



Supporting Youth Workers through Reflection Circles:

An Alternate Approach to Program Accountability

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

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

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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

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

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

DIVERSITY OF THE FIELD

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

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

PROBLEM WITH STANDARDS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

INTERNAL RESPONSIBILITY

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

Youth workers want support to help them do

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

AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY APPROACH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1.

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

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

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

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

ROLE OF FUNDERS

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

ANTICIPATED RESULTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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