OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME
POLICY COMMENTARY

the forum
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

Unpacking Youth Work Practice

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The Forum's Out-of-School Time Policy Commentary is back! With funding from the William T. Grant Foundation, we have been able to revitalize this series, originally funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. In the coming year we will produce four commentaries that summarize recent and emerging research related to out-of-school time, with an emphasis on exploring the many factors that contribute to setting quality and affect youth developmental outcomes. Please see ***www.forumfyi.org*** to review previous commentaries in this series.

Those of us who took a basic psychology course may remember Maslow's Hierarchy which suggests that basic safety and supportive relationships are the necessary foundation for human motivation and engagement (or "self-actualization" in Maslow's terms)[1]. Those who don't remember Maslow, but have spent time in youth organizations, are sure to have ample evidence that young people may come for activities but they stay for the relationships.

A growing body of research underscores the importance of caring relationships and is helping to unpack the specific social processes that unfold between young people and youth workers inside of programs. As our understanding of supportive relationships and program processes becomes more fine-grained, the more we learn about what it takes to create engaging, high quality environments. That understanding, in turn, must inform our efforts to support those individuals who are working, often with very limited guidance, to create such environments for children and youth every day in organizations across the country.

We like to begin with the "so what" up front. Collectively, we believe the research, interviews and examples featured in this commentary support the following assertions:

- ***What staff do shapes young people's experiences in programs.*** Relationships and interactions form the foundation of youths' experiences. Staff practices should flow from a strong developmental understanding of adult-youth relationships. Investing in improving these practices can lead to desired program outcomes related to academic, social and emotional development.
- ***Youth work practice is complex.*** Youth work practice involves a range of judgments and behaviors that must be weighed and juggled simultaneously in order for staff to be effective. Staff in youth programs regularly navigate complicated interactions and dilemmas while at the same time building caring relationships and delivering program content.

[1] Proposed in his 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow's Hierarchy of needs is a framework for describing human physiological and psychological needs. Maslow's Hierarchy is typically depicted as a pyramid starting with basic needs as the base, and continuing successively through the higher level needs of safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization or engagement. Generally, lower level needs must be met before higher level ones can be realized. Maslow's Hierarchy has practical applications for and been adapted to a wide range of fields and social contexts.

- ***Workforce investment strategies need to be equally complex.*** Professional development efforts for youth workers need to be specific and contextualized in order to be relevant and effective. The full array of workforce development entry points and opportunities – recruitment, orientation, training, supervision and coaching – should be considered in order to address the complex demands workers face and ensure quality programming.
- ***Individual worker improvement and setting-level improvement go hand in hand.*** Program quality is determined by the individual performances of a collection of staff. Program improvement strategies should include efforts to improve the point of service where young people interact with staff and experience the delivery of program content and objectives.

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From Individual Competencies to a Holistic Approach

Fifteen years ago marked a critical point in the history of the youth development field, when intensive collaboration among experts from around the country resulted in a comprehensive documentation of the youth development approach. With leadership from the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research at AED, the Stronger Staff – Stronger Youth project[2] netted a set of core competencies for youth work practice which later became the centerpiece of the Advancing Youth Development Curriculum.

[2] In the early 1990's, the Wallace Foundation made major capacity building grants to national youth-serving organizations to strengthen their staffs and boards. The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research received a grant to bring these organizations together to look for opportunities to link their work and identify strategies to define core competencies and address the needs of frontline workers – a group not reached by most of their capacity-building efforts. As a result of the Stronger Staff/Stronger Youth project, these organizations developed common youth work standards and the Wallace Foundation began to explore local options for supporting frontline workers.

We've come a long way since these important efforts. Core competencies are still a critically important professional touchstone. And yet as the field evolves and is continually influenced by a range of academic disciplines and practice fields, our understanding of effective youth programming is deepening. Recent studies and on-the-ground efforts have added texture and depth to the field's increasing understanding of what good practice looks like and what challenges may impede it. That deepening is leading to a more nuanced picture of what program staff do, one that pushes beyond the notion of specific and divisible competencies toward a more holistic understanding of youth work practice.

In ***Research Update*** we summarize recent qualitative and quantitative studies that all help "unpack" youth work practice by Bart Hirsch, Reed Larson, Kate Walker, Charles Smith and their colleagues. Each research team takes a different entry point into examining practice – Hirsh examines relationships, Larson and Walker explore dilemmas, and Smith discusses pedagogical profiles. In ***On the Ground***, we discuss how real-life "practice dilemmas" are being integrated into youth worker professional development in Minnesota. ***Voices from the Field*** features a conversation about youth work practice with two seasoned professionals representing two different generations – Elaine Johnson, Senior Fellow at the Academy for Educational Development and Ravi Ramaswamy, Outreach Coordinator at Ozone House in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Research Update

Fueled by a growing body of knowledge suggesting that quality matters in youth-serving settings (e.g., Durlak & Weissburg, 2007; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000; Lauer et al, 2006; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007), many researchers have turned their attention to unpacking the "black box" of youth work practice and understanding how specific processes and practices support the features of high quality settings. Over the last two years, three such teams have published insightful research about the actions and behaviors of youth workers that are associated with quality.

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Bart Hirsch and colleagues' qualitative work on staff/youth relationships in urban Boys and Girls Clubs brings to life and breaks down in rich detail the "relationships, relationships, relationships" mantra that is heard so often in the field. Reed Larson and Kate Walker's research on practice dilemmas explores the varied and complex challenges – interpersonal, organizational and ethical – that youth workers navigate regularly on the job. Charles Smith and his colleagues have identified different clusters of professional behaviors that reflect intentional practice on the part of staff and have an impact on youths' developmental experiences in programs.

Though these three strands of research examine youth work practice through different lenses, each sheds light on important questions about the effects of staff practice on program quality and ultimately, on young people's development. What staff behaviors and practices support young people's development and contribute to the features we know matter for quality? How do youth workers navigate the competing demands and complexities of service delivery? How do the everyday decisions and behaviors of staff add up to influence youth experiences? This section summarizes recent work by Reed Larson, Kate Walker, Bart Hirsch, Nancy Deutsch, and Charles Smith and discusses the combined implications of this body of work for the field.

The Power of Relationships

A Place to Call Home (2005) and a forthcoming book from Bart Hirsch (Northwestern University) focus on his recent work with Nancy Deutsch (University of Virginia) and others on the mentoring aspects of staff/youth relationships within youth-serving organizations. Examining mentoring in the context of community-based youth programs can broaden our understanding of the full potential mentoring has to offer. Typically more organic than the relationships that develop in either school- or community-based mentoring programs, the natural mentoring relationships that develop between staff and young people in the urban Boys and Girls Clubs that Hirsch's team studied are attuned to youths' needs in a uniquely authentic way. Hirsch theorizes about why mentoring in youth programs may succeed more often than other types of mentoring (frequency, consistency, breadth and duration being among the top reasons). In so doing, these researchers build a powerful argument for prioritizing relationship-building and for helping youth workers engage in relationship-focused practice.

Through a mixed methods approach, observations, interviews and a youth survey help illustrate how the mentoring that happens inside of youth-serving organizations can be very broad – covering a much wider range of topics than is typical in either informal kinship or school-based mentoring. For example school-based mentors stayed almost exclusively in the academic space, with 89% addressing solely academic issues, and family members focused mainly on personal ones. Program-based mentors spent only one-third of their mentoring time addressing academic issues, and yet were the only adults of the three groups to provide regular help with homework.

Program-based mentors were more likely to use a positive orientation as a basis for mentoring rather than focusing on the avoidance of negative behaviors. Kin were evenly split in their tendency towards a positive or negative frame. The breadth of the mentoring that occurs in youth-serving organizations, in addition to the frequency and duration of contact youth and adult staff have with one another in these settings appears to contribute positively to youths' development and experience within programs.

In the centers the research team studied, youth tend to see their staff mentors quite frequently – 75% of youth see their closest staff member 4 or 5 days a week while another 19% see their staff mentor 2 or 3 days a week. In this context, 70% of youth indicate that their closest adult staff member often or almost always offered useful advice, while almost the same percentage said program staff push them to succeed. The majority of youth also indicate that these program-based adult mentors regularly introduce them to new ideas and model qualities and skills that the young people want to adopt for themselves.

This research on program-based mentoring underscores the importance of strong relationships to the quality

of youth experiences in programs, and outlines several strategies that effective mentors use, including fostering initiative, offering pathways to explore alternate futures and providing emotional support. Effective mentoring relationships are also characterized by mutual appreciation and trust, adult modeling of comfort with oneself and high expectations. Hirsch notes that effective mentoring parallels authoritative parenting which balances a high level of responsiveness and warmth with high standards and clear limits.

In high quality settings where young people build skills and thrive, youth organizations are pushing beyond the delivery of specific activities and staff are pushing beyond the demonstration of individual competencies. The complexity of effective youth work practice is also illuminated by the work of the other two research teams featured in this brief.

Navigating Dilemmas

Without minimizing the importance of relationship building, Reed Larson (University of Illinois) and Kate

Types of Practice Dilemmas

Category	Sub-category	Key Tensions	Example
Supporting youth's engagement	• Scaffolding youth's work • Sustaining motivation	Facilitating/directing learning vs. supporting youth's initiative and direction.	A youth leader wants to expose youth to inequities in access to city services to improve the effectiveness of their advocacy work but struggles with the best way to engage youth in these issues.
Cultivating program norms & enforcing rules	• Addressing violations of rules • Cultivating group norms • Maintaining consistency in behavior toward youth	Imposing rules & order vs. cultivating a youth-driven normative culture; being the "friend" vs. being the "heavy"; relating to youth in a professional vs. personal way.	A youth worker wants to ban the use of a historically racist slur that youth are using in reference to one another in casual conversation. The youth say that they are not offended by the word when using it in this manner and state that they see it as reclaiming the word as part of Hip Hop culture.
Responding to personalities & relationships	• Responding to individual personalities, problems and unique needs • Responding to youth-to-youth relationships and group dynamics	Worker desires to form positive relationships with youth & encourage the same between youth vs. pragmatic and professional limitations.	One youth regularly incites others to join in negative comments and off-task behavior whenever the group is engaged in an activity that is not his first choice.
Reconciling realities of organizational constraints or flaws with youth development goals	• Dealing with top-down policies and/or bureaucratic requirements • Limited time/resources • Staff relationships/conflicts	Youth-centered program delivery vs. the world of adult organizations.	Through a democratic process, the youth choose one member to represent their agency at a high-profile public event, but the executive director insists that another youth would be more appropriate.
Connecting to youth's outside lives & connecting youth to the outside world	• Relating to youth's outside lives, including families • Supporting youth's connections to real-world settings	Dealing with conflicts between participation in program and family/outside demands; dealing with dissonance between a youth's background and the culture of outside institutions.	One girl repeatedly misses group practices for an upcoming event, often not showing up at the last minute. When asked about it, she states that her mother often "springs" babysitting duties on her, often just as she is preparing to leave.

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> Larson and Walker's analyses demonstrate that seasoned practitioners are more likely than their less experienced peers to respond to dilemmas in ways that are youth-centered and effectively balance multiple considerations.

Walker (University of Minnesota) approach the question of how staff foster quality environments for youth from an entirely different angle in their research on the practice dilemmas that youth workers face on a day-to-day basis. Practice dilemmas are challenging situations – interpersonal, organizational and ethical – that require quick decision-making and involve competing considerations. ***Under what circumstances should a staff person allow a youth who has violated program rules to return? How should staff balance the needs of the group with that of one outspoken member? Should a staff member disclose their personal history in helping a youth make a difficult decision in their own life?*** These are representative of the kinds of challenges faced every day by professionals in the field as they manage situations characterized by competing priorities and commitments, a great deal of subjective judgment and diverse ethical and practical challenges.

To identify and explore these and other dilemmas, the research team followed 17 adult leaders in 12 programs for an average of three to four months (a natural program cycle). They conducted 167 observations, 113 interviews with youth and 125 interviews with adult leaders over the course of the study, leading to the identification of 250 distinct dilemmas. These situations were organized into five broad categories and more specific subcategories. Categories include: supporting youth engagement, cultivating norms and enforcing rules, responding to interpersonal dynamics, resolving organizational and developmental tensions and negotiating tensions with external influences (see chart for a more detailed summary). This should be considered a starting framework rather than a final determination about how to organize the situations youth workers face on a day-to-day basis.

Larson and Walker's analyses demonstrate that seasoned practitioners are more likely than their less experienced peers to respond to dilemmas in ways that are youth-centered and effectively balance multiple considerations. These youth-centered approaches involve assessing the developmental needs of youth, and then balancing the multiple tasks and considerations of engaging youth directly; turning challenges into teachable moments; incorporating youth into the solution; and advocating, as necessary, on behalf of youth. Throughout each process, "expert" youth workers were more often than not able to navigate the tensions between challenging individual youth while also providing positive support, paying adequate attention to both product and process and attending to both immediate and long-term concerns.

This work also suggests how navigating these kinds of dilemmas relates to overall program quality. Consider one of the example dilemmas above. A youth worker's ability to make a good set of decisions about handling a dominant group member has implications for:

- the experience of the other group members (e.g., other youth might feel intimidated or "shut down" by the dominant personality);
- the worker's ability to effectively carry out program objectives (e.g., constant disruptions may get the group off-track from planned activities); and
- the positive growth of the individual youth who needs guidance about how to respect boundaries and share appropriately in a group (this is just the kind of growth many programs seek to nurture in participants).

Larson and Walker have developed a three-pronged agenda for further exploring practice dilemmas in the field that spans research and practice. On the research side, they intend to explore how staff make decisions about the practice dilemmas they encounter. In terms of professional development, they are working on developing a set of trainings centered on such dilemmas and an evaluation strategy for understanding the effectiveness of such training.

Profiles of Practice

Charles Smith and his colleagues at the Center for Youth Program Quality[3] have several efforts underway to better understand quality at the point of service in youth programs, utilizing observational data collected using their Youth Program Quality Assessment. Data collected through the Center's work in Palm Beach County, FL helps illustrate how staff practices cluster into six different "pedagogy profiles" that fall under three broad classes or styles of staff performances. The Center labels these three broad practice styles as: a) positive youth development approaches, b) staff-centered approaches, and c) low-quality program delivery (or no intentional approach).

Based on observational data from nearly 600 after-school offerings in 165 organizational settings, Smith and colleagues focused their analyses on identifying the dimensions and patterns of staff practice that appear to most support positive developmental and learning outcomes. The six commonly used "pedagogy profiles" they identified reflect specific ways of delivering program content and the frequency with which staff exhibit certain behaviors.

Staff practices, entirely distinct from content (e.g., science, dance), are behaviors adults exhibit when engaging youth in an activity. These include things like facilitating active learning, working alongside youth, offering choice or asking open-ended questions. On the low-quality end of the spectrum, practices include sitting in the back of the room as a strategy for monitoring group behavior, using didactic instructional methods, or publicly singling out one youth as a negative example for others. These kinds of practices – whether conscious or not – provide a foundation for program delivery and young people's experiences in the setting.

The practices Smith discusses can be categorized into three domains or components of program quality: ***supportive environment, opportunities for interaction and opportunities for engagement.*** Staff in supportive environments display warmth, demonstrate care for the feelings and ideas of youth and employ well-defined conflict resolution methods. Opportunities for interaction require the effective use of grouping and cooperative learning strategies, robust verbal exchange and regular use of open-ended questioning. Opportunities for engagement involve providing youth with decision-making and evaluation experiences over time, including practices like offering choice, planning and reflection.

Smith found that just 28% of all staff offerings observed fell within the "positive youth development" profiles, providing youth with a supportive environment, active learning and opportunities for engagement.

Smith and his team hypothesized that certain pedagogies or approaches may be associated with key variables like staff-youth ratio, age of the youth and content. For example, because the arts is usually focused on expression, arts program staff might be more likely to employ choice.

Smith found that just 28% of all staff offerings observed fell within the "positive youth development" profiles, providing youth with a supportive environment, active learning and opportunities for engagement. The researchers viewed these offerings as demonstrating the most "developmental intentionality" on the part of staff. Staff falling into the "staff-centered" profiles – 39% of the sample – provided a supportive environment and hands-on learning, but did so in staff-directed ways, thus failing to create opportunities for higher-order engagement. Finally, Smith found that one-third of the staff offerings in the sample fell within one of the "low quality/non-pedagogy" profiles.

Smith and colleagues found that across profiles, there was a hierarchical pattern to staff behavior. Most program offerings involved staff that were supportive, but fewer staff were able to capitalize on opportunities for higher-order engagement with youth. For example, in only about 50% of program offerings did youth participate in small group work, planning or reflection. "Our findings suggest

[3] The Center for Youth Program Quality is a new joint venture between the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation and the Forum for Youth Investment.

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that many after-school settings have not advanced far beyond a 'child care' model, where youth safety and fun are important parts of the programming model, but motivation and deeper cognitive engagement with content is a secondary concern."

Smith and his team found that while adult-youth ratio did not determine which profile was present in a given offering, program content and age of youth were modestly predictive of pedagogical profile. Program offerings geared toward older youth provided greater opportunities for choice, planning and reflection than did those for younger children. This pattern may be a function of the fact that older teens can "vote with their feet" and that staff are working to respond to teens' developmental needs for autonomy and leadership. While the "positive youth development" profiles could be observed across all age ranges and content areas, this approach was also more prevalent in arts and enrichment programming.

On the Ground: A Close Up Look at The Practice Dilemmas Project

Sabrina, a long-time youth participant at the Central West Teen Center, is excited to be this year's chair of the annual Shoot for the Stars fundraising event. She is an enthusiastic participant and fundraiser for the Center, a place she credits with helping her get her life "on track." Sabrina has personally raised quite a bit of money, selling more tickets than any other youth, and is quite proud of her emerging fundraising skills. One day, she comes into your office visibly upset and clearly not herself. After hesitating for a while, she eventually tells you that she had been keeping more than $400 from ticket sales in her drawer at home and was going to turn the money in today (the first time she has been able to come into the Center in a week), but her mom found the money and used it to pay family bills. Sabrina said she and her mom got into a big fight and that her parents always find a way to ruin anything really important to her. She is afraid that other youth will think she stole the money. She promises to figure out some way to re-pay the Center and hopes this doesn't ruin her standing in the program or as the chairperson.

As the youth worker, what would you do? What is your first response? What do you address first – her current emotional state, how she might now handle things at home, her fears about what others might think, or what to do about the money? Which youth work principles can you draw upon? How can you help Sabrina process and deal with what happened with her parents? Will you communicate directly with Sabrina's parents, and, if so, how? What other considerations will you need to take into account to resolve this?

These kinds of questions come with the territory of youth work. While responding to some dilemmas may seem relatively simple – a participant in a summer program shows up in a halter top and low cut jeans – responding to others can be quite complex and there is rarely one "right response." Part of what makes addressing most dilemmas difficult is not just their complexity, but the ambiguity and subjectivity that are involved.

Reed Larson and Kate Walker, in partnership with faculty and staff at the Center for Youth Development at the University of Minnesota, have designed a training aimed specifically at helping youth workers gain skills in resolving dilemmas.[4] Developed with input from a panel of local practitioners and national leaders in the youth development field, the training is designed to get youth workers thinking about and discussing a range of situations and challenges that arise in everyday practice. The sessions are framed to move practitioners toward greater and more complex consideration of how to apply "youth-centered" frameworks in their practice. The dilemmas considered range from ethical to interpersonal to structural. The case study method, used successfully in professional development efforts in other fields, is used to explore assumptions, issues and options and to engage participants in mapping and discussing the multiple dimensions involved in each situation.

Building on the use of "youth-centered" and "multi-pronged" approaches, practitioners weave their way

[4] The training is one piece of the Practice Dilemmas Project which involves inter-related strands of research, training and evaluation aimed at increasing practitioners' abilities to address the everyday dilemmas they face in practice. The project adds to ongoing discussions in the field about what constitutes program quality and pushes further to address specific challenges staff face in achieving quality in their daily practice.

through professional ethics, the context of youths' lives, relationships (youth-adult and adult-adult) and the assumptions, issues and options that relate to the specific case. Participants are supported in reserving judgment throughout the training sessions. Kate Walker explains, "It is helpful for people to see that this isn't about one right answer and to provide them an opportunity to pause and not make a knee-jerk response. This process is really about getting to the 'how' of good programs."

Practitioners are given opportunities to talk through dilemmas such as the example above from all sides. Taking the example above, the training would begin with an overview of research and core questions, helping staff get a handle on the basic nature of the dilemma and the important considerations and objectives. What are the developmental needs of the youth in the case? Should she be directly involved in restoring the money? How should the parents' actions be dealt with, and with what consideration for the position and feelings of the young person? What organizational safeguards should be put in place to avoid such situations in the future? What contextual factors are important – e.g., would it matter if the money had been taken for wants rather than needs?

Walker believes that practice dilemmas can be an important part of the overall professional development of youth workers including supervision, on-the-job coaching and mentoring and performance evaluation. A range of intentional supports can give practitioners the tools they need to effectively navigate dilemmas. Walker emphasizes intentionality when she reflects, "Part of this is about practice, but not just rote practice. It is not just experience or even raw talent that helps practitioners navigate these. These trainings are one piece of what we mean by deliberate practice and feedback. This is an opportunity to have that deliberate practice and provide practitioners with appropriately challenging tasks to improve their skill."

According to the Practice Dilemmas Project staff, improving practice – and as a result, program quality – requires discussion and analysis of these kinds of dilemmas, and not just during isolated training events. Ongoing collective conversation about practice is a recognized part of a healthy professional community.

> Youth workers don't have an infrastructure to support their learning about how to build quality settings for youth.
>
> Ravi Ramaswamy, Outreach Coordinator
> Ozone House Youth and Family Services

Evidence from other fields suggests that such reflection shows promise in elevating the skills of youth workers (Banks, 2005; Harrington, 1995; Levin, 1994).

The current version of the training is 12 hours long and is delivered in three-hour modules that take place over four weeks. Following a pilot last fall, the training was rolled out in the spring of 2008. The training team also plans to develop a 24-hour version of the training over the coming year, which will become part of the Youth Work Institute's signature training series.

Voices From The Field

The Forum recently checked in with two practitioners representing two different generations of youth work professionals and asked them to discuss the status of youth work practice and the competencies that under gird effective practice. Using the three strands of research presented above as a backdrop for their conversation, Elaine Johnson and Ravi Ramaswamy talked about a range of issues that impact practice.

Elaine Johnson is currently a Senior Fellow at the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, DC. Most recently, she served as the founder and Director of the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work, and a Vice President of AED. With over 30 years in the human services field, Elaine has spent much of her career as a national spokesperson on youth development, youth worker professional development and workforce issues.

Ravi Ramaswamy is a practitioner from an up and coming generation of youth workers. He currently serves as the Outreach Coordinator for Ozone House Youth and Family Services in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ravi also serves

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> This is not about a single competency. It's about an integration of the key concepts and practices.
>
> Elaine Johnson, Senior Fellow
> Academy for Educational Development

as a trainer for the Center for Youth Program Quality, and has worked as a classroom teacher in Mexico.

Forum: We asked you to take a look at the three strands of research we featured in this policy commentary: Hirsch's study on mentoring relationships, Smith's identification of pedagogical profiles and Larson's examination of youth worker dilemmas. What spoke to you most?

Elaine: There were aspects of each of these strands of research that spoke to me. What kept jumping out at me as I reflected on what I was reading was the gap that exists in terms of organizations providing a formal process or structured learning curve to staff. If it exists it's often happenstance – either you rely on past experience that has somehow given you a set of skills or you are fortunate enough to have a good supervisor. So how do we address this?

Ravi: You make an interesting point about the learning curve. Youth work is not valued as a profession that requires skill building and involves a learning curve. Youth workers don't have an infrastructure to support their learning about how to build quality settings for youth.

Forum: What are your overall impressions and what connections did you make between the various studies?

Elaine: When you consider the research all together, you could walk away with a slight hint that what the youth worker isn't bringing to the job increases the likelihood of many of these dilemmas occuring. Addressing the kinds of tensions that Larson raises in his dilemmas research – that is the *work* of youth work! Then some of these dilemmas are about the gap between the level of day-to-day supervision and what the youth worker thinks is in their realm of decision-making. Some differences in practice may come down to whether someone is fortunate to have a good supervisor.

Ravi: Yeah, I see these types of dilemmas on a weekly, if not daily basis. You are constantly making judgments. The direct care professional is required to be autonomous because they can't just go grab someone to help in the moment. You are requiring independent thinking from youth workers, and it's all based on their own experience. This is where you get the large differences in quality that Smith talks about between youth workers in the same setting.

How do you teach to each and every dilemma? There is no way to address all those questions. I fell back on this idea that what youth workers really need to understand is the fundamental relationship they need to have with young people. You need to understand what you are there for. I have found that it helps me to avoid all sorts of dilemmas. If you understand the fundamental purpose of the youth worker-youth relationship, some dilemmas are easier to avoid or minimize.

Forum: Minimizing certain dilemmas? How does that work?

Elaine: Well, this is not about a single competency. It's about an integration of the key concepts and practices. I think youth workers fall back on the "personal experience" framework sometimes because they don't have enough content or strategies to respond to that young person in the moment the way they need to. I can recall, on several occasions, having to meet with a youth worker one-on-one after a training session because that person was adamant about it being the power of sharing their personal story that turned a young person around. There is a place for that, but that can also be limiting for the young person's growth.

Ravi: It's interesting you say that because that's the old model of youth work, the well-intentioned person who wants to put young people on the right path. It's, "I went down that path myself, and I know how to steer you away from that." There is a time and place for it, but for me it's never been necessary for young people's growth and development to insert my experience or narrative into their decision-making process. I go back to the central role of youth work being about stimulating conversation, not necessarily inserting your own narrative into it.

Forum: What do you think is needed to help youth workers deal with these complexities and maintain a youth-centered focus? To move them from "shooting from the hip" to more intentional practice?

Elaine: Because of my training as a social worker I think that our scaffolding of the professional development of youth workers should change. In social work, there was no way coming out of graduate school that I was going to be assigned certain cases. I got the less complex cases first. In youth work, I don't see that being accounted for.

Ravi: If youth workers are open to intentionally being on a learning curve and that's coupled with opportunities for professional growth, that helps. Just acknowledging that new youth workers shouldn't necessarily be ready for certain kinds of situations is important. The things that impede workers' progress are low wages, too many responsibilities and even oppressive work environments.

Elaine: Sometimes what impedes workers is that there is no one to trust to go to with some of these concerns. If a youth worker goes to a supervisor and says that they are struggling with a dilemma, the interpretation might be that it's about them. In addition, there is often no human resources infrastructure available to say, "We can plug you into 'X' to address it." Compared with corporate industries, there is very little training or resources for those working with people. I would look at the workplace culture and resources that either contribute to good practice or work against it.

Ravi: I have personally been very fortunate. I work in a culture that understands the holistic approach and works hard to make me feel valued and take away stress that doesn't need to be there. But I agree with Elaine – a big part of supporting youth workers comes down to resources. There is so little money coming in that you question sending someone to a conference that costs $150. Add to that the fact that direct care staff are often not working full-time, they are working 20, maybe 30 hours a week; they are in school; they are 20 years old. How can all of those dynamics translate into consistently high-quality youth work?

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>
> Elaine Johnson, Senior Fellow
> Academy for Educational Development

Elaine: The part-time workforce is now so prevalent in the field that we really need to deal with the question of how to support part-time workers. We may have something to learn from other helping professions that have a significant part-time workforce. I have heard in meetings, "Well, they are part-time so they probably can't do much harm." But the research is clear that if you don't get the point of service right, it doesn't matter whether you're working there for two hours or 20 hours. If it's not high quality, it's wasted time.

Forum: Over a decade and a half ago, through the efforts of Elaine and others at places like the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research and the National Collaboration for Youth, this field defined core competencies for youth workers. Does emerging research like what we've summarized here suggest it is time to move to a more holistic discussion of practice?

Ravi: A holistic approach is important. I have done training where afterwards people say, "This sounds great! I get it!" Then once they had to put it all together in a real-world context, it became clear that they didn't get it. My conclusion was that the disconnect was in their fundamental understanding – they didn't get the youth centered, strength-based ideas about practice. What's missing is the holistic aspect, which is based on a value system around how human beings should be treated. Sometimes, effective youth work requires that individuals make a huge paradigm shift.

Elaine: My reference point is the Advancing Youth Development curriculum. If I had to weigh in on what topics to focus on the most, I'd say there needs to be much more dialogue on the issue of understanding what one believes about young people. So I agree with the

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underlying idea behind the question about moving beyond competencies, but that's not the way I'd frame it.

The competencies frame is valuable in this society as we continue to shape ourselves internally and relate to others externally as a profession. We should have an external agenda and an internal one. On the external agenda, I'd continue to push competency-based work. Internally, we can push more on the importance of the value system and linking that to a body of identified competencies. That framework sets the stage for addressing dilemmas and operationalizing good practice.

Conclusion

Youth work is both important and complex. Promising evidence from Hirsch and others suggests that positive adult-youth relationships in youth-serving settings are frequent enough, consistent enough and last long enough to effect change. Larson and Walker provide a picture of the kinds of dilemmas youth workers must resolve in order to create safe, supportive environments in which these relationships can thrive. The difficulty of this task is affirmed by Smith's finding that one-third of all staff do not even succeed in cultivating a basic sense of warmth and belonging in the activities they lead.

Improving youth work is equally important and complex. Smith's current and previous research suggests that individual staff bring dramatically different skills to the table and that quality varies more between staff inside of single programs than it does between programs. Johnson and Ramaswamy affirm Smith's findings and suggest that the current thinking about youth worker preparation does little to ensure that staff have the supervision and support they need to handle the complexity of their jobs. In contrast to other professions and other countries, U.S. youth workers are too frequently recruited quickly and "dropped" into situations without adequate preparation or supervision.

Quality counts. Young people participating in high quality programs make significant academic, social and emotional gains; those participating in low quality programs do not. Expectations for the outcomes associated with out-of-school time and after-school programs have increased from problem prevention to preparation. Investments in program quality improvement need to increase commensurately. Research suggests that these investments should focus on ensuring consistent and specific supports for frontline staff.

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OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME
POLICY COMMENTARY

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Unpacking Youth Work Practice

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This commentary examines youth work practice and discusses the supports needed to facilitate effective practice in youth-serving settings. We use three lenses: staff-youth relationships, practice dilemmas, and instructional approaches to raise important questions about what youth worker behaviors and approaches support positive development. Viewed together, the three strands of research explored in this commentary deepen our understanding of youth work practice and can help inform organizational and policy strategies aimed at developing a strong, stable, committed and prepared out-of-school time workforce in the 21st century.

What staff behaviors and practices support young people's development and contribute to the features we know matter for quality? How do youth workers navigate the competing demands and complexities of service delivery? How do the everyday decisions and behaviors of staff add up to influence the quality of youth experiences?