



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

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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

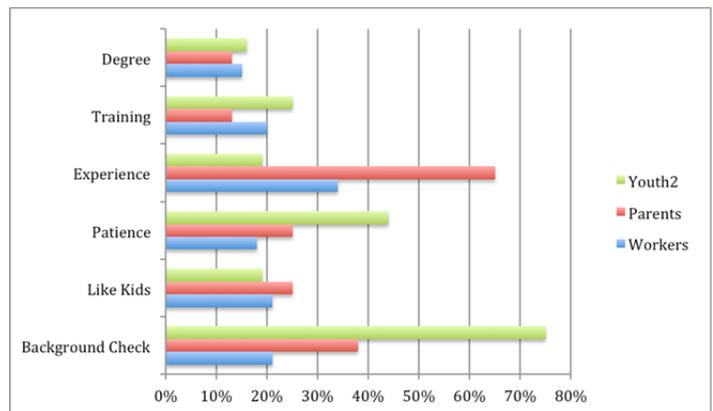
Each stakeholder indicated which of these people were youth workers. Generalists were unanimously selected as youth workers. However, all people on the list were identified as youth workers by at least 40% of the entire stakeholder group. Follow-up discussions revealed a general consensus that people 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.

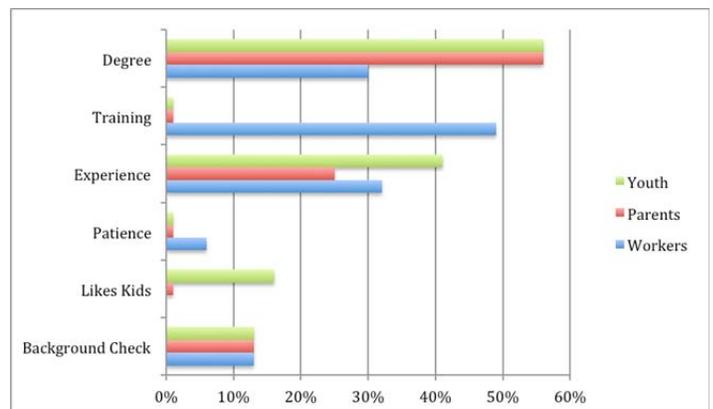
While interviewing Gene Roehlkepartain, Interim CEO of Search Institute, we talked about the word "qualified" and its relevance in terms of credentials versus competencies. He encouraged me to try to disentangle these terms when exploring expectations and accountability. With his suggestion in mind, 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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