encouraged to take up challenges.” Their Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa and the Agenda for Children seek to:

- Build a common understanding of what is needed to support [young people’s] healthy development
- Promote a broad, whole person approach to address [youth] issues and needs
- Raise [youth] status and profile in government business
- Encourage a multi-sector response by government (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002, p. 6).

The Ministry's guiding principles and values, written below, underpin these goals:

Beyond

Focusing on 'at risk', negative labels, problems
Blaming teachers, parents, TV
Reacting in an ad hoc manner to youth issues
Fixing single youth problems in isolation

Towards

Understanding young people as partners in their development
Encouraging adults to be supportive mentors
Planning being intentional, having a plan and setting high goals
Achieving an inclusive economy/society - where young people are innovative and energetic participants (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002, p. 2)

The United States has yet to embrace a common set of youth-serving values, which can lead to unintended consequences for youth. For example, I recently participated in an intensive two-day meeting that sought to uncover root causes of some significant concerns for youth in the foster care system. There were conversations about how to develop culturally appropriate responses and wraparound supports, and questions about what kinds of supports to offer and who would deliver the supports to youth in care. It wasn't until the *second day* of conversation that someone voiced a fundamental aspect of providing support to young people—to ask *them* what and who would be supportive in their lives.

This was a 'duh' moment for some, but there were others who acknowledged that this wasn't an aspect of their standard operating procedures, especially as it relates to case plans and treatment options for youth in foster care. Standard operating procedure meant that if you experienced trauma you went to therapy, regardless of whether this is culturally appropriate. If there was a wraparound meeting held to discuss supports, professionals and

"approved" family members were invited, but no thought was given to the caring teacher who consistently plays a supportive role in that young person's life.

A (NEW) STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

If there were a shared understanding of core youth work values and a youth-centered approach were adopted by all youth-serving disciplines, there could be a new set of "standard operating procedures." For example, it wouldn't take two days of intense brainstorming to come up with the realization that young people should be actively involved in decision-making about their lives. This value would be ingrained into the work as an essential element of youth-serving practice.

If this youth-centered approach became a cultural norm, much like it has in New Zealand, our communities would work with young people to develop strategies that would help them thrive, not just survive. In schools, youth would feel more connected because there would be a stronger emphasis on caring relationships—not at the expense of test scores, but in support of them—and current strategies that exclude participation in the learning community would be disavowed. Youth in care would be collaborators in their case plans—ensuring that the supports that are offered to them are truly supportive, rather than just a standardized response. Young people who have had encounters with law enforcement would have opportunities to learn from their mistakes. They would be offered the opportunity to make amends and be empowered to move forward as stronger citizens, rather than de-humanized through incarceration and impeded from positive opportunities for employment, education and housing because an adult-sanctioned record has slammed the doors of opportunity shut.

It's time to give something back to all of the fields that have informed this interdisciplinary practice called youth work. Youth workers have learned how to walk between these disciplines, using the songlines of many, to build bridges and develop an approach that keeps young people at the center of their work. The values

of relationship, collaboration, empowerment, and human development guide this approach—an approach that can be used, no matter the content.

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AUTHOR BIO

Lindsay Walz has been a youth worker for more than ten years, working in educational, therapeutic and social service settings. She earned her undergraduate degree in Family Social Science with a minor in Youth Studies, and is currently completing her Master of Education in Youth Development Leadership at the University of Minnesota. Lindsay's youth work practice is supported by her interest in social justice, restorative practices, holistic healing, expressive arts and education.

Accountability with a Youth Worker Voice

Emily Schloesser

INITIAL EXPLORATION

Although there is a great deal of crossover with the questions explored by the Minnesota Walkabout Fellowship, I have chosen to focus on number three: What would happen to youth work in Minnesota if we had a creative system of expectations and accountability for youth workers? I chose to focus on this question because there have been a number of conversations happening in recent years around the idea of licensing, certification, and credentialing. While those all look very nice on resumes, an ongoing theme from the conversations I have been having is the idea that you cannot prove that a youth worker with a particular license or certification is more qualified to work with youth than one without. Although there are a number of things that people would like to see improved in the field (pay, practice, recognition, ethics, etc.), there is no guarantee any improvements would be made in the field through licensing, credentialing or certification of individual youth workers.

I have been in the field of youth work since 1999. In that time I have worked with a variety of programs – schools, shelters, youth groups, youth employment programs, etc. I have also worked with a variety of young people – LGBTQ, homeless, low-income, immigrants and refugees, those involved with the juvenile justice system, and those with documented disabilities to name a few. I have my bachelor's degree in Social Work and am currently completing my Masters in Social Work. Like most youth workers I know, I did not grow up thinking this is what I would do. However, as soon as I began working in the field of youth work, I knew this was what I was meant to be doing. I know, from my experience, and the experience of my colleagues, that accountability and expectations are important to the field of youth work—particularly to

youth workers themselves. Most of us work in poorly run organizations and are looking for a way to hold them accountable to us in order to decrease staff turnover and increase competence.

CHANGING THE QUESTION

There are a number of levels of accountability within the field of youth work. These are typically explored by looking at the ways organizations hold youth workers accountable for the work they do or the ways funders hold organizations accountable for the outcomes they produce. Unfortunately, youth workers do not have as much leverage for holding organizations and funders accountable. By exploring initial questions I had in regards to the idea of having a creative system of expectations and accountability for youth workers and keeping concerns about professionalism and accountability in mind, I began to wonder instead: What expectations can youth workers have for a creative system of accountability and expectations of the organizations they work with or others that impact the youth worker field?

Some suggest that by professionalizing the field of youth work through licensure or certification, there would be a decrease in staff turnover and improvements in competence, pay, and ethical practice. However, as a couple of executive directors have pointed out to me, professionalization of youth work is unlikely to become mandatory unless organizations are able to see the benefit. They want to know why professionalization of youth workers matters and how professionalization would impact their ability to hire and pay youth workers. Walker and Walker (2012) point out, "...models [for professionalization] assume that licensed, credentialed, certified, tested and graded equals qualified" (p. 50). Since this is not

necessarily the case, I do not believe that licensing or certification is the way to go. This is important to the field of youth work because youth workers need to find a way to be able to hold accountable the organizations that make decisions about the work we do.

FRONTLINE CONVERSATIONS

I spoke with a number of youth workers in exploring my new question: What expectations can youth workers have for a creative system of accountability and expectations of the organizations they work with or others that impact the youth worker field? Some were quite new to the field; most had been around for a number of years. They work in schools, community-based organizations, shelters, drop-in centers, and with support groups. When I spoke with them about the Walkabout Fellowship and the question I was considering, I inquired about the expectations they have of the organizations they work for. It is important to point out that, for the youth workers I spoke with, many items on this list are “wish list” items. They are either expectations they have but are not being met or they are expectations they hope to have fulfilled in future jobs as youth workers. Answers varied but could, overall, be divided into a few broader themes:

1. **Expectations of support of fellow youth workers:** follow through; hold youth workers accountable; speak with one voice to clients, employees, and public; be organized; have direction; and give clear expectations.
2. **Expectations of supervisor support:** operate with integrity, honesty, and ethics; be transparent; trust your youth workers; offer appreciation, inspiration, and respect.
3. **Expectations of support for practice:** be provided with opportunities for professional development and collaboration; have realistic time commitments; offer crisis prevention over crisis intervention.

The youth workers I spoke with felt, as do I, that professionalization can be a positive thing.

However, most cited experience as the key to professional development. This aligns with Walker and Walker (2012) who ask us “...not to disregard *phronesis*, the practical wisdom and judgment essential for practitioner expertise, on the grounds that it is not easy to define, not readily amenable to measurement and not convenient to embrace in educational and training environments increasingly pushed to minimize time commitments and personal contact” (p. 50). A number of responses indicated that licensure and/or certification, when done well, could assist youth workers in gaining good basic skills. That being said, without the practical experience of working in the field itself, there’s no guarantee that those possessing licensure or certification would be able to do the job of youth worker competently.

Thus, we return to the idea of professionalization not being the answer to developing more skilled or qualified youth workers. Looking through the expectations, most of them seem pretty basic. However, many of the youth workers I spoke with work in poorly run organizations that lack both direction and leadership. There are fluctuating staff, high turnover rates, changes in funder expectations, and general confusion about what youth workers are supposed to be doing or accomplishing. So, how do we set organizations up to support youth workers by meeting youth worker expectations?

A DIFFERENT SET OF EXPECTATIONS

This type of accountability will be possible only if the voice of youth workers is at the forefront. Youth workers are at the heart of this profession and have, for too long, been excluded from conversations about the direction the field is heading. It would be difficult to gain consensus about every detail; however, I do believe that it is possible to pull together some basic expectations youth workers should be able to have of their employers.

If we look at the responses I received from the youth workers I spoke with, any number of combinations would begin to move things in

the right direction. My preference would be to put the following at the top of the list: transparency in all relationships, professional development opportunities, and having clear direction and supervision. These were the expectations that came up most consistently in my conversations with youth workers, and I believe that by incorporating these expectations early on, the other expectations would at least begin to fall into place. I also see a great deal of crossover in how addressing one expectation can lead to addressing another expectation. For example, being transparent can lend to the feeling that youth workers are trusted while having a clear direction can contribute to the creation of more realistic time commitments.

Ultimately, it will take time for the field to organize itself and come up with solutions beyond licensure and certification of youth workers or credentialing of organizations and programs. As I see it, there will need to be a

coordinated effort—not just on the part of youth workers finding a united voice—but a collaborative effort of youth workers, community, organizations, and funders working to improve the field of youth work together.

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AUTHOR BIO

Emily is a youth worker with thirteen years of experience with a variety of youth. She has worked almost entirely in non-profit settings and has a passion for facilitating successful transitions for youth into adulthood.

The Impact of Social Contracts on Youth Work in Rural Minnesota: A Walkabout Exploration of Expectations and Accountability

Cheryl Meld

I just want to tell you that your grandmother meant a lot to me. She really helped me as a 4-H leader. She taught me how to do things that I used all through my life. She made a difference in me and I appreciate that.

These are the words of a World War II Veteran who approached me nearly 35 years after my grandmother passed away, more than 60 years after she touched his life. My grandmother forfeited her teaching position in a one-room school when she married in 1928. Because she still wanted to serve young people she chartered the first 4-H club in Aitkin County in 1930 and led it for more than 40 years. During World War II and later, many of her former students and club members kept in touch by mail, sharing moments in their lives and using humor to describe how farm life, school days and 4-H had or hadn't prepared them for life in the army and adulthood, contributing over 100 letters compiled in a scrapbook. Why did this neighbor need to tell me how he valued my grandmother's work? I think he wanted me to know my youth work today is valued and he feels connected to the work in our community through his past personal experience.

WALKABOUT SONGLINES

One of the questions fueling the Walkabout Fellowship asked how a creative system of expectations and accountability might affect youth work in Minnesota. In the context of the Walkabout, Fellows speculated that the creation and implementation of such a system might have a positive impact on negative public perceptions of youth worker value such as "Anyone can do youth work, it doesn't take any special talents." and "Youth workers shouldn't be in the job for the money, they should work from the heart." and "Youth work is what you do until you find a real job." Would a system of expectations and accountability give more

credibility to the field of youth work? Would it encourage passionate workers to sharpen their skills, become certified, earn a degree? Would it influence decision-makers to hire full-time workers at competitive wages? Would a system of expectations and accountability have a positive effect on services to youth? Is there a need for an overarching system across the entire Minnesota youth work landscape or do some communities create informal systems that address expectations and accountability?

I believe that a unique approach to service in rural communities enables an informal framework for expectations and accountability among youth workers. Within this framework a youth worker helps youth and families create workable solutions to meet youth needs utilizing knowledge of a family's complex history over many generations in the same community. John Gardner examined the role of the social contract in building community and found several factors that contribute positively to this informal system of expectations and accountability: communities remain for the most part homogeneous; there is little change in a community from one decade to the next; families often have many decades of roots in a community and can boast of generations of history and continuity; community members value conformity; and communities are often unwelcoming to strangers and prefer to solve problems from within. (Gardner, 1990)

In a number of ways, this rural situation isolates communities and arrests modern and desired development. Despite these possible drawbacks, such a community climate creates a favorable environment for the cultivation of something called social contracts, undocumented but understood guidelines for the professional and interpersonal activities of the youth worker.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the expectations and accountability within undocumented social contracts that develop between youth workers, families and communities they serve in rural Minnesota. Because social contracts include the understood guidelines for performance, information sharing, communicating and relationship boundaries they can be a powerful psychological tool for motivating and directing the conduct of youth workers as they engage with youth, families and communities in transforming adolescents into healthy adults.

MY SONGLINE

My experience in direct service to youth and program administration over a 25-year span has provided the opportunity to observe youth worker-youth relationships in areas of juvenile justice, human service, 4-H youth development, education and non-profit sectors. Throughout changes in my career I have continued to serve youth directly by teaching skills, engaging in community service, and providing individual support. Early on, I volunteered as a 4-H club leader and elementary basketball coach while filling a part-time paid position as a youth program assistant. Then, as a program coordinator, I recruited volunteers, managed and mentored staff and networked with peers. I needed to secure grants to fund activities, programs, and staff. In the process of securing grants I learned to design programs; collaborate; write logic models; build coalitions; create measurable objectives, work plans and action plans; evaluate outcomes; mobilize communities; prevent substance abuse and prevent all manner of risk behaviors; intervene at critical developmental windows and, almost, how to change paradigms. I moved from coordinator to director in one organization and started as director in another at the same time because each youth worker position offered 10-20 hours of work per week when I needed 40. I learned to write grants that included full-time positions, and in assuming administrative positions, always included responsibilities for direct service in order to keep my skills and knowledge relevant.

My professional network has been built upon urban and rural ties throughout the Midwest while my practical youth work experience has primarily taken place in rural Minnesota. Through my experience and networking, I have observed rural youth work to be distinctly different from youth work in urban settings. Many comparisons can be made, but having an awareness of just a few allows one to begin understanding how the benefits of a system of expectations and accountability might be perceived differently among urban and rural youth workers. Certainly, in either setting, responsible youth workers agree that quality workers are necessary to provide the best services to youth and advance the field in general. The differences are not in the level of dedication or quality of services, but in the reality of practicing youth work in two different settings that are both truly representative of Minnesota.

First, the number of youth served in Minnesota's urban areas of St. Paul and Minneapolis is obviously much higher than in rural communities. These cities with population densities of 5,000 and 7,000 people per square mile (PPSM) require many more youth workers, youth programs and appropriate cultural responses. Their counterparts in rural settings serve youth in counties, few of which have total populations in excess of 100,000 people, where population density ranges from 9 to 60 PPSM and larger cities including Duluth and Rochester peak at 1,200 PPSM. Programs serve fewer total youth and one worker may be the sole youth worker in a county covering 2,000-3,000 square miles. A system of expectations and accountability meant to "qualify" a youth worker may reduce the number of eligible applicants desiring to serve in a rural area to zero.

Second, the Walkabout Fellow discussions centered on the status of what I will call "generalist" workers, not specialized workers required by the State of Minnesota to hold a license or certification to provide services to youth. Specialists include teachers, social workers, counselors, probation agents and others who perform their work in settings

where youth participation is not voluntary. Generalists, in contrast, would be those in afterschool, church- or community-based programs serving youth participating primarily by choice. The low number of total workers providing services to youth in rural areas creates an interdependence between specialized and generalist youth workers to help each other create workable solutions to youth problems. The input from both the generalist and specialist often carries the same weight, creating a gray area in the definition of roles. The youth and adults informing my Walkabout considered a wide range of generalists and specialists all to be youth workers.

Third, the corps of urban youth workers has to be diverse enough to respond to rapidly changing cultural dynamics in our large cities. The expectations for these youth workers include many skills that are not required in rural areas where many communities remain mostly homogeneous and change takes place very slowly over decades. An overarching system of expectations and accountability meant to qualify youth workers may include elements rural youth workers see as irrelevant to their work, taking too much time to fulfill, or too difficult to attain because of the cost and travel involved.

Finally, it has been my observation that the responsibilities of the urban youth worker are often limited to a specific focus in direct service, worker supervision or program administration. A worker with a specific role might see benefits to becoming more ‘qualified’ to fill his or her specific role and then aspire to meet a higher level of qualification in the future when changing roles. A rural youth worker may fill several roles simultaneously: direct service worker, volunteer coordinator, grant writer, and program administrator, because people are not available to fill separate part-time roles. A system of expectations and accountability addressing specific roles of youth work may be overwhelming if the youth worker is required to meet the expectations for several different roles simultaneously. Again, this may

discourage capable workers in a geographic area where the loss of one or two workers can mean the end of the program.

“Parents know you well enough to share personal information they would not share with other people. This puts you constantly in a position of weighing benefits and consequences, of boundaries.”

High School Principal

Consider how these conditions characteristic to rural youth work interact to enable an informal system of expectations and accountability among youth workers enmeshed in the lives of families they serve. Families engaging in a social contract with a youth worker must trust the youth worker to focus on serving the best interests of the youth, a trust based on observations of the youth worker’s behavior over time.

“The personal knowledge of family situations makes the decision-making process more difficult, but it leads to making better and more effective decisions about how to help a young person.”

Elementary School Principal

Establishing trust includes conversations with neighbors about the youth worker’s family, the youth worker’s impact on other youth he or she has worked with, whether a family has experienced negative consequences that can be attributed to the youth worker’s lack of discretion when networking with county agencies, whether the youth worker frequents the local bar and if so, what are the worker’s relationships with other patrons and so on. Establishing trust is the beginning of reciprocal relationships between youth worker and youth, youth worker and caregiver, and youth worker and community, including the exchange of personal information that wouldn’t necessarily be shared with others in more formalized systems. The family has expectations that the youth worker will behave in a way to maintain trust; the youth worker becomes accountable for managing a volume of personal information in order to focus on prevention or intervention

efforts. These efforts include customized interventions utilizing a worker's knowledge of the family and its members in contexts well beyond the youth program. Intervention plans may also incorporate relationships between community members who are connected within the system of inter-reliance sustaining the community, in the intricacy of a dance to facilitate change while managing community and family entanglements that occur naturally in rural communities.

RURAL MINNESOTA SONGLINES

The following two scenarios illustrate the interpersonal dynamics of the social contract in play in a rural community. They are the true stories of youth workers and youth, although names have been changed.

SCENARIO 1, SHIRIN

Lisa worked for a community-based non-profit providing afterschool programs for adolescents in a small town. As Lisa led an afterschool photography class, she got to know Shirin, a Native American girl enrolled in the class. Shirin was the 14-year-old daughter of Larry, a long-time acquaintance of Lisa's and a single parent with substance abuse issues periodically leading to treatment or jail time. Shirin confided in Lisa, sharing information about her personal life and her role in conflicts she was having with some other girls at school. Lisa began an informal mentoring role with Shirin, knowing the girl had no stable adult female in her immediate family. Although Lisa is not Native American she was accepted into the reservation community because of her longtime demonstration of caring.

During the school year Shirin demonstrated great resiliency by maintaining a "B" average and perfect attendance while navigating the dysfunctional family relationships bound by step-parents and siblings entering and leaving the household, as well as couch-hopping friends and relatives. Shirin shared news with Lisa that her dad was going to jail for 30 days.

The court required her dad to arrange for her supervision by a responsible family member

Shirin described a plan to be supervised by her grandfather, also living in the community, alienated from the family with no real plan to provide for her needs. Shirin planned to live at home by herself for the 30 days in January, and pointed out she had filled an adult-like role for several years while her dad was being irresponsible.

Lisa felt obligated to influence the plan towards a "safer" out-of-home placement. Shirin was adamant that social services not be any more involved in the situation, which would be back to normal in just 30 days (maybe less with work release). Shirin had been in foster care before and had several step-siblings in foster care at that time, including an infant brother.

Lisa knew all the players in this drama. She talked to the grandfather to find out exactly what his intentions were regarding the care of Shirin. He grudgingly agreed to help her if she really needed something, but made it clear he could not provide money and that he and Shirin didn't get along very well.

Lisa talked to a caseworker in the county social services department. The plan Shirin wanted to proceed with met the criteria for supervision, as long as Lisa could assure social services she would keep a very close eye on things as well. Lisa talked to Larry. He was worried about his little girl, but concerned about his own problems. He explained that it might not be 30 days if he could work off part of his sentence during his incarceration. He told Lisa he knew she would be there for Shirin, if needed. Lisa talked to the school principal to arrange a way to connect with Shirin during the school day.

During the next 30 days, January temperatures dropped below zero. The wood furnace in Shirin's home went out repeatedly and was too difficult to maintain when Shirin was at school. Without a constant source of heat for the entire house, the plumbing froze. Without running water, Shirin had to bring bottled water home each day for her two dogs. She used the showers at school each morning, through special arrangements made between Lisa and the school principal. Shirin put an electric

space heater in her bedroom so she would be warm enough to sleep when the rest of the house was 30 degrees. She had adequate food for herself but needed a ride to the store to buy dog food for her pets, two large dogs, both pregnant. Both dogs delivered during Shirin's second week living under these conditions. Shirin now had 15 puppies to care for and keep warm and insisted it was even more important that she stay at the house because there was no one else to care for the animals.

Shirin and Lisa met to touch base each day during lunch or between classes. Lisa learned Shirin's telephone had been shut off because the bill was several months delinquent. Afraid that Shirin had no means of communication for an emergency, Lisa considered offering Shirin a room in her own home. Still Shirin did not think that she needed any additional help other than a ride now and then. Shirin's dad got out of jail in 28 days. The next time he saw Lisa he thanked her tearfully and said he knew Shirin could not have gotten through the experience without Lisa's help. Shirin and her dad resumed their daily routines.

Lisa and Shirin remained very close. Shirin graduated from high school 4 years later. She went to a community college and transferred to a 4-year college to work on her degree in counseling. During that time, she maintained occasional contact with Lisa, inviting her to her community college graduation, and asking for Lisa's help in apartment hunting in a metro area. Larry continued his role in the community. Whenever he crossed paths with Lisa he expressed his appreciation for her support of his daughter, opening up and sharing he knew he often failed her.

EXPECTATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SCENARIO 1

Shirin and Lisa's story is an example of social contract interplay. An outside agency or system worker may have been bound to a formal protocol resulting in a foster placement. Shirin's life experience caused her to reject foster care completely. She may have become defiant, creating a larger problem. A worker without personal connections may not have

realized how important it was to Shirin to maintain independence, to be able to care for the pets that depended on her, even without running water and adequate home heating. The long history of Lisa's work in the community allowed her to cross boundaries and act as Shirin's mentor without offending Native American neighbors and relatives. Lisa's relationships with social service workers, school administrators and others allowed her to act as an advocate when she had no official authority to represent Shirin. Lisa's non-judgemental treatment of Larry allowed her to develop a longstanding supportive relationship with Shirin. Neighbors aware of the situation were on standby, watching the house while Shirin was on her own, ready to make a call for help if needed. Lisa was held accountable to Shirin's family, school personnel and community members, all of which had expectations for Lisa in her role with Shirin.

Because Shirin remains in touch with a local youth organization, I was able to contact her during my Walkabout. She is 22 years old, expecting to graduate from college in June of 2013. I asked her to reflect and comment on her experience during that time.

I knew it would be ok because I had my grandpa and neighbors to look after me. I knew I would be ok because it wasn't really much different than when my dad wasn't in jail. I mostly took care of myself when he was around, and he left me money for food. I wanted to be home alone instead of in a foster home or with my grandpa because I had been in foster homes before and I didn't want to go back to that. I knew I'd be able to take care of myself while my dad was gone so that's what I did. I knew that there were adults who knew about my situation, and I feel that if they thought I wasn't capable of being alone, they would have stepped in and put me in a more positive situation. I knew at the time that most kids my age wouldn't have been able to handle the situation I was in, however, given the things I was faced with in my past, I knew I could.

Shirin

SCENARIO 2, DEREK

Derek was 13 and in seventh grade when he joined the football team and met Rian. Rian coached the junior high football team and was a teacher at the high school. By the time the season ended, Rian had a good relationship with Derek. He had worked hard with Derek to make sure he passed classes, attended school and behaved well enough to remain eligible to stay on the team. Derek was a natural athlete with a charismatic personality, but many factors in his personal life created challenges to success. He had an older brother who was beginning to establish a criminal record, four younger siblings experimenting with risky behaviors, and a loving but immature mother. His mother had alcohol and drug issues and a constant stream of friends, many of them boyfriends, passing through their house at all hours of the day and night. Derek often needed rides home from games, rides to school, and money for meals when traveling for games. Rian ran a dropout prevention program coordinated through a local non-profit. He recruited Derek into the program, encouraging him to participate in homework help and recreational activities. He provided transportation for Derek on Saturday mornings for a recreational basketball league.

As Derek became more successful in school and more aware of the lifestyle he wanted to escape, his family and neighbors accused him of “selling out” to the school system. Many of Derek’s friends, cousins and uncles didn’t like the fact that Rian was influencing Derek in a way that made them look bad in Derek’s eyes. Derek had an uncle named Mike who respected Rian and what he had done for Derek. Although Mike was a drug user and criminal himself, he wanted something better for his nephew. Mike made sure none of Derek’s neighbors or family members intimidated Rian. But even with Rian’s support, the negative home environment and peer pressure started to erode Derek’s efforts to do well at school. By the time he was in 11th grade it appeared he wouldn’t finish the school year, much less graduate. Rian met with school administrators and Derek’s mother and arranged for Derek to start spending a great

deal of time with Rian during the school day. He arranged to go to Derek’s house to pick him up for school if he missed the bus. Derek began to turn around again. He spent many hours during his lunch periods talking and playing cribbage with Rian. They worked after school on homework assignments. When Derek had problems with behavior he came to Rian directly with the news rather than avoiding Rian or making excuses. Rian acted as an advocate with the school counselor and arranged Derek’s enrollment in alternative school courses to make up failed classes. He met with Derek’s mother as frequently as possible to keep in touch with what was going on in the family’s life, learning about her abusive boyfriend, the death of Derek’s biological father to alcohol-related disease, the pregnancies of two of Derek’s younger sisters.

Two months before his high school graduation, Derek was arrested along with two friends as they drove away from a cabin they had burglarized. All three were high on Methamphetamine. Each spent 30 days in lock-up before returning to the community.

“They entrust you with their kids because you know them....not just because they know you. Parents appreciate that you know.”

Grace, School Lunch Lady and Youth Worker

Derek was the only one of the three to return to school and complete his senior year. He participated in graduation but did not receive his diploma until he completed his alternative school coursework. Rian had been elected by the senior class to give the keynote address at graduation. It was a difficult task, speaking about the possible futures of members of the class, when nearly everyone in the audience was aware of his relationship with Derek and the recent turn of events. Derek and Rian still had a solid relationship. Derek kidded Rian that they both had actually succeeded in Rian’s program. After all, he hadn’t dropped out! Derek remains the only one among six children in the family to have earned a high school diploma.

“I wish I didn’t know so much about these families. When you see some kid and you know they have no advocate at home...you have to step in.”

“You sometimes have to deal with the youth as adults because they are the most functional person in the family; they are more capable than the parents.”

Rian, Teacher and Youth Worker

EXPECTATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN SCENARIO 2

Rian used every available resource to support and influence Derek. He engaged Derek’s mother in serious and productive discussions about Derek’s school performance, even though she was unable to follow through on many of the plans they created together. Rian formed an alliance with Uncle Mike in order to have access to Derek during out-of-school time. In return, Mike expected Rian to look out for Derek and advocate for him within the school system and with law enforcement officers, if necessary. Mike and Derek’s mother expected Rian to help with transportation and financial resources that were necessary for Derek to participate in sports. Mostly, they expected Rian to be there and not give up on Derek.

Rian gave up his lunch and prep time at school to spend hours of one-on-one time with Derek. Rian worked as an advocate for Derek with the alternative school, the high school and eventually the juvenile justice system. School teachers and administrators expected Rian to avert possible problems that would discourage Derek from completing school. They expected Rian to work with the family to engage all of Derek’s siblings as better students. They expected Rian to be the conduit for communication about problems any of Derek’s siblings were having because Rian had gained the trust of the family and was able to communicate freely.

Law enforcement officers were aware of and respected the work Rian had been doing. They often gave Rian a heads-up when they saw potential for Derek to be involved in criminal activities in earlier years. In return, officers expected Rian to share information he might

have gained that could lead to solving or averting crimes among Derek’s family members. Rian had a role in the safety of the community in general. Members of the community expected Rian to help ensure that Derek was working on solutions that might lessen problem behaviors among his group of friends.

“One kid gets more attention than others, because you know to what degree it will help, how critical it might be to have an extra adult stepping in...preventing a young person from entering the court system when he’s 10 or 11 years old.”

Aitkin County Deputy

Derek’s family held Rian accountable to a persistent and long-term commitment to Derek’s success. Rian was not held accountable for Derek’s failures but for the success he had in delaying or reducing problem behaviors. The community acknowledged the level of success Rian had achieved in that regard by continuing to be supportive of his efforts even though Derek made many poor choices along his path. Rian felt accountable to the community for Derek’s choices.

“You make investments in the kids of families you have known for several generations. Their success is a success for the whole community.”

Terry, Youth Minister

There is little doubt that Rian’s work with Derek delayed and reduced his drug use and delinquent behavior. Through Rian, I was able to contact Derek during my Walkabout exploration. I asked him to reflect on his school experience. He said he would probably have been committing crimes as a younger kid without Rian’s support. I asked him to describe what he would consider some benefits to participating in programs in rural communities.

I feel it is a good way to work with kids. It gives a special touch. Knowing that you are working with someone who knows what is going on in your life. Someone you can count on and know that you can trust them. I know working with people that do not

know you personally can be very hard sometimes. A child with benefits like I had when I worked with you guys will help them later in life, because they know they have people that care and are willing to show them they do mean something to the world. Working with people in large cities is more hard due to the fact there is not the one-on-one contact. It's harder because a kid doesn't get to trust their leader or know them personally. I feel that when I worked with you guys you were my second family. If I had a problem I could go to you right away and I knew nothing would be said. I grew to trust everyone and I loved the activities you gave us kids. I guess a better way to put it is I felt important to someone, that someone cared enough about me to help me out.

Derek

STAKEHOLDER SONGLINES

The voices of rural youth work stakeholders were important to informing my Walkabout. As the beneficiaries of youth work, youth and caregiver experience could provide a valuable perspective on expectations and accountability to the youth worker discussion about how a creative system of expectations and accountability might impact the field of youth work. I sought to gather sufficient data to support the claim that rural workers are able to do their best work when they possess not just measurable skills but are able to gain stakeholder trust through their long-term presence and commitment to young people in specific communities.

I met with more than 120 youth, caregivers and service providers. Through interviews and focus groups I explored whether my observations regarding social contracts are supported by rural Minnesota youth work stakeholders. I focused on the area of Minnesota northward of an imaginary line, extending east and west of Brainerd. Rural youth and adults included represented more than 25 communities and ten counties. The group of youth engaged was comprised exclusively of high school seniors, approaching transition out of youth programs, able to

reflect on and articulate opinions about expectations and accountability related to youth workers. Caregivers included adults who have filled parenting roles ranging in duration from 6 to 43 years. Service providers included both specialists and generalists with a range of experience from six months to 40 years.

Beginning with a discussion about which service providers are identified as youth workers, I presented a list of 19 roles filled by people who serve youth:

- 4-H Club Leader
- Boys/Girls Club Worker
- Chemical Health Counselor
- Community Sport Coach
- Cultural Leader
- Diversion Agent
- Group Mentor
- Individual Mentor
- Kids Plus Worker
- Mental Health Counselor
- Probation Agent
- Religious Leader
- School Coach (non-sport)
- School Coach (sport)
- School Counselor
- School Para
- School Teacher
- Social Worker
- YMCA Worker

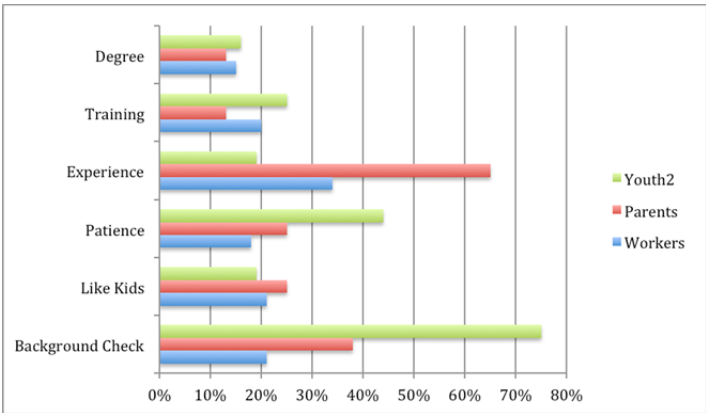
Each stakeholder indicated which of these people were youth workers. Generalists were unanimously selected as youth workers. However, all people on the list were identified as youth workers by at least 40% of the entire stakeholder group. Follow-up discussions revealed a general consensus that people who work with youth are youth workers. Teachers consider themselves youth workers, as do social workers, as do mentors and 4-H club leaders. Specialists were often described as youth workers “plus something more.” If “youth worker” is not an identity with a clear

definition, the question about a system of expectations and accountability for youth workers may not have a clear answer. The lack of a defined group of youth workers does support my observation that when service providers play collaborative roles in supporting youth, boundaries and authority overlap, contributing to a sense that youth workers are all the people who serve youth, not a specific subset.

I presented the list of service providers again, asking stakeholders to identify which workers need a post-secondary degree to be qualified to fill the role. Though fewer stakeholders identified generalists as requiring a degree, there wasn't a consensus about which roles actually required workers to possess a post-secondary degree. Youth stakeholders identified most workers on the list as needing a degree. Follow-up discussions revealed that most stakeholders believed each of the roles included some process of becoming qualified to fill the role, either through training to become certified or by graduating from a two or four year degree program. It appears that stakeholders are not clear on what qualifies many service providers to do the work, but if a person is working in a role serving youth, some authoritative entity has approved that worker as "qualified." There was agreement among stakeholders that qualified did not mean a person was competent as a youth worker.

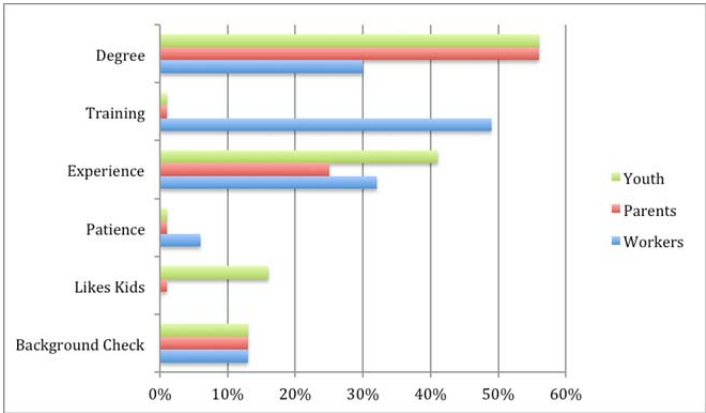
While interviewing Gene Roehlkepartain, Interim CEO of Search Institute, we talked about the word "qualified" and its relevance in terms of credentials versus competencies. He encouraged me to try to disentangle these terms when exploring expectations and accountability. With his suggestion in mind, I asked youth service providers what qualifies them to do their work. Overwhelmingly, the response was that a college degree followed by experience qualified them to fill their current role. To gain a broader perspective I asked all the stakeholders, "What qualifies an entry level youth worker to work with youth?" The most frequent responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. What qualifies an entry level youth worker to perform youth work?



At the entry level, youth workers with experience, patience and a clear background check were considered by stakeholders to be qualified. Parents clearly valued experience among workers. We explored qualifications further. I asked stakeholders if a youth worker filling a lead role needed the same or different qualifications. Interestingly, though the same qualifying factors were identified, stakeholders valued them differently. Their responses are shown on Table 2.

Table 2. What qualifies a youth worker to perform a lead role in youth work?



Clearly, stakeholders expect youth workers in lead roles to have a higher level of qualifications than at entry level. While stakeholders agreed that these factors officially qualify youth workers and give them authority

to work, they also agreed that “qualified” did not mean a youth worker was competent to work or to be successful in performing rural youth work. A youth worker with a college degree and record of training and experience might, in fact, appear highly qualified but might not be competent in performing the work. Competency was established by a worker’s track record and the relationships they were able to use to provide services to best meet youth needs. Stakeholders expanded on this idea by describing situations in which a qualified person had been engaged to perform youth work in a rural community but had been unequipped to navigate the community network and had failed to be able to perform successful youth work.

What then, equips the rural youth worker? How do youth workers establish themselves in communities as trusted and competent workers? What do stakeholders look for when selecting a program in which to participate or enroll a child? What do youth identify in youth workers as essential characteristics in providing trusted roles? What do parents look for when selecting a program into which they entrust their child’s wellbeing?

I talked to a group of 16 generalist youth workers, each with a history of work in a specific rural community. I asked them to describe what they believed had established them in their roles as trusted and productive workers. All sixteen expressed they had a prior connection to the community before they became identified as a youth worker. Some had grown up in the community, some had been seasonal residents, and some had attended or worked at camps in their teen years. All had similar paths to becoming youth workers. Here are some of their songlines:

“I was a 4-H participant, a Boys and Girls Club volunteer in college and then a volunteer in my children’s community activities; as I raised my children I learned what we needed in our community.”

“I participated in a church youth group with a fantastic youth director and became a

Bible school teacher and then a youth director of the children’s choir and a camp counselor; I became a 4-H volunteer and then a Minnesota Naturalist volunteer before answering an ad for a part-time youth program job.”

“I was a Boys and Girls Club and 4-H participant, then a summer camp counselor and a nanny; I volunteered as coach for a community hockey team during college and then as a 4-H leader and parent volunteer at school before becoming a Kids Plus coordinator.”

What I identified as a commonality among these youth workers was that all of them had established themselves as credible and dedicated workers over time in specific communities. Each had become involved in a network of youth-serving organizations and activities that led to further opportunities and increased their capacity to serve youth in trusted roles. Each expressed how accountability affects many daily decisions and behaviors. The title “Youth Worker” carries many connotations in a rural community. Youth workers are expected to be youth workers 24 hours a day. A trip to the grocery store may include a conference with another shopper about the progress his or her child is making in the homework help program. Ordering a drink with dinner at a restaurant may cause a waitress to comment “I didn’t know you drink, aren’t you a teacher?” Despite the need to be aware of the youth worker reputation every moment, workers also expressed that once they had begun working in a rural community, they couldn’t imagine not doing the work. Workers in these roles continued to work for many years. Worker songlines support my observations of how a youth worker establishes a trusted role in a community, thus enabling the development of a social contract with youth and families.

Next, I asked parents what they look for when selecting a program. None of the sixteen parents I talked with spoke about college degrees or training or documentation of qualifications or credentials. Instead, they talked about who was providing the programs.

Their responses had a common theme:

- Security- **knowing who** will be taking care of my child
- **I know the people- what they do** in the community
- **Who** will be the coach or mentor
- What activities are offered -**who** they are led by
- Is there a sufficient number of adults present - **who** are the leaders
- Hands on activities -the fun factor

The parents' responses support my observation that workers known to the community are more likely to be successful in gaining the trust needed to engage families in programs and thus establish the foundation for a social contract to develop.

Finally, I talked to 32 youth ages 17-18. I asked them to describe the characteristics of the best and worst youth workers to which they have ever been exposed. The average number of programs in which youth had participated was nine, including school- and community-based sport or enrichment programs as specialized interventions including counseling or social worker case management.

When sharing their "best" youth worker experiences, youth did not talk about college degrees or training or expertise in a specific skill area. They talked about relationships and the characteristics of workers who had been successful in engaging them and becoming meaningful in their lives.

"He was a hard worker and very independent when it came to his job, he did whatever he could to help kids, in nice way. He came to my graduation even though he was done being my case worker for two years."

"She enjoyed helping out kids, was respectful, courteous, and willing to go out of the way to help. She focused on the person she was helping, was friendly, laid back, fun, enjoyable to be around,

trustworthy and reliable, always there, listening to what I had to say before giving feedback."

"She was organized, had a good reputation and loved what she did. She helped with problems I was going through and had good ideas about how to make things better."

"He never gave up on me. He was a great role model. I could trust him to know what he was doing because I knew him and his experience"

"They get involved in your life, provide assistance, care about you, are friendly and teach you things. They push you to succeed and are proud of you."

The best youth workers were workers that the youth knew over extended periods of time and often in a variety of contexts beyond the activity or program that constituted the youth worker relationship. One boy talked about a youth worker who had come to their home on a Saturday to help his dad make repairs to their family car when he learned about their lack of transportation. Another shared a story about his grandfather and the youth worker's father having gone hunting each fall. These conversations with youth supported my observations regarding the history of relationship building that enables social contracts to develop and work for the benefit of youth.

The young people also described the most inadequate youth workers they had ever been exposed to. This discussion did not include a worker's lack of education or training, or other qualifications. As with characteristics of best workers, the discussion centered on relationships between youth and youth workers.

"They take away your dreams and instill theirs. They try to change you as a person and pull happiness away, abuse you and belittle you. You get to know they put themselves first and then their pets and then maybe you."

"They don't care what is going on as long as you leave them alone."

"They had multiple DWI's, didn't care about safety and hated what they were teaching. They were no fun."

"Inadequate teachers to me are the teachers that don't push their students to do their best, the ones that basically say, 'Sit down, shut up and do your work.' I don't like AT ALL, teachers that bring family problems to work with them, snappy and short tempered. I have my own problems to deal with!"

Most of the descriptions of inadequate workers described a "they" rather than "he" or "she" in comparison to those of best workers, perhaps the indication of a lack of personal connection developing between the youth and worker.

The worst workers did not perform youth-serving roles over long periods of time. Youth told many stories about how short-lived some youth worker roles had been for the most inadequate workers as well as how parents had played roles in terminating such workers.

WALKING OUT

The Walkabout experience allowed me to connect with youth workers in ways not usually afforded by time. It was common to close youth worker discussions with their reflections related to the value of actually sitting down and having these conversations about our work. It is clear we don't do enough of it. Many of the youth workers expressed appreciation for being included in a conversation from which they often feel excluded. Most youth workers informing my Walkabout had not previously considered what I presented as "social contracts" in performing their work, though they easily provided examples from daily work to illustrate the complicated web of professional and community interactions serving youth. Workers were in agreement that while time-consuming and complex, integrating a community into a wraparound approach when serving youth resulted in good long-term planning and a high level of success in

resolving problems. Among those who had worked in both urban and rural settings, there was agreement that entering youth work roles in rural communities had at first been challenging; the rules were different.

"Everyone knows everyone and they are aware of all aspects of your life. For a long time you are an outsider, community members don't accept help from outsiders. They watch to see if you really care to invest or if you are stopping here on your way to somewhere else. Once you are accepted into the community, people will do whatever they can to help. Once you are involved in the lives of the youth, you can pull the expertise of professionals and community members into play."

Fran, Summer Program Volunteer

Caregivers provided many examples of youth workers who had "gone the extra mile" for a child. They expressed appreciation for workers who had included caregivers as experts on youth behavior. They described many situations in which what I presented as "a social contract" had effectively served their children's needs. They also described how trust was important to the sharing of information with youth workers, and that to establish trust, a caregiver has to see the worker in action in many community settings.

Youth provided valuable insights as I navigated my Walkabout. They were able to understand the concept of a social contract. Youth described many examples of youth workers who "wore many hats" in a community and how this helped the youth discover a true identity of the person. One boy offered this example of the little league coach who was a science teacher and a member of the trapshooting league and was always suggesting books a youth might be interested in reading. This person might be the person who stopped by your house to talk to your dad about seeing you hanging out with friends at the local bar. Even though they basically "told on you" to your dad, they might be the first person you confide in when you need help. You know you can trust them to listen and understand, and

give you some advice before you really get into trouble. This exemplifies how members of rural communities live out the social contract.

Based on my Walkabout discoveries, the use of social contracts in rural youth work has a place in the development of expectations for youth workers and the roles they fill in serving youth. The expectation to be a consistent role model across all areas of one's life can place a burden on youth workers who desire to separate work and non-work roles, as can the expectation by community members that the youth worker must be willing to engage in practicing youth work 24 hours a day. Social contracts also appear to be a tool for holding youth workers accountable for the role they play in transforming youth into productive adults. The accountability, however, was revealed to be related more to the efforts made by the youth workers than to the eventual outcome resulting from months or years of those efforts. The relationships developed among parties in a

social contract can endure for years and continue to reinforce the benefits of the initial work performed by the youth worker.

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AUTHOR BIO

Cheryl Meld is a youth worker with 25 years of experience in rural Minnesota. She is a persistent advocate for rural youth and youth workers across a broad range of programming including education, juvenile justice and community based non-profits.

Supporting Youth Workers through Reflection Circles: An Alternate Approach to Program Accountability

Shaina Abraham

One of the many unique challenges for the field of youth work is the question of accountability. How do we keep the spirit or essence of youth work, our ability to adapt and change to community needs while developing relationships with young people, and create a system of accountability that doesn't diminish that ability? Traditional accountability systems in similar fields (social work and education) have been bogged down in the attempt to be accountable, making it difficult for many practitioners to do the quality work that drew them to the field.

There are many complications with creating a typical accountability system for youth work. Three areas stand out as important aspects to consider. First the diversity of the field, including the many types of youth work happening and the many paths people take to find the field, make the field stronger. Second, standards, even with their best intentions, can lead to complacency and lack of understanding of the reason for the standard. Finally, youth workers report having a higher sense of responsibility for the work they do than is required of them. We don't want to lose this internal responsibility to the community because we created a substandard accountability system that hinders the good work being done.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Throughout this paper I define traditional accountability systems as a system created to define and monitor quality programming, including creation of standards, review of programs to monitor standard expectations, and credentialing for staff involved in programming. This process is almost always organized and implemented by an outside organization and commissioned by funders and

government entities. In addition to being created for and by funders and government entities, youth workers or the people doing the work are not often represented in the process.

In researching this question, I interviewed six youth program managers or directors about the roles internal motivation and personal responsibility play in youth work. What has drawn them to the field and what motivation do they see in the staff they supervise. Throughout this process, I reflected on my own experience as a youth worker and program manager. I also used the experiences of my co-workers to help me develop my thoughts and ideas on the topic of accountability and youth work. I have worked for large national organizations and very small non-profits, and participated in the American Camping Association's accreditation process along the way. Most recently, I have worked for a small non-profit that does not always have the resources to provide consistent good training for all staff. While we try to provide adequate training and work to support our staff, this is an area that many small non-profits struggle with in our work with young people. I only mention this because I feel the experiences people have working in large and small organizations vary significantly with regard to staff development and as a result their careers in youth work are affected differently by the size of their organizations.

DIVERSITY OF THE FIELD

One of the aspects of youth work that helps it be responsive to the community is its diversity—both the diversity of programs and opportunities and the diversity in how staff find their way to youth work. The world of youth work isn't just after-school programs, tutoring or leadership development; it is also

summer camps, homeless street outreach, organized sports and so on. Carol Thomas from the Minnesota Department of Education describes it well as a "beautiful mess."¹ Creating a traditional accountability system that could incorporate all of the aspects of good youth work and work with all the unique delivery areas would be more complicated than helpful. In addition to the diversity of the type of youth work happening, we need to embrace how youth workers find their way to the field. Both the formal and informal paths followed by youth workers to their chosen line of work are unique for each youth worker. According to Dana Fusco (2012) "There are three types of institutions designing and implementing formal YoED (youth worker education): Youth organizations, intermediary agencies (profit and nonprofit), and institutions of higher education. [YoEd] also occurs informally through peer networks, direct (on-the-job) training, experience, reflection and inquiry" (p. 10). This doesn't include the former teachers, former youth participants, park and recreation staff and others who join the field. This diversity in the workforce is an asset to the field and the communities it serves. By creating a traditional accountability system for youth work, we may limit the unique paths to the field by requiring all staff to come from a similar background through credentialing. We lose the diversity of the field and limit access to those who may not be able to afford the credential, or realize youth work as a possible career path until they have finished their education in a different field.

PROBLEM WITH STANDARDS

Another issue with accountability systems and youth work is the creation of standards, competencies and certification. Standards create knowledge nuggets, bits of information without an understanding of why the information is important. Over time, the high quality nature of the standard is lost, becoming an endpoint for youth workers to meet. Complacency of practice happens without dialogue and reflection. Over time the standard or competency becomes the high water mark that needs to be met without

question of why or a desire to do better. Credentialing for youth workers may have a similar result. What happens five years after the credentialing process? Over time, without continued dialogue and review credentialing becomes a piece of paper in a drawer. Without follow-up training or support, credentialing is an endpoint and no longer part of the growth of the youth worker.

For the past few years I have stopped using competencies when training new staff and started requiring them to read original works written by Gisela Konopka, Tony Jeffs, Mark Smith and other researchers, writers, and experts from the youth work field. The staff are asked to read an article and then, as a group, we discuss how we can apply this knowledge to our everyday work with the youth in our programs. We have seen over the years a better understanding of why we organize our programs the way we do than when we just gave them a list of values. A basic understanding of values helps staff understand and appreciate their work. A traditional accountability system does not necessarily allow for continued growth, and can result in complacency.

"I studied English as a college student; I didn't even know what a youth worker was. Now I can't imagine not being one."
Youth Worker

In addition to credentialing causing complacency, accreditation processes don't teach the reason behind the standard, which creates more misunderstanding among staff, if they are not trained. A standard alone is only a directive of what to do, not an understanding of why. For example Standard 4 from the Council on Accreditation-After School Program Accreditation (2008), "Promoting Positive Behavior and Healthy Peer Relationships," states the standard this way:

- 4.01 Program Rules and Behavior Expectations:
- a. set clear and appropriate limits;
 - b. are developed with children and youth enrolled in the program;
 - c. are conveyed and enforced in a fair, consistent manner.

¹ Carol Thomas, Minnesota Department of Education, March 30, 2012

Not only are we given no understanding or explanation for the standards, there is also no mention in the standards as to why we want youth involved in creating the rules and how to accomplish this. Good youth workers know that inclusion creates a sense of belonging, shared understanding of purpose, and makes the young people apart of the process and they know how to include youth in the process. A program could become accredited by following this standard without understanding why it is important or how to implement it.

INTERNAL RESPONSIBILITY

Youth workers have high standards of their own for their work. Many youth workers state they have higher standards than those required by their employer or funder. All six of the program managers I interviewed gave examples of having higher standards for their programs than were required by their major funders. I remember working with a young staff person who questioned why we were asking the youth about their school work if we weren't going to follow up the conversation with the support they needed. He too, in his first year of work, wanted to do what was best for the youth, which was more than what was required by our funding source. If we set up an accountability system that doesn't take this into account, we could be losing highly dedicated staff who care about their work and young people. Five of the six program managers I interviewed reported having higher standards than expected of them by their supervisors. They also reported trying to instill a strong sense of responsibility in the new youth workers they hired. "We are responsible to the youth and our community and then to our funders." (Youth Program Manager, personal communication, April 16, 2012) Traditional accountability systems look at numbers and best practices, not personal responsibility or internal motivation. Losing the internal motivation of youth workers because we are focusing on the standards involved with an accountability system and not what the community needs would be a major loss to the field.

Youth workers want support to help them do

good youth work. A traditional accountability system would only create more busy work for the staff without creating the support they desire and want. We know the quality of a youth program depends on what staff do with youth (Walker, K. and Gran, 2010). If we ignore the training needs of the staff and create a system that doesn't educate the staff, we are alienating our most valuable resource in providing high quality programming for young people. Any accountability system we use in Minnesota should focus on youth worker support and education that will strengthen programs, not create competencies and standards that could lead to youth worker complacency and lack of interest in the work.

AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY APPROACH

As a response to the growing desire to create accountability, I suggest we focus our time, efforts and resources on developing a model of funder-sponsored reflection circles for youth workers with various levels of experience across the state. A model that will accommodate the many stages and responsibilities of youth workers and those who supervise or support youth workers could impact the field by creating a new type of accountability and responsibility to each other and the communities we serve. Rather than being motivated by a set of standards, we could create a field driven by excellence and community needs. We don't need to define accountability for youth work using old frameworks; we can and should create a new model that is beneficial for youth work.

A model using reflection circles could incorporate many of the best practices we have learned over the years in helping youth workers develop their skills and values. We know from research that formal education does not automatically create or result in high quality youth workers. Systems that support youth workers and encourage reflection help develop youth workers as they hone their skills and values. A reflection circle model would help us support youth workers who may not be able to afford higher education while offering everyone the opportunity to learn from each other's experiences.

We know from previous research that using reflection-based approaches to learning youth development concepts is very successful (Walker, J. and Walker, 2012). We also know that using a "typical" staff development approach to youth development trainings will only result in pieces of knowledge being transmitted and will not necessarily result in better youth workers.

What youth workers do with our young people requires professional judgment and practical wisdom that transcends routine application of established rules and procedures or mechanical skills. As a field, we need professional development that accounts for the complex reality and artistry of everyday youth work practice. (Walker, K. and Gran, 2010, p. 4).

I believe using reflection circles through a year-long experience that happens multiple times throughout a youth workers career could be an answer or response to Walker and Gran's request.

Many supervisors of youth workers I have spoken with wished they had had a better support system as a new youth worker and again as a supervisor of youth workers. Creating a basic model for reflection circles would need to include some key ingredients and objectives. (Table 1.)

Reflection circles would allow participants time to reflect about their own passions, values and goals related to their work and the opportunity to challenge themselves and see if their values are still aligned with the work they are doing. Participants would be able to learn about and from their colleagues' struggles while helping to develop their understanding of their goals and values for the work. "I supervise all the other youth workers in the building; my peers at work don't have the same struggles as me. I would love a place to learn from and reflect with my youth work peers." (Youth Program Manager, personal communication, March 8, 2012) Throughout the reflection process, youth workers could connect themselves better to their work and develop a stronger sense of

Table 1.

Ingredients	Objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funder support – financial and philosophical • Required participation at least once every 5 years • Similar experience levels or place in careers among youth workers in group • Facilitation by a youth work professional, not a participant in the group • Group meetings at least once a month • A safe space for reflection • Opportunities to challenge research • Time to discuss practice dilemmas • A place to ask for support • Revolving topics based on current trends and youth worker experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn new approaches to the work • Learn about commonalities of struggles • Develop professional colleagues.

self in how they approach youth work or how to better supervise more novice youth workers. Having an opportunity to reflect and look at research would also help youth workers reconnect with why they joined the field in the first place and help rekindle or stoke the fire that burned in them when they started working with young people.

People who are excited about their work do better work (Ayers, 2005). Youth workers who are motivated to do good work will feel responsible to the youth and the communities

they work in and in turn do high quality work. By allowing for time to reflect with their peers, youth workers themselves will create a new level of accountability in the field, one based on doing what is best, not what is expected. Reflection provides a space for new ideas and creative approaches to problems or dilemmas. By providing youth workers with regular access to reflection circles we are encouraging them to be creative and find solutions to issues or problems we may not even have known existed.

ROLE OF FUNDERS

By creating a system of reflection circles supported philosophically and financially by funders we could ensure that youth workers and organizations understand the importance of reflection and learning from our peers and current research in our field. Funders could require organizations to participate in the reflection circles on a regular basis, allowing staff from large and small organizations the opportunity to participate together. Funders could also provide high quality facilitators for the year-long process. By having a system of reflection supported by the funding community organizations would have to allow staff time and support to participate in the reflection circles. By putting the responsibility on funders we guarantee that youth workers and supervisors would be allowed the opportunity to find support outside of their organizations, but still with colleagues who can support each other and learn in a safe space. In return, the funders would get improved programs and opportunities for young people, and be able to be more confident that the money and resources they are investing will result in high quality learning opportunities for young people.

ANTICIPATED RESULTS

How do reflection circles eliminate the need for outside accountability systems? The quick answer is they don't. There will always be a need for program evaluation, quality assessment, and staff development opportunities. Reflection circles allow us a new way to look at keeping youth workers

engaged and feeding their high sense of responsibility to the work. Reflection circles provide support currently not available to youth workers, one that will help them stay motivated, connected to their peers and research, push their understanding of the field and realize the impact we can have on communities. Using an outcome-driven process such as credentialing, youth worker certification or program accreditation doesn't fit with the youth work field. Youth work is about the process; we should have a system designed to help youth workers through their process to strengthen their work.

As a result of youth workers' participation in reflection circles we could expect to see many positive results in the field. Motivated and engaged people keep their jobs. Because participants of reflection circles would be more engaged with their job and excited to do good youth work, they would be more likely to stay in the field longer. Almost all youth work supervisors have struggled with keeping good staff for long periods of time. Longer staff tenure results in more qualified staff working; less time spent orienting staff; and longer, stronger relationships with young people. Longer and stronger relationships with young people leads to better outcomes for the youth involved and as a result, a better youth work field.

Youth work as a field is lucky to have such a wide array of experiences and expertise. Building reflection circles into our regular development would allow us access to each other's experiences and expertise. Working in reflection circles, youth workers would be able to learn from the unique perspectives of their colleagues who work in diverse areas, and create solutions they might not have been able to come up with before because they didn't have access to youth workers doing different styles of work.

A more connected field could also result from reflection circles. By working closely with youth workers from other organizations during reflection circles, youth workers will develop more colleagues they can count on for support

and develop partnerships across organizations that will benefit youth, communities and organizations. Imagine if the folks leading youth sports down the block had a space and time to build relationships with the staff working at the homeless shelter. By combining time and meaningful learning to the reflection circles, youth workers would build natural connections and be better prepared to serve their communities and connect with others when they need assistance.

While building connections across organizations through reflection circles, we would also be building the strength of the youth work workforce. I have been lucky enough in my career to have supervisors who saw their role as more than just being a supervisor to me. They have all believed it is important to help me develop skills to either continue to help the organization and community I am working for, or to go to another organization and use my skills there. By creating reflection circles that connect youth workers to research, practice, other areas of the youth work field, and self-reflection, we are helping them be better prepared to do the work they value. Not all organizations have the capacity to truly support individual growth of youth workers. Having a funder-supported network of reflection circles will help develop strong individual youth workers and support the field overall.

One of the trickiest areas of being a supervisor of youth workers is creating a space where they feel safe and supported without feeling their jobs are on the line if they make a mistake. Reflection at work is important to program quality and staff success. By creating reflection circles away from the organization, we could support youth workers in asking the tough questions without fear of losing their jobs. Sometimes people make mistakes. Even if they have a great relationship with their supervisor, they may not feel comfortable processing a mistake with them. By creating reflection circles, youth workers will have a safe space to ask the tough questions and process the events they might be afraid to bring up with their supervisors.

Youth workers often enter the field excited and motivated to work, as their core values for the work develop along the way. A system of circle reflection would help youth workers delve deeper into their own values and those of the youth workers who came before them. An important aspect of youth work is the ability to care. According to Mayeroff, (1972), in order to truly care for others we must participate in self-reflection to understand who we are and what we bring to the caring relationship. Our values as caring adults are what guide us as we work with young people. Having a space to reflect and develop our knowledge throughout our careers will help us become a better field and create more caring environments for young people.

CONCLUSION

Reflection circles should not be the beginning or the end of a youth program accountability system. In partnership with funders, quality assessment, and program evaluation, reflection circles would become an integral part in strengthening the field of youth work. Creating a system for youth workers and their supervisors to support each other to move our work forward will create a stronger field. Staff will stay more connected and dedicated to their work, youth workers could continue to work in the areas of youth work in which they excel, and youth workers will be better youth workers. Supporting young people is what we do in youth work. Why should we take a different approach to supporting our youth workers? “We spend all this time setting up learning opportunities for the youth, but we never think about doing it for ourselves.” (Youth Worker, personal communication, January 27, 2012) Creating a system of accountability that doesn’t include time for staff to reflect and reenergize would continue to ignore one of our field’s greatest assets: youth workers.

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AUTHOR BIO

Shaina Abraham has spent the past 15 years working with youth in urban and camp settings. She has worked with YouthCARE since 2006 and was recently named their Associate Director. She has a Master's Degree from the University of Minnesota in Youth Development Leadership. Shaina is passionate about creating spaces where all people feel welcome and are encouraged to learn from each other's experiences.

Inclusivity, Engagement, Voice: A Youth-Centered Approach to Creating Professional Development Networks

Shaun Kelley Walsh

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, engagement and voice would guide the content and structure.

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.

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 (NIOS). 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.

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.



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

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 knelt 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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AUTHOR NOTE

Images of youth workers in this paper are taken from "What is It About Us?: Connecting Voice, Values and Practice," a training held in Saint Paul, Minnesota, February 2012 facilitated by Shaun Kelley Walsh and Caitlin Aldridge. Quotations under images were taken from interviewees.

Thank you to all of the interviewees for sharing your time, passion, expertise and truth.

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.

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.

It's Complicated: Crafting a System to Support Youth Work

Kari Denissen Cunnie

Today there is a new theoretical paradigm in the development and policy world. Known as the “Human Development” approach....it begins with a very simple question: What are people actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities are available to them? This question, though simple, is also complex, since the quality of a human life involves multiple elements whose relationship to one another needs close study. Indeed, one of the appealing features of the new approach is its complexity: it appears well equipped to respond to the complexities of human life and human striving. —Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach, Martha C. Nussbaum

Human development is defined as the process of enlarging people’s freedoms and opportunities and improving their well-being. Human development is about the real freedom ordinary people have to decide who to be, what to do, and how to live....Central to the human development approach is the concept of capabilities. Capabilities—what people can do and what they can become—are the equipment one has to pursue a life of value.¹ —Measure of America, A Project of the Social Science Research Council

THE CONTEXT

The state of Minnesota, where I live and work, has one of the largest academic achievement gaps between youth of color and white youth of all states in the nation². In Saint Paul, Frequently Asked Questions connected to a new strategic plan put forth by the school district notes that “only half of our students are proficient in reading and math. The 2010 [Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment] II

proficiency scores show that the widest gap exists for African American and Native American students as compared to White students. This gap holds true regardless of income.”³ The achievement gap is a real problem and it permeates our public discourse and the circles where I work.

The response and solutions to fix the achievement gap are many and come from every direction. The federal government encourages reform through competitive state grants like Race to the Top, while national service programs like VISTA, originally intended to address poverty, are pressured by federal and state agencies to narrow their focus on more in-school and academic goals like reading interventions. Local funders shift priorities to address clear academic outcomes like reading by third grade. Local communities are intent on replicating the Harlem Children’s Zone and Cincinnati Strive, two local initiatives that have gained national attention for their unrelenting focus on ensuring young people’s academic success.

Just as groups like the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, which advocates for a focus on non-academic skills like problem-solving and critical thinking, seem to be falling out of favor, Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman’s work complicates our understanding of what makes a young person successful. In his study on the effectiveness and impacts of the General Educational Development (GED), he found that mastering high school level content alone does not guarantee young people’s future success. Equally important— and maybe even a prerequisite for mastering content in a school or community setting— are a cluster of non-cognitive skills like curiosity and “stick-to-itiveness.” These findings make us all squirm in our chair. Whatever you call them, character

¹ <https://www.measureofamerica.org/human-development/> Retrieved October 14, 2012.

² Education week- 2012 report card, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/marketplace/products/qc2012-shr.html?intc=EW-QC12-LFTNAV> Retrieved September 15th, 2012

³ Strong Schools, Strong Communities Frequently Asked Questions, Saint Paul Public Schools p. 2, http://www.spps.org/uploads/strongschoolsfaq_jan11.pdf Retrieved September 7th, 2012.

traits, non-cognitive skills, or 21st century skills, they're complicated to define and difficult to measure⁴. Many argue it's easy to hold someone accountable to making sure a child can read, but holding them accountable to making sure a child is curious? That almost seems to border on the impossible.

This is the milieu of ideas, debate and conversation that dominate my work as director of Sprockets, Saint Paul's Out-of-School Time Network. Sprockets brings together large systems like the school district and city government with community organizations to improve the quality, availability and effectiveness of out-of-school time learning for all youth in Saint Paul. In this work, the focus is on learning outside the classroom and is most often done by youth workers who work alongside young people. Given Sprockets mission, my work has a lot to do with supporting youth workers to be effective at their practice. What becomes complicated for all involved is clarity in understanding what youth workers are ultimately responsible for in their work with youth. Is it academic success? Non-cognitive skills? Both? Or something else altogether?

It is from this context that I became part of a fellowship program that asked a group of Minnesota practitioners in the youth work field to explore issues about shared values and principles, theoretical and practical frameworks, and accountability systems for youth workers. As I talk to colleagues nationally and read literature in the youth work field, I am aware of the systems-level conversations and tangible work happening across the country to credential youth workers. Much of this work happens as a strategy to ensure the quality of out-of-school learning opportunities and to ensure youth workers are accountable to an agreed upon set of youth worker competencies. Often it is also argued that credentialing and/or licensing youth workers will improve the status, pay and work experience of youth workers. Given these national efforts and Sprockets' explicit charge to support both the quality and effectiveness of out-of-school learning, I was drawn to the issue

originally posed this way: *What would happen to youth work in Minnesota if we had a creative system of expectations and accountability for youth workers?* These days the language of high expectations and accountability are fully loaded and often feel blaming and divorced from creating authentic spaces for learning and development—of youth or the people who work with them.

For the purposes of this paper, I focused on youth workers' accountability to themselves and to the young people they work with. I wanted to ensure that this creative system was less about compliance and more about supporting youth workers to develop their capabilities to grow as practitioners so they can create more powerful, meaningful and quality experiences with and for young people. Also instead of imagining creative systems and then asking what impact each of those possible systems would have on youth work in Minnesota, I instead explored what youth workers in Minnesota want and what type of system they feel would best achieve those goals.

This paper will ultimately propose key elements for a creative system that supports youth workers to develop their skills and capabilities as youth workers, but first I will define what I believe the role and goal of youth work is in communities. It is because of the swirling, often contradictory, public discourse about young people and what they need that I find it important to take a stance on what youth work is and what youth workers should be accountable for. Second, I will explore the national conversation and efforts around credentialing as it relates to creating systems of support for youth work. Lastly, I will describe conversations with youth workers in Minnesota around this topic and share proposed elements of a creative system informed by their perspectives.

DEFINING YOUTH WORK

There is disagreement among people who work with youth outside of formal school settings about who youth workers are and are not. For

⁴ Heckman, James J. & Yona Rubinstein. *The Importance of Noncognitive Skills: Lessons from the GED Testing Program*. The American Economic Review, 91: 2 pp. 145-149.

example, in the Sprockets network, youth workers typically work with young people in recreation centers, schools, community centers and churches. They facilitate after-school and youth groups, sports teams and a range of other after-school and summer learning opportunities. They work with young people from a variety of backgrounds, from more stable home environments to youth experiencing significant stresses related to poverty or other community and family instabilities. Young people in Saint Paul are diverse, speaking more than 100 languages and dialects within the Saint Paul Public Schools, and the Sprockets network partners work within and among that diversity. Youth detention centers and residential treatment centers are outside the scope of the Sprockets network, yet many would include staff in these settings as youth workers.

To get outside the debate about where youth work happens or does not happen, I find it more useful to describe youth workers not by the setting in which they work but by the approach and core values that guide their practice. I like the definition that came out of a 2006 Wingspread Conference where youth workers are defined as “individuals who work with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social and/or educational development and enable them to gain voice, influence, and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence (p.4).”

Youth work is about supporting holistic human development—the subject matter content is often secondary. This definition is even more critical given the social and political context described earlier that is pushing youth workers to be less focused on the whole child and to have a more myopic focus on young people’s academic success. Supporting young people’s identity as student is one part of the youth work definition, but it is far from all of it. If we are going to talk about holding youth workers accountable, it is critical to put a stake in the ground and be unwavering in our clarity that youth work is about human development, inclusive of but not exclusive to supporting

young people’s academic achievement.

CREDENTIALING YOUTH WORKERS

With a clear definition of youth work, I turn to a more focused exploration of my question: What would a creative system of expectations and accountability for youth workers look like?

To begin, I wanted to know more about what credentialing advocates feel is promising and necessary about credentialing. An article reviewing professional credentials in out-of-school time by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at Wellesley Center for Women for Cornerstones for Kids defines a credential as, “a certification that recognizes an individual’s performance based on a set of defined skills and knowledge.”⁵ In 2008, the Academy for Educational Development’s (AED) Center for Youth Development brought sixteen leaders in the youth work field together to discuss the state of the field. A summary report based on the convening envisions “a day soon when all youth workers in the United States are fully trained and certified.”⁶ The reasons provided for moving toward this goal are not simply laid out and they range from ensuring youth work has the same professional integrity as teaching and social work to an argument that youth workers will “not succeed in teaching lifelong skills and competencies for the success of youth if they are poorly prepared and lack support.”⁷

Many advocates of credentialing for youth workers cite studies—largely in early childhood education and school-based teaching—that show practitioner education, professional development and training to be key factors in producing quality outcomes for youth⁸. What remains unclear is how these findings lead to the conclusion that credentialing and/or licensing is key to a system of support for youth workers; professional development and

⁵ Dennehy, J, Gannett, E, Robbins, R. (2006). *Setting the Stage for a Youth Development Associate Credential: A National Review of Professional Credentials for the Out-of-School Time Workforce*. National Institute on Out-of-School-Time Wellesley Centers for Women. P. 5.

⁶ AED. *Youth Work: Organizing Pathways for Leadership Development and Social Change*. (2008).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Dennehy, J, Gannett, E, Robbins, R. (2006). Curry, D., et al. (2012) Assessing Youth Worker Competence: National Child and Youth Worker Certification in D. Fusco (Ed.) *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Questions* (pp. 27-38). New York, NY: Routledge.

training and credentialing are not synonymous. The NIOST article states that, “despite the growth in professional development programs, there have been few formal scientific evaluations to measure their [credentials’] success. However, there has been a tremendous amount of research in both the out-of-school time (OST) and early care and education (ECE) fields demonstrating that more highly educated staff provide higher quality services to children and youth.”⁹ This article also supports the work of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition which argues for a comprehensive professional development system with five key components, stating clearly that credentialing is one component that is not effective alone.¹⁰

There are others who agree that quality youth work requires professional development but do not conclude that credentialing based on core competencies adequately addresses the complexities of a practice focused on supporting human development. In their article, *Establishing Expertise in an Emerging Field*, Joyce Walker and Kate Walker explain that youth workers face complex practice dilemmas that require judgment and that the, “tendency to reduce youth work practice to measurable terms [competencies] risks reducing youth work to a purely technical skill....By whittling down practice to the ability to undertake specific tasks, it becomes largely stripped of its social, moral and intellectual qualities.”¹¹ Youth work is about supporting human development—young people’s journey to decide who to be, what to do, and how to live. This is a complex process and developing the skills, artistry, and judgment necessary to be an effective youth worker is complex as well. While we like check lists, because they simplify the complexity, we must be careful not to lull ourselves into the belief that attending a training aligned with each competency and walking away with a credential on its own will lead to better youth work.

LISTENING TO YOUTH WORKERS: PERSPECTIVES ON CREDENTIALING OR LICENSING

Through two listening sessions, I spoke with 17 youth workers and youth program managers connected to the Sprockets out-of-school-time network in Saint Paul. All but two (or 88%) self-identified as youth workers; 88% also reported that they work directly with youth at least some of time. The two who did not work with youth at least some of the time act as youth program managers. Of the 15 who work with youth at least some of the time, about half do direct youth work only while the other half do direct youth work while also acting as a youth program managers. All 17 listening session participants had completed some form of higher education. One (6%) had an associate degree, 11 (67%) had a bachelor’s degree and 5 (29%) had an advanced degree¹². During listening sessions, participants were first asked to share their initial reactions and assumptions about youth worker licensure and/or credentialing (free association brainstorm). Their reactions to the concept were then further discussed and “unpacked.” Next they were asked to share what they believe a creative system of accountability and expectations for youth workers should look like. As youth workers talked about credentialing and/or licensing youth workers, three clear themes emerged. No matter what question was posed, the groups always wove their way back to the following points:

1. *Racial equity*: It was feared that credentialing or licensing (these terms were used interchangeably by youth workers in listening sessions) would lead to a “whitening” of the field and that youth workers of color and/or from low-income backgrounds would have significantly greater access barriers to the field than white and/or higher-income individuals. Most felt this would not benefit the young people in Saint Paul because they would find fewer and fewer youth workers who look like them.

⁹ Dennehy, J., Gannett, E., Robbins, R. (2006). p.10.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 8.

¹¹ Walker, J. & Walker, K. (2012). *Establishing Expertise in an Emerging Field* in D. Fusco (Ed.) *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Questions* (pp. 39-51). New York, NY: Routledge.

¹² I did not request information on the topic area of degrees and am not able to report how many had a youth work, education, or youth development related degree.

2. *Youth work is not a 100% learned craft:* Many believe that truly good youth workers bring something intrinsic to the table that can't be taught. Something more akin to an artist. Artists can get better through training, education, practice and mentorship but if you're not an artist, you're not an artist. The youth workers I talked with felt the same holds true in their line of work. You can get better but some folks, no matter how much training, just aren't youth workers. They did not believe that credentialing and/or licensure in any way will guarantee good youth work. They believe it is the responsibility of good youth program managers to recognize a talented youth worker when hiring.

3. *Licensure does not necessarily mean better pay:* Youth workers were clear that they want better pay and benefits. They argued that the youth work field is generally young because they have to move on to other positions in order to attain other life goals like having a family or buying a home. Youth workers noted that this also means that just when they feel experienced in their work, they no longer can sustain a direct youth work career. Most of the youth workers I talked to were very suspect of any assertion that licensing or credentialing will lead to better pay. When someone suggested that teachers are better paid because of licensure another responded it's more likely because of teacher unions. Another participant was not convinced that the private philanthropic or public funding sources for youth programs would have any interest in supporting higher salary lines in grant applications but would probably still expect a credential and higher outcomes anyway. Pretty much, they felt that efforts to create credentials may be about improving quality and raising accountability, but that paying more for it was not a part of most decision-makers conversation.

In 2005, the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition commissioned the Forum for Youth Investment to conduct a survey of 1,053 youth

workers, 195 organization directors and focus groups with 70 youth workers across eight cities. The goal was to better understand who youth workers are and the conditions of their work. The Forum produced a report that is considered one of the best views of youth workers we have, that included information from this study alongside a survey of youth workers conducted by the National Afterschool Association¹³. The youth workers surveyed were a diverse lot. While primarily under age 30, a good number were in their 40s and 50s. The surveyed youth workers were also majority people of color; they were fairly well educated: 60% had a 2-year degree or higher while two thirds had a relevant credential. While the sampling used in the study does not allow for the results to be generalized to youth workers more broadly, the Next Gen and Forum study still tells us some important things and gives some credibility to the perspectives of youth workers I spoke with in Saint Paul.

Some findings around youth workers salary and education were particularly relevant. While the median salary was between \$25,000 and \$25,999 (less as an hourly rate for part-time staff), those with two or more years of post-secondary education were more likely to be white with a social work or education credential (as opposed to a youth work or youth development credential), were paid more and were more likely to say that their background is different than the youth they work with (p. 29). The lower-paid, often part-time staff were more likely to be people of color who had a youth work credential such as completion of the Advancing Youth Development (AYD) program. These youth workers were more likely to say that their background was similar to the youth they work with.

It seems to me that some findings in the Next Gen and Forum study just might support Saint Paul youth workers' fears. It seemed that better-paid youth workers were better educated than less well paid youth workers. It was also true that these youth workers were more likely to be white and say they did not reflect the

¹³ Yohalem, N., Pittman, K., & Moore, D. (2006). *Growing the Next Generation of Youth Work Professionals: Workforce Opportunities and Challenges*. Next Generation Youth Work Coalition by The Forum for Youth Investment.

backgrounds of the youth they worked with. I agree with my peers in Saint Paul, unless implemented in a very creative and non-traditional way, credentialing systems would probably exacerbate this finding. I also found it interesting that the youth workers who actually had a youth work credential (as opposed to the related, but different, field of social work and education) were less well paid. I understand that could be due to the fact that there is no one standard, agreed-upon system of credentialing youth workers as there is for social work or education, but I also do not believe that if we did have a common approach, higher pay would naturally follow.

Another finding from The Forum and Next Gen study is worth noting. When asked what they think would most help advance the profession, both youth workers and program directors said raising wages and increasing program resources, in that order, over things like professional development and minimum credentials. This aligns very nicely with what youth workers in Saint Paul said. So why are we asking about creative accountability and expectation systems instead of asking what we can do to make youth work an actual, viable profession? The youth workers I spoke with did value conversations about professional development, but they valued it more as an opportunity to improve their practice than as a strategy to gain higher pay.

CRAFTING A SYSTEM TO SUPPORT YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

Whether someone is a proponent of credentialing or not, my research and conversations found that most agree that a creative system of supports for youth workers must have multiple elements. In this section I lay out the elements and characteristics of a system of youth work support that I've come to believe are important. In my conversations with youth workers in the Sprockets network, many elements of a creative system were identified. Themes from the listening sessions deeply influenced my final thinking and I do my best here to represent the ideas from those listening sessions. In addition, my final

conclusions are influenced by readings, discussions with colleagues in the Walkabout fellowship, as well as my own experience as both a frontline youth worker and director of an out-of-school-time intermediary network in the early stages of developing a system of supports for youth workers.

DYNAMIC SYSTEM

In the Sprockets network we talk a lot about continuous quality improvement. What we mean is that quality never reaches stasis. Achieving quality is much more like growing a garden; you never reach a point where your final product no longer requires weeding, fertilizing, or tending. In order to maintain your garden, constant tending that accounts for changes in the environment is necessary. This is the first critical element for any system; it can never become static. Instead, a creative system of support for youth workers must be constantly attended to in order to ensure it remains relevant and is achieving its stated purpose. This does not mean that trainings are offered every year and therefore it not static; it means that there must be constant attention to youth workers' engagement in their learning and development within the system.

The youth workers I spoke with also identified this element and added that it is youth workers who must be on the team of "tenders." They warned against external sources of authority managing a system to support youth workers who are too far away from the day-to-day realities of direct youth work practice or who have competing interests and motivations. Part of the tending must also be to ensure multiple points of entry remain and to guard against standardization so that youth work continues to be a field accessible to people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. The system should never require every youth worker to gain a degree, license or credential that is exclusionary due cost or initial acceptance or entry (into a higher education institution). The system should be outside of formal higher education systems but could include higher education options for those interested.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The types of learning opportunities and experiences that should be available within the system are the next element to consider. First, professional development opportunities must be grounded in practice. Therefore, youth workers should have formal opportunities to reflect on their experiences in doing youth work. This is key to much of what Walker and Walker propose about youth workers building judgment. Youth workers need opportunities to talk with other youth workers about challenges and successes in a way that pulls those experiences apart and makes them “learning cases.” Related to this idea (or one example of it) is youth workers’ need for opportunities for apprenticeship and mentorship from those with more practice experience. It is possible that youth workers receive mentorship by program managers or others within their organization but many youth workers in the two listening sessions suggested that a more structured and formal mentorship or apprenticeship system would be valuable.

Youth workers do believe that trainings such as classes, workshops, one-time sessions and conferences must also be part of the professional development components. These provide important venues to learn key youth work concepts and skills. They did not feel that these, in and of themselves, are adequate but that strong mentorship with opportunities for reflection are what make trainings meaningful and able to be tied to daily practice.

ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH


Lastly, there are things that can be done to strengthen the ecology of youth work. Investments made in workers in the “middle” of organizations could help because these are the supervisors, managers and organizational leaders who are responsible to support the frontline, direct-service youth workers. A few youth workers who participated in the listening sessions made the interesting assertion that, if an investment is going to be made in a credentialing or licensing structure, it is program managers and not frontline youth workers who should be required to have a credential.

It is critical to recognize that youth workers and the quality of their practice do not happen in isolation from the environment in which the work. The health and wellness of the organizations offering youth learning opportunities can greatly impact the ability for youth workers to practice effective youth work. Any system must also provide opportunities to address the capacity of organizations to ensure opportunities for reflective practice and that leaders in the organization also understand the key aims, skills, knowledge and experiences that lead to improved youth work.

While the focus on this paper was not explicitly to address the average pay and advancement opportunities for youth workers, I feel it would be too big an omission not to address compensation at all. Youth workers did feel that quality youth work is also tied to experience and that low pay and unclear opportunities for advancement make it difficult to remain in direct youth work once they become experienced. I agree with the youth workers I spoke with that these issues are related to systems that support quality youth work but that these issues cannot be solely addressed by creating professional development systems. They are influenced by political environments, funding streams and other factors that also need to be addressed in order to achieve adequate pay and advancement opportunities for youth workers. I do believe this is a topic that deserves more exploration and attention than could be given in this paper.

CONCLUSION

While simple answers are generally preferred, crafting systems to support youth work practice is a complicated task. It is complicated by the push and pull of public discourse about what the role and ultimate impact of out-of-school time should be. I’ve argued that it is critical for youth workers to claim their work as human development, inclusive of but not exclusive to academic success. Even with this clarity complexity remains. Human development is complex—both the work to support youth in growing their capabilities and the work of youth workers to develop their practice. Also,



understanding and agreeing upon the elements of quality youth work practice is complex. Are competencies enough or is there something more nuanced that lives in the grey areas of human experience that requires youth workers to build judgment that is situational and can only be nurtured through reflection and mentorship, not competency trainings and exams?

Lastly, crafting the system itself is complex. It requires constant tending, multiple entry points and multiple types of professional development opportunities. It also requires attention not just to youth workers but to the organizations and settings in which they work. Yet complexity should not lead to our paralysis. As Martha Nussbaum argues in the opening quotation, one of the appealing features of the human development approach is its complexity because it is the *only* approach able to respond to the complexities of deciding

who to be and what to do. While complex, the elements described above are possible and can be realized by engaging networks of youth workers and related stakeholders to make it happen.

AUTHOR BIO

Kari Denissen Cunnien is the Director of Sprockets, Saint Paul's Out-of-School Time Network. She has over 12 years' experience in out-of-school time where she has been both a frontline youth worker and youth program coordinator. She also has experience in community organizing and coordinating both neighborhood and city-wide collaboratives related to community and youth learning. Kari studied public policy at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

Building Capacity for Program Quality in Youth Work: Learnings from a Six-Year Quality Journey of the Minneapolis Beacons Network

Jenny Wright Collins

Through funding from the Federal 21st Century grants administered by the Minnesota Department of Education and the McKnight Foundation, the Minneapolis Beacons Network contracted with the Youth Work Institute over a 5-year period to partner to build capacity for Program Quality Assessment, Improvement, and Staff Development. The Minneapolis Beacons Network is a collaborative of four of the largest youth-serving agencies in the Twin Cities (the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities, the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities, Minneapolis Public Schools Community Education, and the Minneapolis YWCA), serving over 3,000 youth from low-income schools and neighborhoods each year. The Network partners employ approximately 18 full-time and 100 part-time youth development staff in nine Beacon Centers and work in partnership with another approximately 100 teachers and school staff and 100 community partner staff and volunteers each year.

INTRODUCTION

People who care about the well-being of young people in Minnesota ask the same questions about all Minnesota children that they would ask about their own children: *Are they healthy? Are they happy? Are they cared for? Are they learning? Are they prepared for their future?* These questions cause us to wonder about the quality of their experiences at home, at school, and in all the other places that shape their learning and development. Citizens and policy makers who want to see all Minnesota youth succeed grapple with questions of how to ensure quality and accountability in our schools and other settings where our children learn.

Questions of quality and accountability for youth workers and youth programs are complex but important to consider for those who care about youth in Minnesota. Youth workers and youth programs from Parks and Recreation to afterschool programs to Community Education impact the lives of young people across the state. However, the question of WHO and HOW to hold youth workers and youth programs accountable is complicated. Unlike some fields of practice, there is not one professional association or one primary source of funding that binds the field together. Youth work takes place across

multiple settings with limited, inconsistent and varied sources of funding and disparities in access for children.¹ The diversity of practice across the youth work field is a strength because it is so woven into different aspects of society in our state, but it makes it difficult to regulate and monitor.

QUALITY

In recent years more local and national researchers and practitioners have sought to measure and improve quality in youth work and have expanded our understanding of what it takes to “move the needle” on youth program quality. We know that effective quality improvement efforts focus staff and organizational efforts on improving quality at the “point of service,” where the young person experiences the program², while also ensuring organizational conditions support that experience. The Minnesota Youth Work Institute and Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota have implemented statewide strategies that include long-term quality improvement processes focused on organizations. The Youth Program Quality

¹ Blyth, D. and Lochner, A. (2010). *Exploring the Supply and Demand for Community Learning Opportunities in Minnesota*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

² Smith, C., Akiva, T., Sugar, S., Lo, Y. J., Frank, K. A., Peck, S. C., Cortina, K. S., & Devaney, T. (2012). *Continuous quality improvement in afterschool settings: Impact findings from the Youth Program Quality Intervention study*. Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment.

Assessment (YPQA) Tool of the Weikart Center has begun to be used broadly as a result of support from the Youth Work Institute and some key local funders.

As the leader of the Beacons Network in Minneapolis, I have had to make decisions in our collaborative partnership about how to ensure quality across our small system. We have been on a “Quality Improvement Journey” in partnership with the Minnesota Youth Work Institute for the last six years, a process that has resulted in significant improvements to “point of service” program quality and integrated a quality framework into the culture of our network of youth programs and youth workers. This process of building capacity for quality improvement became a catalyst for developing a shared identity and values across multiple organizations in the Beacons Network.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Despite advancements made in recent years in measuring and improving quality, there are questions in the field about whether more should be done to ensure accountability in youth work. Some Minnesota decision makers have asked if Program Accreditation is a route to ensuring quality and increasing investments in youth programs. Accreditation takes a systems approach to promoting accountability, quality, and continuous improvement, but there have been significant hesitations expressed from members of the youth work field about whether this model is the right fit for youth work in Minnesota³.

The concepts of quality and accountability were very intertwined in our work in the Beacons Network in recent years. While the Weikart Center’s YPQA pyramid gave us common language, measurements and standards for quality, we had to answer questions of WHO should be doing WHAT at each level of our network and how to make sure that was happening. We implemented system-wide efforts that emphasized shared accountability and utilized multiple levers to encourage changes in practices, including engaging youth

in assessment, encouraging peer-to-peer learning and reflection, and increasing cross-agency staff development.

Our example of one partnership between the University and a citywide collaborative of youth-serving agencies implementing the Beacons model in Minneapolis illustrates some key lessons learned about both accountability and quality. Our strategies and learnings from this process are shared in this paper with the hope that they might inform the development of a system of accountability for youth work in Minnesota. If done creatively and with intentionality, I would hope to see Minnesota build a system of accountability with and for youth workers that would not only ensure quality experiences for Minnesota’s children, but also build a more cohesive youth work field in Minnesota.

METHODOLOGY

For purposes of researching for this paper to summarize our experience of attempting to increase accountability for quality across the Beacons Network in Minneapolis, I reviewed the following key documents collected over 5 years of partnership to identify themes and key learnings:

- contracts,
- meeting notes,
- training outlines,
- YPQA observation data,
- project summary reports
- reflection notes

I began to map out the journey we had taken, identifying actions we took each year, the lessons learned from these actions that resulted in future actions, and some overarching strategies that became themes for this paper. As I identified themes I clarified and finalized them through meetings with four key partners/consultants and 10 lead staff from multiple agencies who were involved over multiple years with the project.

³ Walker, K. (2012). The question of youth program accreditation. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development.

BIG IDEAS TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Engage multiple levels of organizations and systems around a common quality framework and link it to the shared identity or “Brand.” The process engaged mid-level managers, center supervisors, and frontline youth workers around a common frame that aligned the YPQA framework with “The Beacons Way.”

Build youth worker buy-in and ownership around the framework for “point of service” program quality. The training and professional development opportunities were designed to model quality strategies, be relevant to specific contexts and cultures, and position center supervisors as “quality champions.”

Build organizational capacity to support quality. Network and organizational supports were invested in and aligned for cumulative impact including evaluation, professional development, training, and technical assistance.

Build on strengths, and challenge each other to get better across agencies. The intentional partnership between a University/Intermediary and a network of youth development agencies built on the strengths and capacity of each, while also pushing each organization to grow.

Partner with youth to drive quality improvements. Engaging youth as quality assessors and decision makers in the improvement of program quality can accelerate impacts but also requires building capacity for youth-adult partnerships, particularly among staff.

CREATING SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR QUALITY

As a former youth worker and Beacons center director, I had recently become the network director of our collaborative partnership of youth agencies. Questions of accountability and quality came up quickly as one of the expectations of my role was to establish a

system for monitoring our centers to ensure quality and consistency. A previous attempt to get managers to work across agencies to “audit” the Beacon centers had met with resistance and suspicion, and I was hoping to develop an alternate process.

Nationally, most Beacons initiatives are funded by municipal governments, so the accountability and monitoring come from those agencies directly, while support for quality might come from an intermediary. The original Beacons initiative in New York City was very intentional in setting up an intermediary organization specifically designed to support quality of the Beacon Centers. The Youth Development Institute still provides training, technical assistance, and convening for sharing of best practices locally and nationally.

Our unique collaborative structure in Minneapolis Beacons very much informed our approach to creating a new system for quality and accountability. In Minneapolis, the YMCA serves as the lead and fiscal agency with three other lead youth development agencies that implement the Beacons model in multiple schools. The network role, hosted at the Y, is responsible for ensuring compliance with funding requirements for grants that are distributed to the partners. However, these partners are not just sub-contractors. They are co-leaders of the network management structure and co-creators of the citywide collaborative. Their buy-in was critical.

A new partnership with the Youth Work Institute allowed me to expand the accountability and support for quality beyond my role. A 21st Century grant application provided the opportunity to build a formal partnership with the Youth Work Institute to expand on an effort linking use of the YPQA tool to training and technical assistance, in order to build the capacity of organizations and staff to improve quality. How we would accomplish all this was still very unclear.

GETTING A PARTNERSHIP FOR QUALITY STARTED

To develop the plan for the partnership we convened managers from the lead agencies to

begin to identify needs by mapping all staff training opportunities available to staff across multiple youth development organizations. Once we had this visually mapped out, we looked for areas that were gaps as well as areas where we could cross-share training that already existed. It became clear that there was no training directly related to the YPQA or any other research-validated quality assessment tool, and that this was a gap the Youth Work Institute was well positioned to fill. The tool seemed like a good opportunity to get agreement across organizations on some common measures where the previous Beacons audit tool had been unsuccessful.

In addition to meeting with mid-level management to develop the plan for the partnership, we engaged the Beacon center directors in giving input to the strategies as well. Some of the Beacons center directors had already attended Quality Matters with the Youth Work Institute, a new training and technical assistance cohort which included training for supervisors, an on-site quality assessment, and a “discovery process” with the assessment data on site. Those who had attended Quality Matters expressed their desire to provide their direct service staff with exposure to some of the information and strategies they had been exposed to through the Quality Matters training process. From the beginning of the partnership, I shared with the Beacon directors that I saw their role as “Quality Champions” in this work; as key influencers in the processes, they were continually consulted in the ongoing development of the strategies implemented through the partnership.

In meetings with the management team and center directors, we narrowed the focus of the partnership to providing training for direct service staff and center directors (supervisors) and technical assistance for organizations toward using the YPQA assessment tool and framework as a key strategy to drive program quality improvements. From the start it was clearly agreed that the strategy would not be to take a punitive approach to quality improvement. Our goal was not to use the YPQA scores as a high-stakes way to compare

and possibly penalize programs. *Our emphasis, in fact, would be less on the use of the tool itself and more about getting our staff to embrace the YPQA's quality framework and strategies for program quality.*

From the beginning, Deborah Moore, Director of the Youth Work Institute, and I operated with shared goals that we would:

- **Continuously improve throughout the process** and learn from what worked and what didn't
- **Provide access for youth workers and programs to the research and evidence-based practices** available to the field through the Institute and the University
- **Build on and honor practice knowledge** held by our Network's youth workers
- **Build the capacity** of our Network and participating agencies to support strong youth workers and quality programs
- **Align with existing evaluation and capacity building processes** to maximize and accelerate investments we were already making in our system around youth-adult partnerships and outcomes evaluation

LESSONS LEARNED: GETTING TO OUR BIG IDEAS TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Looking back now, the process we went through was a lot like youth work and the process of experiential learning in that it involved taking action to test an idea, reflecting on learnings, and then applying those learnings in future actions. Rather than a clear linear process, ours was a more spiraling approach built on the past years' successes and challenges. With each year the project gained momentum as systems efforts including evaluation and youth-adult partnership strategies all aligned with the YPQA framework and overall network capacity-building efforts. What emerged in six years of challenges and

successes were some key strategies that continue to give the work traction today as we move into a sustaining phase.

ENGAGE MULTIPLE LEVELS OF ORGANIZATIONS AND SYSTEMS AROUND A COMMON QUALITY FRAMEWORK AND LINK IT TO THE SHARED IDENTITY OR “BRAND.”

As a network of multiple organizations and locations, our effort to improve program quality and ensure accountability had to build common ground or it would be at risk of being rejected by the partner staff and agencies. Introducing the YPOA tool gave us a common frame and language for quality. However, “Beacons” gave us our common identity. By intentionally linking these two and showing our staff the connections, we not only strengthened our staff commitment to quality, but we strengthened our staff commitment to our own brand.

A specific strategy that led this idea was a year-long cohort of center directors who engaged in a Beacons “Trainer Cohort” experience that involved creating trainings specific to the Beacons context and needs that linked directly to YPOA indicators. This year of the project yielded the greatest energy from staff overall because it translated into three cross-agency training days, each serving over 100 staff, that linked the YPOA indicators and framework with core components of the Beacons brand and model. This expanded our trainers’ confidence and built a more cohesive culture across agencies and centers around what we had begun to call “The Beacons Way.”

“What does that mean to you?” I asked a staff person who had said to me, “Well, you know, they just don’t do it the ‘Beacons Way.’” This person began to describe youth work practices that directly aligned with YPOA indicators, such as starting our meetings with youth by doing an icebreaker, setting goals together and ending sessions with reflection.

BUILD YOUTH WORKER BUY-IN AND OWNERSHIP AROUND THE FRAMEWORK FOR “POINT OF SERVICE” PROGRAM QUALITY.

An immediate concern when we began this work was that frontline youth workers might

reject the program quality improvement effort if they viewed it as a punitive, high-stakes assessment led by outside “experts.” We knew that minimizing fear and gaining their buy-in would be critical. A key strategy was to build buy-in with the center directors and then expand the training and use of the tool to reach the frontline staff as the years progressed. We emphasized expanded training support for frontline staff first and use of the tool second, and agreed to keep the scores for use at the local level for improvements so that fear would not become a deterrent to staff engaging in the process.

To get our Beacons directors on board with leading this work in their centers, we decided to build on the Quality Matters training that many center directors had already attended. We talked with them about becoming the champions for quality in their centers and engaged as many of them as possible in professional development opportunities linked to the process. We provided Quality Matters to all center directors who hadn’t taken it, and supplementary opportunities such as learning circles for those who already had.

For our frontline youth workers, our first-year goal was to expand access to training support; we did this by providing free training “coupons” to all Beacons Network staff through the Youth Work Institute. We learned quickly that simply covering the cost of training was NOT enough! Although thousands of dollars were made available for free training coupons, not one dollar was utilized. Reflections with the center directors revealed some barriers to access that went way beyond cost for our youth workers, including:

- Locations and times difficult for staff with such diverse work schedules outside of the program
- Lack of staff of color and perceived lack of staff with urban youth work experience at the Institute
- Mistrust of the University in some urban communities

- Unfamiliarity with the course content beyond Quality Matters by supervisors made it difficult to recommend it to their staff

After that big lesson the first year, in year two we assigned consultants from the Institute to work directly with the center directors to customize training to meet the frontline youth worker training needs at individual centers. Customized training succeeded in our goal of giving more of our frontline youth workers access to training related to quality. However, customization got great traction at some centers with some leaders and not at others. While it was very useful in some locations, it didn't get the traction we had hoped for across the whole system. It didn't lead to cross-agency learning, nor did it build a common set of expectations across the Network.

Year three led us to the "Trainers Cohort" described above and we finally seemed to be gaining momentum in engaging our frontline staff via our center directors and network-wide professional development. By linking quality improvement efforts to a shared identity, values, and pedagogy among youth workers across our agencies, we built buy-in and began to establish a community of engaged youth workers better prepared to support and hold one another accountable. Staff were conscious of "walking our talk" and modeling the methods we hoped to see staff use with youth. Staff also pushed to include youth for the first time in these trainings, and some alumni even co-led trainings.

A complementary component at this time included integrating training in Youth-Adult Partnership through Pam McBride, focused on strategies for reflection, effective power sharing, planning with youth, and consensus-building facilitation strategies with youth. The Minnesota Technology of Participation and Youthrive training components were integrated into these youth worker training opportunities.

Through this process we have learned a great deal about the importance of the engagement of both supervisors and frontline youth workers. We have seen how complex it can be

to get youth workers to trust and embrace a quality improvement system, but it can be done. Today we see youth workers sharing strategies with one another related to program quality, including leading sessions for their peers in areas related to the YPQA, such as creating a safe and supportive environment and engaging youth through planning and reflection.

BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY TO SUPPORT QUALITY.

While "point of service" quality is important, we heard loud and clear from our center directors how important it was that their lead agencies and their schools provide the conditions necessary for them to produce high quality programs. We employed three key strategies to support organizational capacity:

- Align all of our Network investments and efforts with the quality work where possible including evaluation, training and technical assistance, and building a collective collaborative vision.
- Assess and support the capacity of each Beacons lead agency to support quality.
- Assess barriers to quality present in the school and work on a district level to change policies or practices that present challenges for quality

Through the years we have woven the YPQA into the fabric of the network not as a separate initiative but as a core component and framework for our evaluation, professional development, and continuous improvement model. A complimentary component was the introduction of the YPQA as a formal component of our annual external evaluation conducted by Bluewater Associates. This made the training support connected to that even more desirable to lead agencies. We also introduced a staff survey designed to get information from staff regarding organizational climate and support affect our centers. A key strategy moving forward will be to further utilize the YPQA Form B to be more systematic in ensuring organizational improvements on behalf of quality are taking place.

During Year One, consultants from the Institute conducted an assessment of each lead agency to determine strengths and areas of improvement to support quality programming in their agency and across the collaborative. Their information was used by a mid-level management group to inform decision-making and peer sharing around effective organizational practices to support quality.

One key barrier we identified to moving the needle on quality was that our programs were integrated not only with school staff but also with partner agencies, and these key adults in the programs had little to no exposure to the YPQA. This continues to be a challenge today, but being aware of this challenge has led to some key actions designed to address this barrier:

- We meet regularly with school and district staff, sharing our YPQA results when possible, and addressing policies we identify as barriers to quality.
- At an annual Principals Breakfast, we presented on the YPQA and showed the alignment with a district classroom quality assessment tool
- We have begun to informally include some of our partner agencies and even some school staff in our trainings and hope to expand this work in the future

BUILD ON STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGE EACH OTHER TO GET BETTER ACROSS AGENCIES.

A collaborative quality improvement model that includes quality assessment, peer-to-peer learning, and reflection has the potential to create powerful changes in individuals and agencies. Through the years this partnership built on the strengths and capacity of each organization involved, while also pushing each organization to grow.

The leaders of the Youth Work Institute met annually with me and often with the center directors to reflect on what had worked, what hadn't, and what to do next. This involved difficult conversations at times about where we were getting traction and where we weren't. By

the third year when we developed the Trainer Cohort, we seemed to have found the right balance in our partnership. The Institute was now providing leadership around the training content linked to the YPQA, and the Beacons Network staff was providing leadership around the training process and connecting it to the real context experienced by the Beacons staff each day. In this way we found we had the best results when we built on our strengths and had the tough conversations that allowed us to define those honestly.

Internal to the Beacons Network, a similar process of building upon strengths and identifying areas for improvement has occurred through this quality improvement work. We have done all of the hard work to build buy-in and build capacity described above and are now really positioned to have shared accountability across our network. We have built a brand for Beacons that each agency would like to live up to and protect, and this allows the space for some shared accountability to develop.

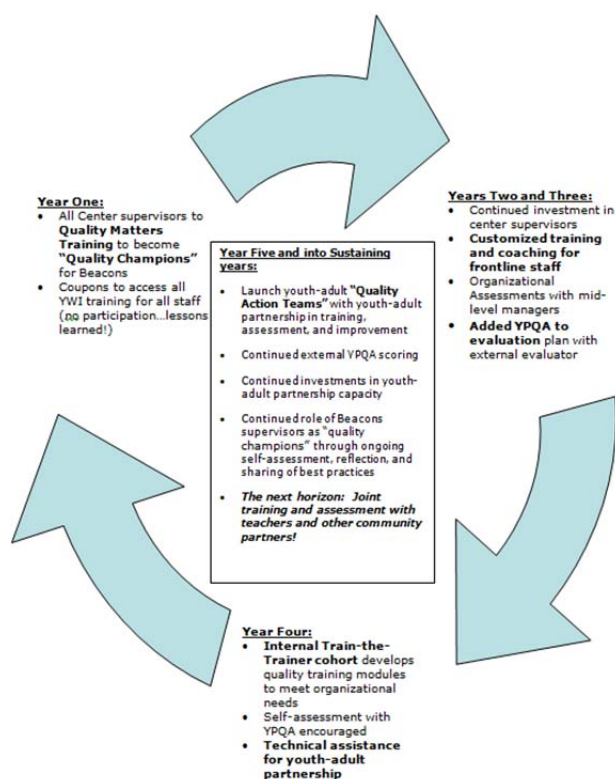
A goal for the future would be to take our shared accountability from an informal to a more formal place as a collaborative network. A recent process of better defining "The Beacons Way" and the core components of the Beacon centers as well as the supports provided by the network emerged as a result of some of this work. We are now developing some tools to better help us define our expectations of the Beacons operationally across the partnership. This should complement the YPQA as a strategy for ensuring accountability and quality across our partnership.

PARTNER WITH YOUTH TO DRIVE QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS.

A final and potentially most powerful strategy we employed was to engage youth as key partners and key levers for change in our quality improvement efforts. Once we had built the capacity of staff to both embrace the YPQA framework and partner with young people, we now were ready to bring youth into the quality improvement process with them.

A Quality Action Team was formed at each Beacon center with a minimum of two adults and two youths per center, who committed to joint training with the other centers. This group also collaborated to rename sections of the YPQA tool to make it more youth-friendly and more “Beaconized.” Once trained in this revised tool, each center team was paired with another center to do cross-assessments for one another and share the results to be used in improvement.

This model was very exciting in its potential to engage youth in helping us assess and improve point of service youth work across our system. Adults who were previously resistant to the quality improvement seemed much more receptive to having youth hold them accountable, and the cross-center observations sparked new dialogue and cross-sharing of best practice strategies (*“Whoa! Look at how he just prepared that young person to lead a portion of the session while also getting them to reflect in pairs!”*, *“I like how he moved his body to get their attention instead of using his voice.”*)



The biggest challenge was with inconsistency in the first year with some centers having much more regular participation than others, and with the model varying from one center having over ten young people involved to another with limited youth participation. Our goal for future Quality Action teams is to sustain them in each center. A key strategy for that will likely be having them integrate with our existing structure of youth advisory boards in every center and our citywide Beacons Leadership team. In the future we also hope to pilot expanding some of the teams to include more partners and possibly school staff in both trainings and assessments focusing on the YPQA.

RESULTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Beacons has seen significant improvements in the quality scores but perhaps even more importantly in the buy-in of the staff to become more reflective and engage more deeply in ongoing continuous improvement processes. Key results attributable in part to the partnership include:

- Overall growth of 10% since year one in YPQA scores
- The overall Network Engagement score jumped an entire point from Year 2 to Year 3 due to increased training in reflection strategies
- Development of internal training strategies linked to the YPQA elements
- Investment in a Beacons Network Quality Specialist to support quality and collaboration in the Network
- Over 100 youth and staff engaged in quality improvement processes through Quality Action Teams
- Branding Beacons as a high quality program with youth and community members

Our key accomplishments have been in getting staff to truly own program quality as part of their work as youth workers and supervisors, engaging youth as partners in program quality

assessment, and most of all using program quality efforts to build engagement and common identity across our network.

Our key challenges have been in documenting our trainings for sustainability and tracking our quality data across centers and programs. We have also seen that the center directors can be “Champions” for quality with their own teams, but without providing training to our community-based partner organizations and school staff who also deliver programming within our model, the improvements to scores have been limited.

Our possible next steps include:

- Sustain the youth-adult Quality Action Teams and expand access for more community partners to participate.
- Explore opportunities to Train the Trainers and the use of online data tracker with the Weikart Center.
- Expand training opportunities linked to the YPQA to engage more community partners and school staff who are key levers in moving program quality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD:

The field of Youth work and youth programs in the out-of-school time is a diverse, creative, responsive field that I believe can develop a system of accountability for youth workers that moves beyond the limitations of accreditation. We found, as a Minneapolis Beacons Network, that the YPQA—more than a tool for assessment—gave us a common language and methodology we were able to use as a catalyst for developing our sense of common identity and values as a Network. I would like to see the field of Youth work in Minnesota develop a system of accountability that similarly build capacity to promote excellent youth work practice with and on behalf of young people in Minnesota.

The themes that emerged from our process in Beacons could possibly be applied to have relevance to building such a system for the field in the following ways:

Engage multiple levels of the field around a common framework and link it to a shared youth work identity or “brand.” A system of accountability can build needed consensus around shared values and pedagogy in the youth work field, but to do so would need to authentically engage all levels of the field in the conversation: policy makers, funders, organizational leaders, supervisors, and frontline youth workers. Any system of accountability for youth workers will have to build authentic relationships with youth workers and key leaders in organizations that influence youth work first. This work will have to be done across regions and cultural communities.

Build youth worker buy-in and ownership around the framework for accountability in the field. Youth worker buy-in would be critical to the success of such an effort. Opportunities designed to promote quality and accountability could be designed to model quality youth work strategies, be flexible enough to be relevant to specific contexts and cultures, and could identify and implement “youth work quality champions” in the field.

Build organizational capacity and leverage efforts that align for impact. Building the strength of youth organizations should be a key focus of efforts to ensure quality and accountability. A stand-alone system or process for the field would not be as successful as one that is aligned for cumulative impact with other collective field efforts including policy efforts, evaluation, professional development, and technical assistance.

Build on strengths and challenge each other to get better across the field. Rather than a model based on punitive, high-stakes assessments, the field of youth work could establish a system that encourages accountability through continuous improvement and peer support. Intentional use of intermediaries, funders, and policy makers as key levers for accountability in non-punitive ways could accelerate improvements.

Partner with youth to drive quality and accountability in the field. Engaging youth as quality assessors and decision makers in a system for accountability and quality improvement can also accelerate impacts, but requires building capacity for youth-adult partnership, particularly among staff. This, in turn, will strengthen the field.

CONCLUSION

Much like the process of a young person developing, program quality improvement is a complex process that happens over time in the context of relationships and systems that surround young people, youth workers, and youth programs and organizations. Just as we strive as a field to be intentional in nurturing the development of young people over time, so must we bring intentionality and a long-term approach to our attempts to ensure quality experiences for young people in out-of-school time and community learning settings. Keeping “point of service” quality at the center, programs, organizations, and systems must identify the key levers for change that will move quality improvements forward in their context. Quality has the potential to become a culture not only inside a program, but across the systems and the field of youth work. This culture will require ongoing assessment and reflection, ongoing development of youth workers, and ongoing partnerships among key systems-players including funders, intermediaries, universities, organizations, and youth workers themselves.

Accountability should be discussed only once we have begun to build buy-in and capacity across the youth work field in Minnesota around what quality youth programs and quality youth work look like. When the time comes, I challenge Minnesotans who care about the quality of opportunities for young people to not settle for the first easy model of accountability that presents itself. An approach to accountability that emphasizes shared accountability between organizations and intermediaries and engages young people will be worth exploring. Taking the time to develop a creative system of accountability for youth work will require hard work, critical thinking, passion, and intentionality, traits I associate with our state and with this field. If we are going to do it, let's do it the right way for Minnesota youth and the youth workers who touch their lives each day across our state.

AUTHOR BIO

Jenny Wright Collins is Network Director for the Minneapolis Beacons Network. She got her start in youth work as a dance teacher while in high school; she has worked as a camp counselor and served as Minnesota's Afterschool Ambassador for the Afterschool Alliance. Jenny holds degrees from the University of Minnesota: her M.Ed. in Youth Development Leadership and a bachelor of Individualized Studies focusing on Youth Studies, Urban Studies, and Creative Writing. She attended the Minneapolis Public Schools and grew up in South Minneapolis.



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