

# Moving Youth Work Practice Forward: Looking Back to Move Forward



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# THE NORTHSTAR FELLOWSHIP— LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

The fourth volume of *Moving Youth Work Practice Forward* looks back into history to examine the opportunities and challenges facing youth work in the twenty-first century. How is youth work different? How is it the same? What core values, key figures and fundamental documents from the past and present should be used to provide a solid foundation and inform youth work practice in Minnesota in the new millennium? What should be left behind?

Members of the 2015-16 cohort of the NorthStar Youth Worker Fellowship made a commitment to spend a year studying, engaging in conversation, and writing a position paper that will inform systems development and field advancement in Minnesota. The application materials for the 2015-16 NorthStar Fellowship included the following:

In the late 1960's and early 1970's Margaret Mead and Gisela Konopka both wrote about the idea of commitment. Konopka framed commitment in her paper *Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth* as "the emotional, intellectual, and sometimes physical reach for other people as well as ideas, ideologies, causes and work choices." Mead, in her book *Culture and Commitment*, articulated the need to "create new models for adults who can teach their children not what to learn, but how to learn and not what they should be committed to, but the value of commitment."

The word commitment was used by Mead and Konopka to describe something that happens during human development, primarily in adolescence. But it can also provide a lens through which to look at the experiences of the NorthStar Fellows after they spent a year in exploration, creation and study.

When a youth work professional becomes a NorthStar Fellow, they make a commitment to attend meetings and produce a paper, of course, but the commitment goes much deeper than that. The Fellowship creates the space and expectation to read and learn. The fellows commit to creating knowledge that will inform and improve the field of youth work in Minnesota.

Fellows commit to a stance. Each fellow must take a position and be prepared for others to disagree with them. This can be uncomfortable, but the fellows commit to working through the discomfort and prepare for the challenges. One fellow described the Fellowship as a safe place to feel vulnerable.

Finally, fellows commit to one another. One of the goals of the NorthStar Fellowship is to create a community of learners. When asked to describe the cohort experience, fellows said that it provided structure, support and a sense of obligation. They were motivated to come to meetings prepared, share resources and encourage one another throughout the year. They embodied the "value of commitment" that Margaret Mead wrote about.

This issue of *Moving Youth Work Practice Forward* contains the products of the commitments made by the 2015-16 cohort of the NorthStar Youth Worker Fellowship. We hope you find these papers interesting and useful.

Sheila Oehrlein and Erik Skold

# Thank You!

It truly takes a village to complete a NorthStar Fellowship cycle. As the fourth cohort comes to an end, the NorthStar planning team would like to express our appreciation to the following individuals and organizations that have supported this Fellowship through contributed staff and volunteer time, guidance, funding, operational support, and hosting.

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# ON BEING DISRUPTED: YOUTH WORK & BLACK LIVES MATTER

By Angela Bonfiglio

Over the course of history, social justice movements have created disruption to the dominant narrative in order to change the perspective of the masses to a new narrative. Organizers of social movements create disruption through a number of tactics including protests, rallies, boycotts, and civil disobedience to bring attention to their narrative. Globally in the last century, we have seen justice movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, Anti-Apartheid Movement, Women's Rights Movement, Marriage Equality and most recently the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM).

As an individual who is passionate about equity and justice work, I see the importance of disruption in our daily routines in order to agitate and demonstrate a new reality and bring voice to an otherwise silenced story. Yet, I am still navigating what this means as a youth worker. As a relatively new youth worker in North Minneapolis, issues of equity, race, and racism have always been the center of my work. As a white person in a diverse community, it has been an ongoing learning process in understanding racism and how I can be a part of undoing racism from where I stand.

In the aftermath of the killing of Trayvon Martin and Terrence Franklin, the reality continued to come closer to home, as young boys the same age or slightly older than many of my youth had been killed. The reality continued to sink deeper after the deaths of Michael Brown, Aiyana Jones, and Tamir Rice. The issue of violence against black bodies was a reality in which my community in North Minneapolis had a heightened awareness from the news, social media and movements in the lives of the young people. North Minneapolis residents are aware that the social ills of racism and inequality are embedded into many systems in our community, such as education, policing, employment, transportation and the judicial system.

In the aftermath of the death of Michael Brown, the BLM movement was becoming organized locally. A number of groups in the movement set out to shed light on the reality for black and brown people in Minneapolis and beyond. On November 15, 2015, in the heart of North Minneapolis, a place that historically has faced decades of disinvestment, decades of over-policing, decades of systematic racism and discrimination, Jamar Clark was shot by police officers on Plymouth Avenue and James Avenue. Less than 12 hours later, activists, community members, and family members gathered and organized to put pressure on the city, police, and county officials to act in response to the loss of a life through 18 days of occupation, protests, outreach, organizing and marches that have taken over the fourth precinct, highways, streets, City Hall, and the Government Center. As a community, we were organized to act in response to a tragic event that affected one of our own because many groups and organizations were already doing this work under the umbrella of a national movement.

During this time, especially during the 18-day occupation, I had serious questions related to my role as a youth worker. What are personal and professional boundaries that I must pay attention to? Is my organization supportive? As a staff member, what is my role in pushing for support in this time? As a white person, how do I engage my youth group of predominately black high schoolers in these conversations? In the faith development of young people, how do I respond to those experiencing loss? How are youth in my neighborhood processing this situation? Is it my role to encourage youth to be involved? How do I represent

myself and my values? How are different youth workers across the metro area responding? What are the similarities and differences based on where they are located?

I have always been committed to action, but I questioned what action I would take personally and what action I would take in my professional role. In response to disruption, some of the actions I took were not calculated and they pushed beyond my normal role. I asked myself how do I represent myself, my values, my organization and my youth? Less than a week after the shooting, my youth group was heading up to camp for a weekend retreat. At the end of the night during highs and lows, one of my youth said, "Please pray for our family; Jamar was my cousin." When we are in community, we have increased levels of response when personal connections exist. As a faith leader and a mentor, I have a support role in times of mourning and grief with young people. In this moment, I was reminded of the seriousness of my role as a youth worker and how close to home police brutality can come to my youth.

From taking time to sink into some of these pertinent questions in my context, I believe youth workers are in the position to respond when social justice movements create disruption to the dominant narrative by engaging young people in a variety of ways. The role that a youth worker takes depends on a number of factors including the identity and context of their own lived experiences, the identity and reality of their young people, and the position and role of the organizations they work for. At any point in time as a youth worker, we are navigating the conflict between whom we respond to and who we represent. Do we represent ourselves and our values? Do we work for our organization's values and priorities? Do we work for the youth in our community? This ultimately boils down to a tension that youth workers face in a number of situations, and I will use the current movement, Black Lives Matter, as a case study. Through context, theories and interviews with youth workers, I will present the dialogue of the role and tensions youth workers faced in responding to their young people between November 2015 and March 2016.

## METHODOLOGY

I interviewed six youth workers whom I chose because they responded in some way in their professional role with youth. These youth workers primarily work with youth and young adults ages 14 to 24. They are traditional, paid youth workers who work within structured organizations: three work in a faith community, two work in community-based nonprofits, and one works within a school. I have not included the countless leaders of the different movements, school teachers, and informal mentors who have supported young people in their personal connection or involvement in the broader movement for black lives due to the constraints of this paper, yet I recognize their large contribution in this work. Throughout this paper, I will reference quotes from the interviews I have collected. In order to maintain anonymity, identifying information has been removed, but in order to understand the work of these leaders, I will include brief descriptions of their contexts in order to follow their stories through the paper.

## THE YOUTH WORKERS

- **Katherine** is a white youth director in a church in a suburban and rural setting in southern Minnesota. White youth and youth of color who have been adopted attend her youth group. The context of her youth is beginning to become more diverse as the demographics are changing in Minnesota.
- **Nellie** is a black youth worker from North Minneapolis who works at a regional organization in Minneapolis that mainly focuses on policy and grant-making with a commitment to racial equity.



She has many roles at the organization, but mainly spoke to me about a group of Northside young people she works with doing research in their own community.

- **Joe** is a white youth director in a suburb of Minneapolis who works at a church that is well known for being progressive. His youth are mainly white and attend both urban and suburban schools, where he sees a divide in his experiences.
- **Susie** is a youth director at a suburban church. She has youth that go to two different high schools, one being mostly white and the other being much more diverse in the same city. Like Susie, many of the youth she works with are white. While she lives in the city, she notices many ways in which her youth are disconnected from urban experiences.
- **Nate** works in a non-profit located in Minneapolis. His work is centralized in North Minneapolis, where he primarily works with North Minneapolis youth on employment and job readiness. Nate often commented that these were the youth that no one else is engaging. As a white youth worker, living in North Minneapolis, working primarily with black youth, he has learned much from his youth and from being in the North Minneapolis community.
- **Catlin** is a youth worker in a school context. She works with young people of color from North Minneapolis in a South Minneapolis school as a coordinator and advisor. She works with students by hosting support groups throughout the school week and helps students navigate a high school with a majority white staff and students. As a black youth worker, she sees it as extremely important for her students to see someone that looks like them in the school environment.

Youth workers have the chance to engage with young people within the systems in which they live, go to school, and spend their out-of-school time in order to give young people the chance to try new opportunities and begin to understand responsibilities and their choices. I will use the interviews to show how youth workers are uniquely able to respond amidst disruption for positive impact and opportunity to engage with their youth in relationship to a social justice movement in a positive way.

## **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS DISRUPT STATUS QUO**

Our lives are dictated by rules of work and patterns in our day-to-day existence that regulate our days, weeks and seasons. These patterns also rule social institutions as well as individuals. When individuals or groups of people are pushed out of routine or act outside of social patterns, it interrupts the stability of the social institutions in which they function (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Thus movements begin and grow out of disruptions to the norms for groups of people that break down the social patterns and institutions. From these disruptions, ordinary people begin to try to make changes against nation states or powerful groups. Social networks contribute to individuals' ability to enact change. According to Sidney Tarrow (2011), these are called contentious politics, where "ordinary people—often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood—join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents... and is triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives to take action for actors who lack resources on their own" (p. 6). Not all situations of contentious politics are social movements. In order to have a social movement, these events of contentious politics must be supported by underlying social networks, the framing of a movement, and the capacity for ongoing challenges to the opponents' narratives. Necessary to all social movements are contentious collective actions, which can take the form of protests, strikes, riots, and revolutions in order that people who are underrepresented within institutions can "behave

in ways to fundamentally challenge others or authorities” (Tarrow, p. 7). Movements are disruptive by definition against social groups or cultural codes. Disruption can look like “coordinated personal resistance or collective affirmation of new values” (Tarrow, p. 9). By this qualification, Black Lives Matter has become more than a series of events, but collective action and a social movement supported by many to bring attention and make change.

Individuals who act by participating in or being in solidarity with social movements have skin in the game or a self-interest to be involved. These people have a reason for making sacrifices and changes to day-to-day life in order to participate in a social movement for a common purpose (Tarrow, 2011). All the youth workers I spoke to identified some reason for acting in this situation.

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*I got to see firsthand the effect of racism and the kind of oppression in Minnesota and our community... You see people on Facebook talking about it, who are quarterbacking from their couch, who have no idea – and I don't have any idea either as a white male, but at least I have like sat here with this kid... This was a human being that was killed, someone's friend, someone's son, and people saw someone's life get taken... and that has an impact and it changes people. (Nate, April 4, 2016).*

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The youth workers had a powerful desire to use current information as a learning tool for the youth they work with. Katherine used research and provided access to information to try to get her youth to care outside of themselves. She wanted them to “find when they were curious about different things happening so they could say ‘I need to go and I need to have an opinion about this,’ instead of saying ‘I don't care” (April 19, 2016). Joe said Jamar Clark's death led his youth to understand more of why they were talking about race:

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*Those who previously didn't really get why we were talking about race, after Jamar Clark was shot, it was kind of like an ‘oh, aha’ moment for a lot of them ... [black] lives are not valued by the system as much as my life as a white person. It gave us an opportunity to talk about why we are social change makers and Christians (April 1, 2016).*

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Individuals who take part in movements frame their own story and reasons why they participate in contentious and disruptive politics. In order for a movement to be sustained it must convey meaning to other individuals to combat the framing of the power of government, media and other social structures. Participants must then define and construct a collective identity, that has a distinct understanding of themselves and what distinguishes them from others. Members must do “emotion work” in order to recruit others by reflection and shaping of emotions (Tarrow, 2011). This work can legitimize a movement in order to bring others into the collective understanding of a particular movement.

Youth workers were creating spaces to have their youth reflect and find connections to what was happening in Minnesota. Nate, who works with youth who have been in contact with police – some of whom knew Jamar Clark – stated:

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*This was their everyday life... getting stopped by the police and getting harassed... There weren't people stopping them to think about [the Black Lives Matter movement] to start*

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*to get a bigger context... They understood that there is this oppressive system holding black people down in Minneapolis,... but I don't think they understood that they could help change it... How do you get them to believe that? ...There were these moments that you could tell they had hope... Again, they were too weighed down by everyday life survival, that it was a fleeting thought (Nate, April 4, 2016).*

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The sheer proximity to the movement, affected other youth in North Minneapolis to take action. Nellie, who has been working with a research team on the topic of health disparities related to over-policed communities stated:

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*We had tried to get them to protest before, but [they didn't] until it hit close to home. Then they were like it's not about Ferguson, it's not about Florida, it's not about New York, it's about everywhere... When it hit close to home, it changed their passion and what affects them and their community (April 4, 2016).*

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These important moments and reflections help youth feel connected to a larger moment, where even if they are not directly involved, they are further able to navigate what their connection is to the cause of Black Lives Matter. Catlin stated, "This year was really a year where it's been brought to the forefront... and students are aware and they're calling it out and it's about time" (June 14, 2016).

Within social movements and identity frames, individuals and groups can identify in a variety of ways with a movement, which is what we see today with Black Lives Matter. Three types of identity include: 1) movement identity, which is primary loyalty to a movement, 2) organizational culture, primary identity with a movement organization, and 3) biographical identity, where individuals identify with a broad social category (Tarrow, 2011). As with many youth workers, in their professional roles, the youth workers I interviewed did not express particular allegiance to an organization. Rather, they were committed to the broader ideals and opportunities for action and change. Not all the youth workers have found themselves at actions or at protests as activists, but they have all taken some sort of action in their context. I did not ask questions in particular about how they identified with the movement, but some did make statements of how their youth identified with the larger movement. Nate shared that, in contrast to the newer activists, one youth told him that, "He was going to listen to his community leaders ...like all these old pastors who were speaking against the movement ... He was like 'these are the people I trust, these are my community leaders' ... there is a rift there" (April 4, 2016). Nellie discussed the relationship her group had over time with both the national and local BLM organization:

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*We spent multiple nights at the occupation, ... their presence ended up being very strong in the Black Lives Matter initiative, I don't know how they see Black Lives Matter – the group themselves with the individuals involved – but I think they are down for the movement (April 4, 2016).*

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In her case, the youth connected with the movement identity.

The status quo holds power and social movements disrupt that power. The status quo provides a definition for what is considered legitimate (Piven & Cloward, 1977). We live and work within institutions that have the

power to bring people together within movements by creating a sense of cohesion so that collective action can occur. Institutions can use the same forces to disperse us. Our roles within institutions can provide strategic opportunities for action as well as forces to maintain the status quo (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Joe felt that it was very meaningful to his youth that they joined other churches in the area for a march and worship service with their bishop before connecting to a larger community march. "Because there was a worship service beforehand...it set up the march in a way that I think was very helpful for my youth" (April 1, 2016). Within the institution of church, his congregation has partnerships with other urban churches and believes having more opportunities to build diverse friendships will greatly benefit his youth. These institutional relationships can be utilized to build connections and experiences for young people.

## CONTEXT, IDENTITY & WORLDVIEW OF YOUTH, YOUTH WORKERS & ORGANIZATIONS

### IDENTITY

Our identity can shape much of who we are and how we see the world. Our identity can represent so much to a young person through our interactions, intentionally or not. As a white straight female who grew up in a suburban context and graduated from college, my identity and experiences can be very different from the youth I work with. Catlin described the importance of having a similar identity and set of experiences as her students:

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*Being African-American, being a person of color...and knowing that there is a need here in Minnesota in particular for students to see someone that looks like myself... I have empathy because ... I come from Minneapolis Public School District and I know that there is a need for students of color ...to have support" (June 14, 2016).*

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Catlin also mentioned that similar to her students, she comes from a lower income background, qualified for free and reduced lunch, has siblings who did not graduate from high school, and was a first generation college student.

### EXPERIENCES

As youth workers, each of us has a unique set of experiences that shape our identity, the work we do and how we see the world. As humans we are heavily shaped by our lived experiences and what we are exposed to, which in turn shape our worldview. Our social position in society can also dictate our experiences and exposure. Even if our identity and experiences are similar to our young people's, it is false to assume that our youth have the same worldview as we have. Each generation develops new perspectives and ideas about the world. Also youth workers have a range of understanding the context and experiences of their young people, especially if they are from outside the community. Nate saw this with his young people: "Even if they weren't engaged in the protesting... their understanding of what's going on... they know.... And they are like genuinely afraid, genuinely this is real.... I don't have to stand on the corner and worry about being shot" (April 4, 2016).

Sociologists understand that individuals have a set of symbolic interactions that are reflections of social positions, social roles, social pressures, group affiliations, cultural norms and values. These symbolic interactions are based on meaning that humans act on. This meaning is derived from social interaction with

others, and the modification and interpretation of such meanings a person encounters (Blumer, 1969). Our lived experiences and interactions shape our day to day lives, both as adults and young people.

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*There is a clear divide between the youth who go to Minneapolis and youth who go to Edina as far as their experiences with race, so the youth who go to Edina...it takes them longer to reflect on experience or recall experiences where they have to think about race... my assumption is that the school in Minneapolis is a more diverse school" (Joe, April 1, 2016).*

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Youth workers described some of the differences they saw between themselves and their youth, and even between different youth.

### **PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ROLE**

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*I don't feel like it was outside of what I should do...but in general...our job as work force coaches, we are supposed to help them with employment education, but we spend most of our time doing case management and mentoring...because how can you talk about employment when they witnessed someone get shot or ... when they have nowhere to stay at night... Even if I knew they weren't ready for [a job], we had to push them in that direction because that is what we were supposed to be doing (Nate, April 4, 2016).*

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As professionals, youth workers need to balance their personal commitments and professional role. I struggled with this personally due to my vested interest in action and change. Yet, I wondered, what freedom and constraints do I have in my professional role? Do others struggle with this tension? This question is central to my paper; at what point, who are you accountable to: your values, your youth, your organization leadership, or the broader community? Ideally we want to pay attention to all of those things, but what do you do in your role when those are in tension? Youth workers in direct service are often closer to the young people in an organizational system, but not always in roles where we can make structural changes or decisions. Often those who do not have as much power can be at the center of such changes (Tarrow, 2011). In a professional position, youth workers must struggle to balance the needs of young people with the expectations of their own job and organization. In moments of disruption, this is a balance a youth worker must strike. Some youth workers did not experience this tension:

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*I think if I were in a different church, [my personal and professional roles] would have clashed, but I think I am really lucky to be in this church...when people in the church find out I am going to marches...it's not so much a push back or tension, there like 'Oh that's great, we're really glad you do those things and can bring them back to the youth' (Joe, April 1, 2016).*

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Others were still working towards moving forward with some of their commitments and ideas towards racial justice work: “No but probably in a bad way... we haven’t... made time to make a tension... I have a lot of freedom at my job, so nothing is holding me back but me” (Susie, April 21, 2016).

## ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

Professional youth work positions are within organizations that exist in a setting that influences the organization’s goals and strategies, environment, culture, structure, size and technology (Daft, 2010). Becker (1982) defined culture as the conventional understandings that are manifested where individuals have similar ways of acting in shared understanding and coordination. If the scope of a movement is outside the cultural understanding and commitment of an organization it can be difficult for a youth worker to engage in the disruption in particular ways or at all. Within a structure, dynamics of formalization, specialization, hierarchy of authority, centralization, professionalism, and personal ratios can all affect the autonomy of a youth worker to act in the context of responding to a social movement or disruption. This will look different in every organization in which cultural norms and understandings can influence how one will act. Five of the youth workers stated that they felt overall they were being supported in their work by their organization. Four of the five had comments about there not being total support for the BLM cause or anti-racism work in their organization, questioning whether the organization was engaging as deeply as their young people or if the youth workers had enough autonomy to take action as individuals, they did not see the overall organization as completely supportive. They did discuss new initiatives that have started to transform since the beginning of the national BLM movement in the form of creating statements, groups, discussions and initiatives.

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*Personally, yes... my boss was very supportive, I was able to get time off... in order to go to the protests. They were very open for me to come in my protest gear because at the time it was very cold... my smell of smoke... my baggy eyes from coming from [the fourth precinct]... they were supportive of me as an individual. As an organization, they were very supportive... there was resistance when it came to openly supporting... I feel like they didn’t feel like... it was safe to directly fund Black Lives Matter... Put a speech out about Black Lives Matter, but in terms of social media, in terms of support for employees... having the conversations out and proud... they were in complete support... I just think that in terms of organizationally, professionalism [sic], they didn’t feel like they could show that... We are going through a transition... where all of our work is going to be done with a racial equity lens... I think it was happening before Jamar Clark, but I definitely think the national movement had a [role] in reevaluating what we look like (Nellie, April 4, 2016).*

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Joe, who felt fully supported by his organization, discussed the long history of his organization being engaged with the Wounded Knee Trials in the 1960’s and immigration reform. He said even though the focus on racism and Black Lives Matter is new, there is a long history of focus on justice (April 1, 2016). In contrast to all of the other youth workers, Catlin discussed not feeling supported by her organization, but now she sees the institutional change from ongoing participation with the students and the staff around this work:

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*I wanted to quit the first year because of the racism and discrimination that I experienced as a black woman myself, and I came in quietly and just did my job because I was there for the kids and I wanted to quit so many times. Every year I said I was going to quit... but I now see that it was meant for me to be at least these three years, because now I see how change is taking place and I'm so grateful that I've seen change (June 14, 2016).*

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## CONTEXT

Organizations, youth and their families reside in particular contexts that can shape their opportunities, social interactions, and understanding of the world. Being at an organization that is located and works with youth in North Minneapolis, our context shapes what we see and experience. Within their families, young people are exposed to particular opportunities, power, privileges, barriers and discrimination (Witt, 2011). According to psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1994) it is these direct interactions with family, peer groups, school, churches, neighborhoods and more that affect an individual's microsystem. Larger ecosystems such as youth-serving organizations, family, friends, mass media, and social services interact with the microsystem to impact the young person. Macrosystems are larger attitudes, ideologies and social institutions. Both the macrosystem and exosystem interact with the microsystem to impact the child. This is all a function of time, also known as the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's theory helps to remind us as youth workers that there are many systems at play affecting the life and context of a child.

Both suburban youth and urban youth have systems that shape their experiences. An example is Nate's explanation of the difference in policing in North Minneapolis:

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*A [Latino] guy was dropping off his son at Fairview... he was driving down Lyndale, four cops pulled him over, drew guns on him... I guess his car fit the description... he lives in Uptown or South... and he wrote this long post saying, this is real, this would not have happened in any other part of Minneapolis, why is this OK to happen in North Minneapolis... I think that is what people don't get... In that moment maybe the police were in their legal right... but how do people still not understand the fact that it got to that point? ...That this represents something so much bigger... The way that this community is policed is not right, it is different (April 4, 2016).*

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Susie said she has to find ways for those in her context to understand what is going on: "Our church has to go back to basic needs, to basic rights, to basic opportunities to even begin to have the conversation of people understanding this. I think sometimes that is so powerful for how basic we have to get for them to really understand again that we have issues" (April 21, 2016).

## YOUTH LEADERSHIP

In youth spaces that are curated or supported by youth workers, how much leadership have the young people had in shaping the experience? In engaging in a contentious issue such as BLM, what is the role of action based on youth voice and what is the role of the youth worker to expand horizons of young people and meet them where they are? Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Voice can help youth workers understand how

much they are actually engaging young people on a topic. Gisela Konopka shares the importance of giving young people open space to discuss and lead with responsibility, giving young people a voice that can range from non-engagement through manipulation, decoration, and tokenism or leadership through youth and adult equality, completely youth-driven, and youth and adult equity (Fletcher, 2016). Not all youth were taking leadership roles, but those who did discussed situations with youth and adults in partnership:

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*I have really empowered a couple of our youth to be a part of [the racial justice] group, not because the youth group isn't doing stuff [but] because I feel like they can do even more by being a part of that group and bring those ideas back to the youth group, which they have and that has been spectacular... I have really empowered them to be kind of the leaders of what the youth group does.... They were really good leaders... in being a peer mentor (Joe, April 1, 2016).*

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## **ROLES OF YOUTH WORKER IN RESPONSE TO DISRUPTION**

Beyond the dynamics of one's context, worldview and experiences, youth workers found themselves in different roles to respond to this situation. Next I outline the roles that the youth workers I spoke to shared with me. They have a unique sense of what youth workers can offer to the young people with whom they work.

### **EDUCATOR**

Many, especially in suburban environments, saw their primary role as that of educator. By sharing of information, stories and facilitating conversations, five youth workers created space for information sharing to dispel the myths and provide exposure to what is going on beyond the media. Susie said: "My role is to start conversation, to ask hard questions" (April 21, 2016). Storytelling was an essential part of how they portrayed what is going on. Youth workers have the opportunity to develop the capacity for young people to make choices within their growing sense of interdependence through forms of education. According to Gisela Konopka (1973), it is important that youth workers not impose values, but encourage an open discussion and the exchange of ideas. Joe discussed the importance of education as an action:

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*I'm a big believer that education is a form of liberation and social change, and it's a form of action...when we have dialogue and we have discussions and we reflect on experiences, that is a form of action. Whereas my youth, when they think action they think of going to a march or building a house, which that is obviously action, but as far as race when it comes to social movements, especially for those of us who are white ... our first step really needs to be intense education for people of color and being in accompaniment via listening (April 1, 2016).*

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### **MENTOR**

Youth workers in mentoring roles took the stance of accompanying youth in their personal journey in relation to what was going; they mentored them in participating in action. It also looked like being a listener. Many youth workers who had youth engaged in protest focused on equipping their youth with tools around direct action and facilitating safety. Nate's youth organization in North Minneapolis held a healing



circle, led by members of the community, which is something they often do after a young community member dies (April 4, 2016). Often the youth workers were mentoring youth to see beyond themselves in any given situation. In mentoring relationships, young people have the opportunity to receive education, access to resources and power to cope with the system and pressures in which they find themselves (Konopka, 1973). In North Minneapolis, youth workers had to address both the personal ways the oppression affects their young people and the larger system. Nate discussed supporting a young person who was friends with Jamar, witnessed Jamar's death and was being sought as a witness:

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*He didn't want to talk at all. He didn't know who the cops were, who the defense lawyer was...he thought it was all bad... They had to explain to him that they were for Jamar....even after that he didn't believe they were for him...[We said] don't you see, you should go and say what you saw... He didn't even see that because he thought everyone was bad and against him...The system is so oppressive that there is no trust in the system, even the good guys in the system...there is no trust (April 4, 2016).*

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This direct work that is necessary for youth workers to be engaged in can look very different in different contexts. In suburban contexts, there are pressures and systems that create barriers for youth. In their perspective, the youth workers discussed the need to create a culture for the youth to know and learn more. The three youth workers who had youth who were protesting saw this support as part of their mentoring role. Joe stated, "Three youth in particular, I have had long conversations...about...what is direct action... what is non-violence, what is justice, and what is reconciliation...I have really been trying to get them to realize how complicated some of these things are" (April 1, 2016).

### **FACILITATOR OF RELATIONSHIPS**

Since youth workers have strong relationships with young people, they have the opportunity to help facilitate and be a liaison for new relationships. Many youth workers in suburban settings identified the importance of facilitating diverse relationship-building, so that youth can understand more from their peers through retreats and events. These events, trips and retreats often include both educational experiences and relational components. Susie discussed having a panel because, "You cannot argue with someone's story and humanizing people in their story" (April 21, 2016). Other youth workers saw it as their role and opportunity to help youth more directly connected to the movement to make change by helping them navigate the politics of through facilitating institutional relationships with community leaders and organizations, police, government and nonprofits to support them in making change.

### **FAITH LEADER & SHARING IN VULNERABILITY**

Three of the youth workers I interviewed worked at churches and were responsible for the faith formation of high schoolers. They saw faith as a crucial component to this topic. Even a youth worker who was not working in a faith setting stated:

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*The faith community I think has a much bigger role to play in connecting youth to the movement... the faith community has a platform that people listen to the faith community that they wouldn't listen to otherwise. They have a special role in providing a platform for youth voices to be heard (Nate, April 4, 2016).*

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These youth workers played many roles, but in particular saw their opportunity to discuss these issues through a faith lens, which limited the potential tensions of their roles in their organizations. As one youth worker put it, as long as it had to do with Jesus, it was fair game. In a suburban context, it was new for their youth to have this discussion in a church setting, and it was really the youth directors leadership to say, 'Yes, we can talk about this at church.' Church can be a more comfortable or safe environment when discussing difficult issues. These youth workers had chance to push beyond their norm and be vulnerable with their youth. Susie said she had to "Also to model what it looks like to understand... that I have privilege... to put language around it. My role is to be honest and vulnerable" (April 21, 2016).

### **FACILITATOR OF ACTION**

Some youth workers went further than education and provided ways for their youth to take action in the form of doing research, civic engagement, and direct action work. Facilitating action included giving youth the tools and confidence they needed to participate in these opportunities. Within youth work, there is great opportunity to allow young people to try out different roles and opportunities of accountability through participation and accountability. Youth workers can give young people a chance to engage as members of their community and understand what it means to be a citizen (Konopka, 1973, p. 9). In this case, youth workers accomplished engaging youth in leadership through opportunities to be involved. Katherine had her youth do research:

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*We took our time slot for our evening and did research, and we looked at all the news articles... their response to it was that their eyes opened a little bit... They had been just hearing what media trends were trying to tell them instead of [the message that] the organization Black Lives Matter was trying to share" (April 19, 2016).*

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Nellie helped to support her youth in their participation in the protest at the Fourth Precinct and Highway 94 shut down. They also did research at the events. She said: "Once they feel like they are ready [educated], it is our job to bring them there, so they can do the action" (April 4, 2016). In contrast, Joe discussed that his youth wanted to be engaged in the community actions beyond a boundary that he was comfortable doing as a youth group, but supported them nonetheless:

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*I have been trying to get them to understand how much more complicated these thing are then they realize sometimes. I mean particularly when it comes to nonviolence and justice.... There has been a point of tension, with for example the Mall of America protest. I was uncomfortable with making that a youth group event, because there was legality issues, there were parents who need to be involved with some of these things... a lot of the youth were like we have to do this... which was a great energy... but that was one of the things that was hard for me, realizing they are minors, and getting them to understand my point of view with that, but I encouraged them if they wanted to go, go with your parents (April 1, 2016).*

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There is accountability and responsibilities for both the youth and youth workers that can create a learning opportunity by taking action together.

Caitlin saw her role as facilitating peaceful actions and to give students peaceful ways to respond, because she did not want to see them involved in violence or rioting. She shared peaceful tactics with the students and helped them organize sit-ins, peaceful protests and walk outs, and performance nights to share through music where they could take public action for the cause they were passionate about (June 14, 2016).

### **BUILDING PEER LEADERS**

Many youth workers saw that by supporting their youth in these conversations and education, young people had the opportunity to be leaders among their peers, in and outside of the organization. By having more information, youth are able to lead others, ask questions and push each other in understanding and to provide support. For example, “When they’re hearing someone that is saying ‘All Lives Matter’, they’re able to say, ‘Yes, but this is not what the hashtag means’ and correctly explaining something” (Katherine, April 19, 2016). As members of social movements, young people often are not given access to power or are tokenized within systems that do not authentically give them equal power, especially in bureaucracies (Konopka, 1973). It is our role to look out for this and help to support our young people in being leaders.

### **ADVOCATES FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

Youth workers who have direct contact with young people have a role as liaisons in a larger organization to help support changes that will benefit their young people and also support a broader vision to the experiences of people within their organizations and communities. Youth workers can be positioned to identify the need:

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*My critique is ... that you have a staff that is 60% white and 40% black and we serve a 100% African-American population...there is no facilitation about race...white supremacy, European thought verses African thought...or about power structure, there is a certain kind of tension amongst staff (Nate, April 4, 2016).*

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Youth workers identified initiatives, committees, and policies they have either been a part of changing or would like to see change at their institutions. Caitlin participated in many larger institutional opportunities to make change “because of this discrimination I have seen against our students of color and students from within North Minneapolis and because of the whole issue of the achievement gap” (June 14, 2016). She also discussed how she has led trainings for other staff on how to work with African-American students, participated in the equity committee, been a member of a selection committees for new administrators, and supported students in asking and making institutional changes (June 14, 2016). Susie was looking to make change by digging deeper into areas yet untouched:

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*I would even like our leadership to look more diverse and how that happens...Part of that is always thinking about we have such a diverse school and we are not diverse at all at our church. My role is not to be comfortable...not to be safe and lazy, [but] to dig in a little bit (April 21, 2016).*

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### **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

The wide variety of roles and commitment to action by the youth workers I interviewed is inspiring. When considering our roles, researcher and educator Mark Smith encourages us to bring into the 21<sup>st</sup> century the

understanding of localized practice and to continue to understand our role (2007). In a world that encourages us to be producers and youth to be consumers, it led us to be dehumanizing, uniform and predictable (Ritzer, 1996, p. 348). We need to leave these practices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and consider the uniqueness of our role in the lives of youth where they are.

In exploring other people's stories, I discovered more about my own story. As a youth worker, I want to remain authentic to who I am, to the leadership of my youth, and the expectations of my organization and my community. In difficult situations it is difficult to follow all of those areas. When it became more personal and close to home, it can be a challenge to bring all of these things together. First of all, I want to make sure my youth have an outlet to talk about these issues and to know they are loved by a community to be exactly who they are and that their lives matter to our community no matter if there are so many systems that tell them that they do not matter.

When I was at the precinct, I saw the shooting by white supremacists and I saw young people grabbed and pepper-sprayed by police. I knew there were real risks from outsiders and police towards my youth, if they attended, I always personally felt safe because I was with people I knew who had my back, but in no way could I see it as my role to encourage youth under 18 to come to the protest, with such large responsibility. Those youth who did want to go or I saw there, I made sure to explain the risks and safety measures I hoped they would take.

Working in a church setting, I have been a part of a coalition of youth workers who put on a yearly justice-oriented retreat. This year's theme was *Race, Racism and White Privilege*. In this setting of urban and suburban churches I have found it a struggle to figure out how to represent myself in this space, knowing that the work of justice directly affects an everyday reality for my youth. In trying to work in systems embedded with racism and white supremacy, even though this is what we were trying to discuss, my youth, myself, and other leaders saw ways that this was being reproduced through this retreat. Who is in control? Who is made comfortable? Who has put in the work? How do you encourage other white people to be OK with being uncomfortable? How can I act in partnership with others from different contexts, while making sure my youth get the most out of the experience? Are youth voices being heard and responded to? Despite the challenges, I was so proud of my youth because they found ways to celebrate themselves and each other through this experience. We had one of the most impactful retreats that we have ever had, and youth are still asking questions and bringing this information to their peers.

For my youth, their experiences were not being discussed for the sole purpose of teaching their white peers about racism. It was a chance for them to dig deeper into these systems of oppression and learn more from each other and peers. Since many of the youth of color stepped up in pre-leadership opportunities to the retreat, they helped to shape the experience for themselves and their peers, and led much of the discussion, questions and the direction of the retreat. For the adult leaders, I saw a transformation with white leaders from suburban contexts finding ways to be better white allies by being role models for their youth when they pushed them to listen and be more vulnerable with each other. From seeing how different youth and adults reacted to the retreat in a number of ways, it made me question how we can live more in these tensions to get our youth to a new place and understanding.

From the interviews I conducted, I realize all youth workers live with these tensions, and we must act with our heart and head with the community. The youth workers I interviewed had some powerful statements about who we are as youth workers.

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*I think youth worker is just another word for someone who gives and receives education... and someone who has to perform based on what they know. It is your mission to educate yourself...in order to educate them... In my eyes a youth worker's biggest role is to provide equipment..in order for them to feel ready for anything, anything that they are aiming towards (Nellie, April 4, 2016).*

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*In a youth position you're in quite a leadership position, even naming what is happening and making a stance, is powerful. Naming it as a problem and an injustice and then letting kids understand they have roles in that and responsibility... giving someone permission to care about something...is important (Susie, April 21, 2016).*

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So where do we go from here? Here are five concrete recommendations:

- 1. See disruptions from social justice movements and other situations as a positive opportunity to engage our youth.*
- 2. Engage in the tension that can be created in order to more authentically be ourselves and serve our young people and communities.*
- 3. Continue to challenge systems of racism and oppression in all contexts.*
- 4. Act boldly in order to serve our young people.*
- 5. Prepare youth to be engaged as citizens in the world and their context.*

I hope this paper inspires other youth workers to be bold to act in times of disruption, and not just with the day-to-day work, because as youth workers, I truly believe our place is found in the “in-between” for our youth; between school and home life, between current situation and future aspirations, between peers and community. We have a huge role in engaging upcoming generations for all their leadership and possibilities.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ANGELA BONFIGLIO** serves as the Director of Youth Programs for Redeemer Lutheran Church and Redeemer Center for Life in North Minneapolis. She is an Augsburg College graduate, who studied Sociology and Youth and Family Ministry. Since living in Minneapolis, she has been involved with a number of community groups and neighborhoods at the intersection of faith, community and neighborhood. She is passionate about racial equity and interfaith work. In her role at Redeemer, she has the opportunity to use her passions to serve young people in the Harrison neighborhood and North Minneapolis. In her time there she has been involved in projects such as after school programs, summer camp, youth group, youth entrepreneurship, justice retreats, even working with kids to make their own album and more to build relationships and positive experiences with young people amongst a community where they feel beloved. In this fellowship, Angela had the opportunity to reflect more on her practice with young people and bring her passions into her paper to be able to discuss deeper issues around practice, role and racial justice with other youth workers from around the Twin Cities.

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# WALKING THE WALK: INCORPORATING SOCIAL JUSTICE INTO DAILY YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

By Megan Hartman

I have always had an interest and passion in working with young people, starting with my job as a camp counselor in my late teens and early twenties. Tucked away in the northern woods of Wisconsin, I interacted with a white, homogenous group of young people each week. It was a Midwestern middle-class summer fairy tale: swimming in the lake, canoeing along the river, making friendship bracelets, and waving good bye to little hands sticking out of the school bus windows, hearing cries of “good bye!” or “we’ll see you next summer!” My interest in working with young people continued after college and is still one of foundational pieces of what I hope my career to be.

My pursuits led me to a touring children’s theatre based out of Missoula, Montana. For almost two years, I traveled around the country to a different city each week, working with local children. Whether it be in small-town, close-knit communities, or larger cities; every group I worked with was unique. The ways in which I knew to communicate with or manage young people did not always work. I realized that there may not be a “one size fits all” approach, but perhaps there are some sorts of “best practices” that I could use in my work. Wanting to expand my toolbox and challenge myself to think critically about working with young people in an artistic setting, I attended the Master of Fine Arts in Theatre for Youth program at Arizona State University. Through academic instruction and artistic practice, I was challenged to examine my own biases and pinpoint lenses I rely on and ones that are inherently present in my work.

After graduating in 2014, I moved back to the Twin Cities and began working as a Youth Program Manager with East Side Neighborhood Services. While my previous work had intersected and overlapped with youth work in many different ways, it was only at this point where I began to recognize and study youth work as a field. At my program site I was interacting with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds on a daily basis. I thought my previous experiences had prepared me to have not necessarily all of the answers, but at least most of them, but a rude awakening occurred. One way in which this presented itself repeatedly was by youth acknowledging injustices or unfairness within the program model. I felt uncomfortable when comments of identity, culture, and injustice were acknowledged. My face would get warm and I would stutter, looking for the “correct” answer to offer in return. I explored ways to respond and interact with young people and open up opportunities for dialogue after these statements were made. To put it simply: I was not the person who the kids needed me to be. I was not showing up right. They were voicing and enacting their resistance, and as I grasped for control, that seemed to add to the tension, rather than ease it.

As I reflect on my first two years as a youth work professional, I wonder what I can do to take a less reactionary or defensive approach: how can I be proactive in incorporating social justice into my own after-school program? How can other youth workers also take a social justice approach to youth work? Social justice in youth work is a reflective and reactive field that relates to a particular time and place. Those of us doing youth work shift between: 1) a more proactive approach of estimating issues and challenges facing youth communities and figuring out how our programs can serve them, and 2) a reactive approach of pinpointing the challenges and issues the youth are facing, incorporating reflective practice into our own work, and adjusting the current model. Both of these are feasible. As we continue into the 21st century, social justice will continue to be a key component of youth work as youth continue to respond and react to their sociopolitical, cultural, and environmental factors. Youth workers have a responsibility to engage more

deeply with young people and try to provide equitable opportunities to allow youth to understand and navigate unjust systems using their own voices and ideas. Looking ahead, it is essential for youth workers to incorporate social justice into out-of-school-time programs with intention, preparation, and reflection. Doing so will allow young people to navigate inequities and develop skills of resistance and resilience while cultivating their powerful youth voices.

## THE POWERS THAT SWAY AND IDEAS THAT STAY

### WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE IN YOUTH WORK?

Before exploring the history of the field, it is necessary to establish a social justice framework on which I will build my argument. Youth work is, at its core, social justice work (Richards, 2015). There are several definitions of social justice, so rather than go through the stress of selecting “the best one,” I prefer to list several key indicators of social justice as it pertains to this paper. Social justice means:

- Allowing full and equal **participation** by all parties in order to nurture **partnerships** between youth and adults
- Being **mutually beneficial** to participating individuals and/or groups
- Ensuring physical and psychological security through **equitable** opportunities
- Possessing the strategies, knowledge, and resilience to **navigate through daily and worldly injustices**

All of these are characteristics of social justice practice both in and outside the field of youth work, and these indicators will be unpacked even further below.

### PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

In looking at how social justice has been and will be incorporated into youth work, the ideas of one major theorist, Paulo Freire, continue to stay relevant. Freire’s book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) had a tremendous impact around the world. Freire identified the world, not as a static and closed order, but a problem to be worked on and solved. In the foreword, Richard Schaul notes that “...the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it” (p. 33). Freire posits that the oppressed must view reality as a limiting situation which they can transform. According to Freire, those who are oppressed have their humanity negated and unrecognized. They are striving to be free of oppression and reach their full humanity, although “[their efforts] are thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (p.44). The journey/struggle to rid oppression and oppressive acts continues to be ongoing.

Two key terms developed by Freire are conscientization and praxis. Conscientization, or critical consciousness, is described by bell hooks as “that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one’s political circumstance” (1994, p.47). This term meaning “consciousness raising” is about understanding the social and political contradictions of the world and taking action against them in one’s own life.<sup>1</sup> Freire writes, “to achieve the goal, the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality” (1970, p.52). Praxis is the combination of continued action and reflection. Freire deconstructs praxis throughout his work. At one

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tx.cpusa.org/school/classics/freire.htm>

point, he writes “On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection” (1970, p. 66). Freire’s theories embrace spaces and acts of resistance and resilience. He was influenced by his own experiences in times of revolution, just as young people’s acts of resistance are responses to their own revolutionary ideas and beliefs.

## SHAPING THE FIELD

In order to understand the value and need for social justice to be an inherent practice in youth work, it is necessary to recognize that ideas and practices that emerge throughout different decades have a major impact on youth voice and how young people react and respond to the stimuli in their lives. It is necessary to examine the larger economic, social, and cultural forces that bear upon the actions, behaviors, and experiences of youth in order to develop effective policy (Cammarota and Ginwright, 2002). Walker, Gambone, and Walker (2011) explain how, during the early 1900s, social activism in youth work was focused on anti-child labor laws and expanded into public education. Starting in 1960, and for the next two decades, youth work developed as a response to moral panic about youth and their perceived potential for trouble. McDaniel (2015) explains how this prevention/intervention model was detrimental and the message it sent was clear: that young people were expected to make poor decisions. The ideas from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* begin to have an impact here as well: young people were dehumanized, with their actions and environment being controlled and predicted by adults in power who passed policies based on the assumption that young people were “delinquents.” Another key idea in Freire’s work notes the oppressive structures of education, or the “banking system,” in which teachers are the holders of knowledge and students are simply repositories which must take in and memorize such knowledge. By criticizing what were considered to be traditional methods and models of education, Freire paved the way for reform and change to depolarize the roles of adults and young people in educational settings and beyond, including youth work. By the 1990s, a more positive, strengths-based approach began to form, focusing on youth development. Still, this approach was based on the idea that “young people need to be changed and molded by adults into productive members of society.” (McDaniel, 2015, p.41). Even today, the field continues to shift and re-mold in response to social, cultural, and political factors. Through jokes, social media posts, and conversations, young people are talking about race, gender or culture as it relates to current social and political movements every day. As indicated by history of the field, social justice movements are reflective of cultural shifts in perceptions of youth and other communities. Freire’s ideas support the notion that youth work is a fluid, transformable field. While youth work will continue to change, and the previous social justice movements within it may not necessarily be supported now, they provide a valuable, historical foundation on which to build knowledge and understanding in the present and future.

## PERCEPTIONS IN THE PRESENT

### HOLDING MYSELF ACCOUNTABLE

I have spent several months thinking about the role of social justice in youth work and how I incorporate it into my own practice. Because my own worldview and experiences may not be the same as those of the youth with whom I work, I feel it is necessary to take a social justice approach so that I may be able to recognize my own biases and create a more equitable experience for young people. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks explains the value of this: “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.” (1994, p.13). Acts of resistance will continue to happen, and should be expected or even embraced. This empowering act of allowing youth to speak up, speak out, and voice the injustices they

experience cannot happen if the adults in their lives refuse to be vulnerable themselves (hooks, 1994). While recognizing my own biases and background is necessary, my actions and reflective practice cannot stop there.

Each time I came together with colleagues to discuss my topic, I left the meeting perplexed, with more questions than answers. Then, after a particularly in-depth group feedback session, it hit me: the ways in which young people will be empowered and feel a sense of justice or equity will shift and change along with the growing and development of each generation of young people, one after the next. Rather than looking for the answers to putting social justice into youth work, perhaps it really is about sitting with the questions. What questions can I ask of my staff and volunteers that will allow them to include social justice in their work with intention and purpose? Instead of just “talking the talk” of Freire’s ideas, I must also “walk the walk.” Freire writes that his theories are “a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed...” (1970 p.48). I decided to go to the source: the youth themselves. I wanted to hear their ideas and identify key questions that will provide personal accountability for my own youth work practice. Everyone comes to youth work with a variety of experience and understanding. I hope to use the questions that emerged as a continuous check-in tool for myself and my fellow staff members and volunteers, as well as for current and future youth workers who want to continue to incorporate social justice into their work and need an additional tool for reflective practice and dialogue.

## WALKING THE WALK

I conducted two group interviews, one with a group of six 6<sup>th</sup> grade students, and one with a group of seven 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. I explained that I was writing a paper on how to use social justice in our afterschool program. Based on the four components of social justice I described earlier, I provided the basic definition of social justice: *that everyone has access to a variety of opportunities and will be treated fairly in order to create a safe place to grow*. I asked seven questions about social justice, how students perceived it, how they felt it was or was not present in the afterschool program, and how they’d like the adults to prepare or respond using social justice as a foundation for their work. Each group interview lasted about 45 minutes.

The young people provided valuable insight that helped shape my next steps of analysis. Both groups felt that the after-school program tried to be fair in several ways, such as offering a snack to everyone, accepting people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and allowing youth to choose the activities in which they participated. One student also felt support from the adults, noting “if they’re struggling with something, they try to help out the best they can.” When asked about the role of the adults through a series of questions, the youth indicated they wanted adults to act as role models using a variety of adjectives: active, “respectful but not too hard-headed,” responsible, funny, relaxed, “like they care,” and chill.

I took the students’ responses and did an informal content analysis of their thoughts and ideas. Combining this feedback with my own preparation for this paper as well as my reflections from each meeting, I identified four themes for the questions: worldview (of the program leader), distribution of power or control, relationship-building, and intentional reflection. *Worldview* will allow me to continue to check in with any biases or lenses I may be using in my practice. When asked how adults can create a fair or just program, one student’s response was “don’t be racist,” which is easier said than done. Using Freire’s method of critical consciousness, I need to examine the injustices present in young people’s lives and whether or not I am contributing to them based on my own status and circumstance. The *distribution of power or control* was influenced by Freire, as well as hooks, in order to make sure the power held in youth work is not static or polarizing, but rather shared and fluid. *Relationship-building* came from several responses from the youth. Students stressed the importance of adults getting to know them. “Talk about things going on in life...good *and* bad things too,” explained one youth. *Intentional reflection* developed from my current

model as well as the youth responses. Based on suggestions from the youth as to how adults can support them and “show up right” for their programs, I developed questions that can be posed at different points of a youth program, whether it’s during the preparation, implementation, or reflection portion of programming. The questions are listed in the table below.

Worldview	Power/Control	Relationships	Reflection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways are you different from the young people in your program?</li> <li>• What are some similarities between the youth and yourself?</li> <li>• How will you acknowledge differences in backgrounds or experience?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What opportunities are there for youth to make personal choices in your program?</li> <li>• What sorts of consequences will you provide and how will they be explained?</li> <li>• What sorts of variety is there in the program?</li> <li>• In what ways are you modeling the behavior that you’d like the students to follow?</li> <li>• How is power shared during your time?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways will you connect with the students?</li> <li>• How can you help out a student who is struggling?</li> <li>• What sorts of questions can you ask to understand why a student might be struggling?</li> <li>• How are you providing encouragement to students during the program?</li> <li>• What did you learn about a young person today?</li> <li>• Who is someone you’d like to follow up with later?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some of the current issues affecting young people today?</li> <li>• What areas or topics can you learn more about to better understand your work?</li> <li>• In what ways will you try to understand why a student is showing resistance?</li> <li>• Were there any moments of resistance? Describe them.</li> <li>• What is something you struggled with during the program?</li> </ul>

## LOOKING AHEAD

Social justice is a necessary component of youth work. Young people have responded and reacted to political and cultural events of time throughout history, and they will continue to do so. Paulo Freire had an immeasurable impact on youth work and beyond, influencing how we look at the distribution of power and create solutions to local and global injustices. Within youth work, that means looking first within ourselves as youth workers to examine biases and recognizing how social justice is or is not present in our daily practice. In order to put into practice what Freire writes, it is necessary to think about the components of social justice and the themes listed above so that roles may be depolarized and young people will feel more empowered. Social justice in youth work acts as a spotlight to a variety of injustices and inequities, and rather than ignoring or overlooking it, I must be open to moments, spaces, and voices of resistance. If I close myself off to these ideas, I will only be adding to the tension, exacerbating the resistance further. I may not be able to rid the world of all its injustices, but I now have a tool, or compass, to help me navigate through the tough stuff. While I may not have control over how the young people act or behave each day, I can think introspectively and make sure I am trying to control and adjust to my own actions and beliefs using the sets of questions developed from this experience. As youth workers, it is our duty to continue to continue to incorporate social justice with intention, preparation, and reflection. While we may not have the solutions, sometimes it might still be enough to sit with the questions themselves and think critically about our practice.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**MEGAN HARTMAN** grew up in Wisconsin and moved to St. Paul in 2007 to attend Macalester College, where she majored in Theatre and French. Megan spent a few years touring around the United States and Canada with a children's theatre in Montana before attending graduate school at Arizona State University. After earning her MFA in Theatre for Youth in 2014, Megan moved back to Minnesota and is currently a Senior Program Manager at East Side Neighborhood Services. Megan supervises an after school enrichment program at Venture Academy, a charter middle school, and lead a cohort of East Side's 6-12 program managers. In her free time, she enjoys spending time outdoors with my dog, Teddy, as well as my husband.

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# YOUTH INPUT IN GRANT-MAKING

By Steve Palmer

Foundations, grant makers and their staff qualify as important players who shape and influence the field of youth work. Perception commonly holds that youth work includes only those working directly with young people. Acknowledging that many stellar youth workers themselves transition from direct service roles to administrative ones within foundations and direct-service nonprofits, I believe that these staff who work on behalf of youth in more indirect roles can also facilitate and participate in youth work via the inclusion of youth input and feedback through a racial equity lens in the grant-making process. This approach connects funders, the agencies they serve, and ultimately young people to allow for a more equitable means for change.

This approach doesn't just take the stance that "nonprofits know best." It doesn't even just take the stance that communities of color deserve representation- it expands the notion to encompass and recognize the fact that youth make up 52% of the focus of all foundation funding focus areas in Minnesota and suggests that the youth served might be among those who know best how to effect lasting change in communities. As the direct recipients of the largesse of a moneyed foundation, it is regrettable that youth voices have often been excluded from this process. This exclusion can also lead to a troubling racial power dynamic in the relationship between funders, nonprofit staff, and youth. In Minnesota specifically, a state where 74% of the population growth comes among people of color (Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2014), it is especially imperative that people of all backgrounds and races are included in the decision-making and operation of foundations and nonprofits, even (and perhaps especially) in a situation where those with the funds or seated at the executive's desk may largely be upper middle class or white.

As there is an increasing tendency to deem foundations and nonprofits equals in the work of making the world a better place, I wonder if the wall between foundations and youth can become more permeable, or be made as thin as possible. The 21st century has already seen commonly accepted precepts and societal norms revised, challenged, or outright discarded, and I see the nexus between funder, agency, and youth as one possible front for further challenge and exploration. Decision-making, particularly when concerned with money, is largely based upon who holds what power.

I want foundations to engage more directly with youth and, in doing so, subvert some of the power dynamic at play. Minnesota, the "Land of 10,000 funders," is in fact an epicenter for some of these progressive approaches, which I will explore later on. To learn more, I conducted interviews and researched reports mostly from local sources to test out my ideas.

## EXPANDING A RACIAL EQUITY LENS

There are as many foundations in the world as there are causes. Foundations are centered on everything from educational equity to environmental issues to health and medical research. The main difference in approach between a foundation and a nonprofit comes in the acquisition and application of resources. Where nonprofits have expertise, human capital, and access to constituencies, foundations possess the financial plenty needed to conduct this work. As a result, many funders of organizations like mine are kindred spirits in our mission of ending the achievement gap, an issue explicitly tied to race.

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*We recently held a grantee convening on cultural competency, which we called a ‘conversation’, to connote a low-key approach. We didn’t have any ‘experts,’ but we asked grantee organizations to talk about different aspects of organizational cultural competency they had worked on. Some grantees in the audience who had done little thinking about race and culture saw that their peers were doing much more than they were and learned a lot. Most importantly, they received a clear message from the foundation that this is an important issue and that there’s an expectation that they be thinking about it.*

*Health field grant maker in Quiroz-Martinez, Villarosa and Mackinnon (2007).*

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I don’t believe that these foundations can implement youth feedback without first operating through a robust racial equity lens. A racial equity lens is an approach ensuring that an organization includes the voices of the constituencies they serve, and providing means for them to do so. Foundations can and should operate under a racial equity lens, if we are to view them as partners in the missions of nonprofits. In the situation above, the Foundation manager and their organization are using their outsize influence to encourage agencies to implement racial equity procedures. I would also suspect it is a foundation more likely to take youth feedback seriously. To my mind it is sensible to expand the underlying outcome of a racial equity lens—being sure to include constituents—to apply to the inclusion of youth.

Overall, this model suggests that if one demands high standards in the practice of racial equity and the need to include constituents by nonprofits, we as a society should also hold foundations accountable for racial and social equity in their practices, to avoid too great a distance from their target populations, which can result in problematizing clients or “other-ising.”

## **MONEYED INTERESTS**

One can make more anecdotal assumptions about what form this racial equity work may (or may not) take for foundations. Corporate foundations in particular may be more conservative than the organizations they fund. In his survey of the history of American foundations, Mark Dowie notes that while foundations do “bear considerable responsibility for renewing and strengthening the vast and diverse mosaic of organizations that comprise American civil society” this often entails funding organizations “whose aims may not be in the best interest of wealth-based institutions like the foundations themselves.” (Dowie, 2002, p. 211).

Dowie’s scholarship notes that leftist scholars ascribed the interest of organizations such as the Ford Foundation in funding organizations like the NAACP and National Urban League in the late 1960s to a desire to “diffuse black militancy and champion ‘black capitalism.’” This tension between a foundation’s drive for social (or racial) advocacy and the accumulated wealth (and the power structures behind the generation of such wealth) that is inherent in the existence of a foundation causes much debate and while it is not the subject of this paper, I feel this tension is present as I explore the possibilities for other approaches—as wealthy and perhaps more conservative funders try to keep up with the innovators on the ground, the racial and youth advocates of today.

Why does this tension arise? One may assume that foundation boards are often made up of the enfranchised. A white grant maker, quoted in a Foundation Center study, reflected, “Every year I do a calendar check. Who have I met with? Who have I had lunch with? Am I really engaging people of color?” While this grant maker was acutely aware of their position, another white foundation executive said that their concern was that “foundations are not pushed, nor do we push ourselves, hard enough on the issue of racial equity. We stand above the fray when we should be deeply involved in it.” (Julie Quiroz-Martinez). Additionally, as foundations often do not work directly with clients, foundations may by their nature lag behind their nonprofit peers in the practice of racial equity.

Statistics bear this out. Only 23% of grant makers specifically mention particular racial groups when outlining their intended target populations in requests for proposals (RFPs) (Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2014) and I would argue this is a problem in a field where race is a core issue and often the issue, for many African-American advocacy groups like Black Lives Matter. Race neutral practices such as these only reinforce existing (and oppressive) structures. Even aside from funding practices, a perspective that ignores race is also present in the internal functions of foundations: Only 12% of independent foundations have diversity policies on file for their staff, and only 5% of family foundations do so (Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2014).

An intentionally color-blind approach results in perspectives such as this expressed in this troubling quote from one grant maker, who said that because they fund and work in high poverty areas, it “is a foregone conclusion that diverse populations will benefit from our programs” (Minnesota Council on Foundations, 2014). To properly address issues of racial equity, organizations need to first acknowledge that race is a factor. If one includes greater Minnesota, the majority of youth on free or reduced price lunch are actually white. If foundations want to address racial equity, they need to forcefully talk about race and equity and not couch it with loaded phrases arising out of people’s stereotypes. Only when these attitudes shift can they begin the work of integrating youth voice.

## PROBLEMATIZATION

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*Every grant RFP [request for proposals] is a small piece of policy. The language [a foundation] uses becomes the language of the field.*

*—Eric Billet, Minnesota Department of Education.*

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The best way for foundations and nonprofits to approach this racial dynamic stymies many, however. The seeds of this paper and my general thinking about opening up the possibilities for grant-making in this manner originally arose from my (ongoing) quest to find the most in-vogue, up-to-date, politically correct and accurate way to refer to the populations served by my organization, Athletes Committed to Educating Students, or ACES. ACES is a tutoring and mentoring organization working with fourth through eighth-grade students throughout the Twin Cities. A majority (87%) are of color and 90 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a major indicator of poverty. ACES’ sole mission is to end the academic achievement gap in the Twin Cities.

When applying for funding from foundations, and in speaking about our work in the public sphere, ACES (and all nonprofits) needs a shorthand way to convey the populations we serve in order to succinctly describe our mission and activities. But in philanthropy, a field primarily oriented towards equity and justice, how can foundation staff and nonprofit staff, presumably concerned with the whole humanity of all

people, properly pack their values into an “elevator speech” without condescending, “other-ising,” or making a “problem” out of perhaps vulnerable people? Is any kind of shorthand an acceptable way to speak of the highly diverse array of life experiences of the constituencies of nonprofits? After all, terms such as “juvenile delinquent” and “dropout” haunt the past discourse of youth work.

As a relatively new grant writer, a thought arose in my head. Would I let an ACES student read one of my grant proposals? What about ACES alumni? What might they believe I assume or think about them because of my writing? Then, another thought- why shouldn't I want a youth to be able to read my proposal? I see including youth voice as a way to dispel the power dynamic present in foundations, to reduce the possibility for problematization and make the division between foundations and youth as permeable as possible, as I mentioned in the introduction. Foundations can be key drivers of innovative approaches among nonprofits and should not wait for nonprofits to drive the field forward—yes, in their own way, practicing a type of youth work.

## A PATH FORWARD

One approach in integrating constituencies can be to primarily fund organizations run by people of color. This is evident in the approach of an organization like the Northwest Area Foundation, which in recent years has made conscious efforts to shift up to 40% of their funding directly to Native American organizations. Another organization in the Twin Cities deliberately targeting minority groups already doing positive work in the community is the Headwaters Foundation, which has made racial inclusion not only a goal but a core tenet of its organization. Nausheena Hussain, deputy director of fund development for the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islam Relations, remarked that in situations such as these “both the grant makers and the constituents are stakeholders in the grant. When you give responsibility, you empower that community to make that change and better themselves” (personal communication, May/June, 2016). Here again is the tendency to place foundations and nonprofits as equals, but constituents are also elevated to the stature of equal partners.

Again in my mind however, if the persons who have the lived experience of struggle are essential to ending it, it must logically follow that foundations can integrate the voices of youth into their activities, if that happens to be a focus area. Organizations like Youthprise do exactly this. I will use Youthprise as a sort of case study for how foundations could function, not just in Minnesota or the Twin Cities, but nationwide. Youthprise, an effort the McKnight Foundation began in 2010 serves as an intermediary organization funneling money to youth organizations and focuses on three core areas: Learning and social emotional development, economic prosperity, and health and safety. Notable is that a strong commitment to racial equity practices is present in their mission statement.

Program Officer Rudy Guglielmo, says that by participating in youth panels, young people are empowered to “provide feedback on proposals, and work in committees and do direct funding through that.” He notes that this type of approach allows youth an opportunity to “influence the sector” and says he has seen multiple success stories, not just for the organizations Youthprise funds, but in the personal lives of the youth themselves. Additionally, he said that this approach has continually led Youthprise to become “more inclusive and grounded as to what is happening” in the community” (personal communication, May/June, 2016).

Youthprise philanthropy (re)designer Neese Parker, a former youth panel participant and current administrator, said that involvement on a youth panel can be personally enriching for youth. “A lot of times, in the society we live in, [serving on a youth board] can be so influential because it gives youth such confidence in a society that’s built to tear down. They can say they’re a philanthropist, and a positive ego

rises up, it's a confidence push and something they can take home, and take home to parents, and parents are proud. Not only does it change the view of themselves, it changes the view of people around them. If you have a young kid, he didn't do so well in the education system, and now he's a part of this program and here comes Youthprise, now he goes home and tells his parents he's in charge of distributing \$20,000, things like that can hit home sometimes." Parker likens the hands-off approach to grant making in some contexts (that I suspect could result from foundations operating at too great a distance from clients) as similar to a driver seeing a car broken down on the side of the road, and "instead of asking what the victim may need, handing them a set of brake pads and driving off" (N. Parker, personal communication, May/June, 2016).

At Youthprise, Neese helps youth create what the application looks like, what questions are asked, which applicants they want to invite, and who they want to fund and by how much. Personally speaking as a grant-writer, the questions on applications like these are far more exciting questions that would really allow me to tell the story of ACES in a way that I might not be able to via the more staid "activities/outputs/outcomes" style to which the grant-making field often gravitates.

Eric Billiet, an expanded learning specialist with the Minnesota Department of Education agrees, saying that "good youth work creates the stage for youth to not act their age." He sees participation in grant panels as a perfect path towards "co-creating an opportunity for young people to create that space or that stage" (personal communication, May/June, 2016). The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), in fact, is the only state agency that allows youth to sit on scoring panels for federal 21st Century Grants. In the last round, the youth scores count as much as the adult scores (often aligning with those of the adults). MDE first reaches out to partner organizations to recruit young candidates and involves them in every step of the process.

By not diminishing the role of youth, and elevating them to the status of equals, I would argue that these foundations and funders are acting as youth workers, and that this is a replicable model for others to follow. I think the 21st century can allow for an expansion of and rethinking of the field. Eric Billiet offered a similar thought, "What is a youth worker? Is it a job of people doing direct service at minimum wage part time? Or is it a value-based way of being in the world on behalf of young people? Can it be an agreed-to set of principles? How [does one] live those out in a life that is respectful of young people?" (personal communication, May/June, 2016).

This notion of living out one's life in a way that is respectful of young people underlies my whole argument. If foundations are mission-driven they must respect and include the humanity of those they serve. Many nonprofits are held accountable for reflecting the diversity of the populations they serve. I argue that foundations have a responsibility to do this as well, and I view expanding the field of youth work into the administrative and decision-making realms to be the path to do so.

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Interviews were conducted with the following individual in the months of May and June, 2016:

- Eric Billiet, Expanded Learning Specialist , Minnesota Department of Education
- Rudy Guglielmo, Program Officer, Youthprise
- Nausheena Hussain, Deputy Director of Fund Development, Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islam Relations
- Neese Parker, Youth Engagement Coordinator and Philanthropy (re)Designer, Youthprise

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**STEVE PALMER** is the Grant Manager and Development Associate for ACES (Athletes Committed to Educating Students), an after-school and before-school tutoring and mentoring organization working with traditionally underserved youth throughout the Twin Cities. He joined ACES as Site Leader at Green Central School after a two-year stint with Americorps VISTA with the Saint Paul Public Schools Foundation. He served as Volunteer Coordinator at ACES from 2013-2015. Steve graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in 2010 with a B.A. in History.

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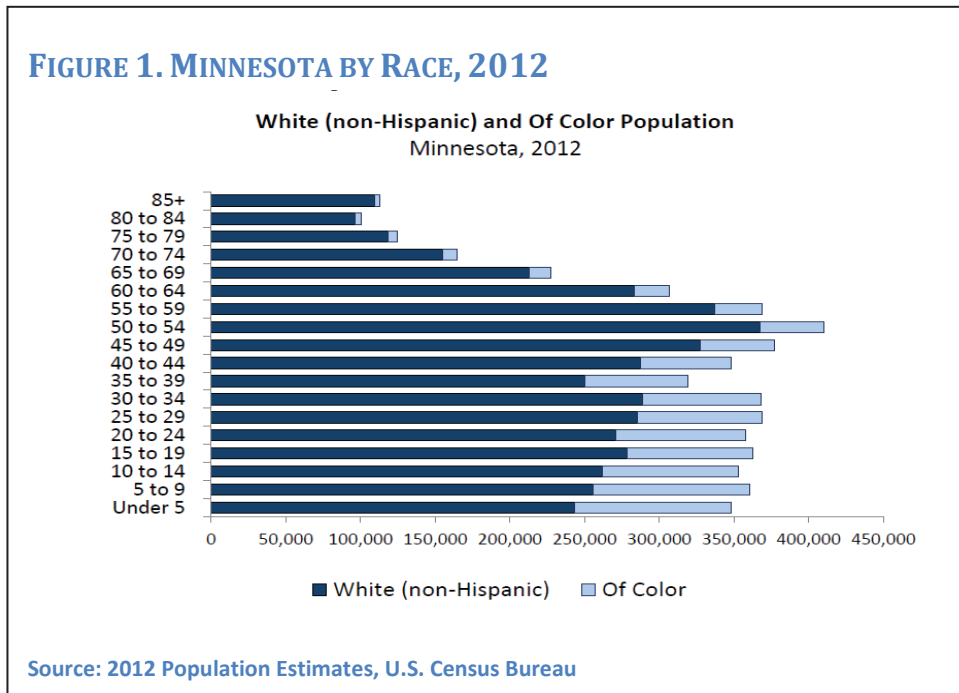
# ADVANCING EQUITY IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT:

A Call to Action in a Changing World

By Kathryn Sharpe

*Two Somali young women stand backstage waiting to compete at the State Fair, nervously peering out at the audience seated in front of the stage—mostly white, many wearing John Deere caps or waving fans from the agriculture building in the sweltering heat. The young women practice their lines for their skit about the experience of wearing a headscarf. Then their names are called, they take a deep breath, smile wide, and step onto stage, the new face of 4-H. In an organization historically known for white rural farm kids showing their cows at the State Fair, these young women are part of the process of the organization’s evolution as it seeks to engage with today’s diverse youth in new ways, thereby transforming not only its demographics but also its way of doing business.*

All over the U.S., similar scenes are playing out in long-standing youth development programs. Figure 1 gives a snapshot of Minnesota’s racial makeup, which is reflected throughout the U.S. As demographics change and the population of youth ages 6-21 becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, we are also witnessing an increase in diversity in terms of religion, nationality, immigration status, sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as the range of physical and mental abilities. This presents a dramatically different population than the one that many youth development organizations have evolved to serve, especially the ones I am calling legacy youth development organizations which have 100+ years of existence and a national reach (i.e. 4-H, YWCA and YMCA, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, and others). As the demographic makeup of the U.S. undergoes a sea change of diversification, these organizations are facing critical questions: Who are we in the 21st century? Whom will we serve in 20 years?



As these legacy youth development organizations now seek to engage a more diverse generation, they approach this growth process from the context of a long historical tradition of being predominantly white, middle class, heteronormative, and U.S.-born. Their policies and practices reflect this, and they must wrestle with their own institutional racism and other kinds of systemic discrimination as well. This requires them to realize that diversity and equity are not the same thing, and that simply becoming more inclusive of diversity is not sufficient. In a society with such dramatic disparities and inequities, these organizations must address equity at a deeper level, which requires them not only to shift the demographics of their participants and staff, but also to change how decisions are made and resources are allocated.

If we truly believe that all young people deserve the benefits of youth development programs to help them thrive, how do we need to change what we are doing in order to more equitably serve the diverse youth in this generation? *For these legacy youth development organizations to stay relevant in the 21st Century and engage in best practices for quality youth development, they must work to create equity in their programs.*

Many of these legacy organizations were originally created a century ago to reach out to marginalized young people, such as isolated rural children of immigrant families or low-income youth living in urban tenements. Yet over time they have developed into organizations primarily serving the majority population (Russell & Van Campen, 2011). Now, as the population of youth diversifies, these organizations are seeking to serve these more diverse and marginalized<sup>1</sup> youth, but to do so effectively requires significant self-reflection and the willingness to change in fundamental ways. Their role in advancing equity is especially important because of the significant impact they have, given their size and level of influence in youth development, as well as the large number of youth they serve. In addition, they are also well positioned to bring together youth from dominant culture and marginalized young people to build much-needed interconnectedness in our society.

What brings me to this research focus is that so I am part of one of these legacy youth development organizations; I have worked for over eight years at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development with the 4-H program. A major focus of my work with 4-H has been in developing strategies to reach out to and engage traditionally underserved communities, to cultivate new youth and families, to recruit and train more diverse volunteers, and to establish partnerships with organizations that serve these communities. As a white, U.S.-born, middle-class, cis-gendered woman who is highly formally educated, this work has brought into high relief for me the critical importance of self-reflection about my own privilege and employing strategies to manage it. I have found important tools for myself in this work in the emerging research around implicit bias and strategies for mitigating bias. As my own organization undertakes this pivot in our internal culture in order to engage traditionally underserved audiences and to create more equitable conditions, I see how my own personal process parallels that of the historically majority-dominated organization and of my colleagues within it, as well.

Therefore, I went in search of research and leaders who could shed some light on best practices, as well as pitfalls, on this journey. Because I could not take on every complex aspect of this topic, I decided to focus my research on the organizations' structures, staff, and leadership. While I fundamentally believe in the importance of being informed by youth and marginalized communities, for this study I am choosing to focus on the processes within the organization. I foresee a future companion study in conversation with community members.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term "marginalized" in the same way as Russell & Van Campen: "To denote the ways that some young people are pushed to the margins; that emphasizes the social processes that render youth marginal, rather than focusing on deficits based in the person (i.e. defining youth as 'at risk' or 'vulnerable')." (Russell & Van Campen, 2011)

For this paper, I interviewed four leaders who have invested significant work into advancing equity within youth development organizations. Celina Martina spent 10 years as Community Partnership Director at Girl Scouts of Minnesota and Wisconsin River Valleys, where she was tasked with engaging diverse communities. Dorothy McCargo Freeman has spent her entire career in the 4-H program and now serves at the Associate Dean of the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development and State Leader for the MN 4-H program, where she has been working to transform it into a more diverse and inclusive program that serves all Minnesota young people. Arnoldo Curiel is the Vice President for Racial Justice and Public Policy at the YWCA Minneapolis, where he provides leadership on racial equity and public policy. And John-Paul Chaisson-Cárdenas serves as the state 4-H Youth Development program leader for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, where he has spent his first two years undertaking a major initiative to diversify and build a more equitable program. Through my interviews with each of them, I garnered significant feedback on the paths they have taken as organizational leaders. I have also drawn upon my own experience as a front-line youth worker and now middle manager engaged in organizational change and interpersonal transformation.

## **EQUITY IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

For youth workers and youth development organizations to advance equity, it is essential for them to build their intercultural competence and to address implicit biases, both as individuals and as organizations. While it is critical that we do personal work to cultivate cultural humility and to challenge our own acquired judgments, it is not enough. Organizations are ingrained with the racism, gender bias, homophobia, sexism, ableism, and xenophobia that the society inculcates; therefore these need to be addressed systemically. Even a group of highly culturally-responsive youth workers will be stymied if they work within an organization whose policies or practices are at odds with their purposes. Similarly, an organization may undertake major systemic changes to become more equitable, but if the staff and volunteers do not have opportunities to engage in a similar process of reflection and transformation, they can thwart the process. Therefore, for an organization to truly transform its own ways of being and become more inclusive and equitable, the process must include all levels of the organization engaging in a process of identifying biases and then actively employing strategies to mitigate them.

These changes are often framed by members of dominant identities as a challenge to be tackled or as a problem to be solved. And yet this mindset keeps us in a reactive, problem-focused mindset. Organizations may ask themselves, “How can we do more outreach to let people know about our program?” or “How do we get more of X community to participate in our programs?” Yet it is important that we transition from a problem-focused approach to diversity (i.e. avoiding discriminatory practices) to a more assets-based approach, seeing diversity as a strategic resource to enhance an organization’s performance (Jansen, Otten, & van der Zee, 2015). We need to move toward asking, “What are the needs and desires of this community? How do we need to evolve and grow in order to partner authentically with them?”

Youth development organizations are particularly well-positioned to undertake this work, since it is highly consistent with a positive youth development approach. We need to bring our youth development philosophy and approach to our own organizational systems; we need to live the values we wish to instill in young people. Gisela Konopka (1973) argued in her seminal piece, *Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth*, that we must embrace differences in the context of our heterogeneous society, and we should promote egalitarianism as an ideal. Conversely, we must reject all forms of discrimination, since they are destructive to all people, but especially to young people who are just establishing their identities. In particular, marginalized youth experience serious negative impacts on their wellbeing as a result of discrimination, and youth programs are well-positioned to provide the strong interpersonal supports that

can serve as buffers and cultivate resilience in the face of societal discrimination (Russell & Van Campen, 2011). We can approach these changes as a fertile opportunity to reflect on our practices and their result, and to consider what our new best practices might be. The policies, practices, staff, and volunteers we have engaged so far have been successful in bringing the youth and families with whom we are currently working. But if these organizations are truly committed to engaging all youth, how can we expand the definition of who is included in “everyone”? How could we transform our goals, our policies, our staffing, and our practices to create a youth development organization that will attract and retain the full range of young people in the community, and do it in a equitable way? We must engage the voices and listen to the needs of these under-represented audiences.

## ADVANCING EQUITY: BEYOND DIVERSITY OR EQUALITY

I chose to focus this paper on equity within youth development organizations, understanding it is an umbrella which encompasses many aspects of diversity and inclusion. When we talk about diversity, it can be understood as, “...[a] program looks like the population of the area...where you live, work, and play. You have the diversity of the people” (D. McCargo Freeman, personal communication, May 27, 2016). Equality is focused on ensuring that everyone gets the same resources or treatment: “The person at the front line has the same voice as the person at the top who’s making decisions” (A. Curiel, personal communication, April 29, 2016). In contrast, equity instead addresses the root issues: it describes an equalizing of the balance of power, access to programs and opportunity, allocation of resources, and decision-making power, in addition to ensuring a diverse range of people are included:

*Equity/Equitable – The proportional distribution or parity of desirable outcomes across groups. Sometimes confused with equality, equity refers to outcomes, while equality connotes equal treatment. Where individuals or groups are dissimilarly situated, equal treatment may be insufficient for or even detrimental to equitable outcomes. An example of equity is individualized educational accommodations for students with disabilities, which treat some students differently in order to ensure the equitable access to education” (Landrieu et al., 2016).*

This definition calls us to assess not only what we are doing in our programs, but to also focus on what the results are, regardless of the intention of the practice or policy. John-Paul Chaisson- Cárdenas provides a concrete understanding of why it matters that we strive for equity and not simply equality:

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*Equity is what people need, when they need it. So it is different than equality. And in some contexts, equality has been actually a barrier to some of the work that needs to happen....So if we continue to... [use] the common phrase, ‘Rising tides will raise all boats,’ it simply does not work when you have started way below or you have an anchor attached to you” (personal communication, May 6, 2016).*

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Chaisson- Cárdenas expresses that as organizations take on advancing equity more is demanded than simply increasing diversity. The work demands an assessment of how the organization’s ways of functioning may have reinforced the inequities in society, and then the willingness to make sometimes difficult changes

such as in reallocating resources from an even distribution to instead allocating them where there is greater need (D. McCargo Freeman, personal communication, May 27, 2016). An example from my own organization is that 4-H has built a system of competition among youth that is focused on individual competition. While this has largely worked well for the European-American youth who have been the majority population, this approach does not work as well for youth from more collectivist cultures, including many of our immigrant communities where people value working together to achieve, rather than highlighting the efforts of only one member (Russell & Van Campen, 2011). In addition, families who are new to the program might not have the resources or expertise to support their child in producing a competitive project, so the young person may prefer to work on it as part of a group. But where can organizations start in addressing equity? One strategy is to build cultural and intercultural competence.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN EQUITY**

In order to work to advance equity within these organizations with decades of established protocols for how they function, which often feel exclusive to non-majority community members, they must work on two fronts: 1) fostering cultural competence and 2) addressing bias at an organizational and individual level. Later in this paper, I will take a deeper dive into implicit bias. But cultural competence is a critical starting point. As John-Paul Chaisson-Cárdenas asserts, “Culturally competent practice is good practice...Good practice is always culturally competent...” (personal communication, May 6, 2016). In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when working with a large number of youth across the U.S. fundamentally requires working with youth from a wide variety of backgrounds, youth development organizations must grapple with cultural competence in order to serve the youth well. One definition of culturally competent organizations comes from Minnesota State Colleges and Universities:

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*A culturally competent organization values the people who work there, understands the community in which it operates, and embraces its clients as valuable members of that community. The organization promotes inclusiveness, institutionalizes the process of learning about differences and demonstrates a willingness to expand the organization’s paradigm for culture (Adapted from Moodian, M.A. (Ed.), 2008).*

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This definition makes clear that cultural competence is something that happens at the organizational level, but also must be embodied by the individuals within that system.

Ignite Afterschool, Minnesota’s statewide out-of-school time network, puts a finer point on what the principles of cultural responsiveness look like within a youth development context. It creates a welcoming and inclusive environment, and informs the relationships that staff members have with participants. When describing programs that are responsive to culture and identity, they write, “Programs create a safe and adaptive environment which recognizes that culture, family and personal history are core to a young person’s identity formation” (Ignite Afterschool, 2015). This includes staff practices of creating a space where young people are free to explore their identities, cultural beliefs, and practices, as well as to engage with others’ in a way that is respectful and builds self-esteem. In addition, the “[p]rogram makes a genuine effort to ensure staff reflect the diverse race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, language and special needs of the young people being served” (Ignite Afterschool, 2015). Therefore, cultural competence and responsiveness calls upon us to grow in our ability to engage productively with questions of identity and culture, but also to change our practices, such as hiring and retaining a diverse workforce.

Some people argue that rather than leaning into difference of culture and identity, we should instead adopt a “colorblind” policy as a way to promote fairness and equality among all people, regardless of identity or background. Yet some studies have found that colorblindness can actually reinforce inequity. In educational settings, colorblind approaches (treating race as taboo or invisible) can actually mask discriminatory classroom practices or school policies (i.e. racial disparities in school discipline if the school does not track incidents of discipline by the race of the student). In addition, teaching children in a colorblind manner makes them less likely to perceive discrimination when it occurs, and it deprives them of learning the language they need in order to communicate effectively about a situation that involves racial discrimination. Similarly, adults with colorblind attitudes are less likely to perceive workplace micro-aggressions (Plaut, 2014). The fundamental flaw of a colorblind approach is that it completely dismissed the fact that our society and so many of its systems are *not* colorblind, and that people have profoundly different experiences (e.g. in hiring, policing, disciplinary action, or housing) based on their race or other aspects of their identity.

So how can we expand the sense of “us” within an organization in order to be inclusive of more diversity, especially in organizations whose staff might not currently reflect the full diversity of the community, and who may not all be on board with the changes necessary to engage youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? One strategy shown to be effective through research is called all-inclusive multiculturalism. This approach includes majority members in the definition of multiculturalism, and research has shown it to be more effective than traditional multiculturalism approaches at getting support from members of the majority (Plaut, 2014). This strategy is not simply about making white or other majority members feel more “comfortable,” but rather about helping everyone find their shared common ground. Employing this approach may be particularly helpful in organizations with a high percentage of majority staff members. For example, some organizations have embraced “1<sup>st</sup> Generation” initiatives, focusing both on traditionally-underserved communities and on families who have never been involved in their programs. “[T]hat’s why we have named it ‘1<sup>st</sup> Generation’, because that takes in more broadly than ethnicity, but it also helps us to see our idiosyncrasies that make it less inviting or less welcoming to young people. So the approach is to recognize that there is stuff...that keeps all people from feeling like they are part of us” (D. McCargo Freeman, personal communication, May 27, 2016). This initiative has been highly successful in engaging staff members from rural, vastly majority white communities so that they can see themselves in the work of inclusion. This example illustrates what studies have found: that an all-inclusive multiculturalism approach increased a sense of inclusion for all organization members, and this inclusion, in turn, predicted more support for organizational diversity efforts by majority members (Jansen et al., 2015; Plaut, 2014). At the same time, however, it is essential to acknowledge that changing policies and practices to make them more welcoming to new members of the majority community will not necessarily translate to marginalized communities. A 1<sup>st</sup> Generation initiative should not be seen as a way to side-step critical issues such as race and ethnicity, for example. It cannot erase the differences in experience of youth of color, Native youth, disabled youth, or LGBTQ youth. Addressing often well-entrenched policies and practices requires assessing the impacts they have had, and that process leads us to recognizing the role of implicit bias.

### **WHEN WE DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT WE ARE THINKING: IMPLICIT BIAS AND ITS ROLE IN EQUITY**

Neurosocial research has revealed that human beings are influenced constantly by both positive and negative subconscious associations about others, based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, accents, and many other aspects of our identity. This phenomenon is known as implicit bias and has significant implications in our behavior and judgments. Implicit, or unconscious, biases occur involuntarily and are beyond both our awareness and our conscious control (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015). In fact, they often are contrary to what we *think* we believe. The brain naturally has two major systems for thinking: System 1 is quick, instinctive, happens in the back of the brain with little effort, and tends to be

highly biased because it is based on inputs from the world around us. System 2 thinking is slower, occurs in the front of the brain with more effort, and can serve as a brake on System 1's bias, allowing us to question our own judgments (Staats, 2015). While everyone has implicit biases, the good news is that we can address them and even mitigate their effects (Lieberman, Rock, & Cox, 2014).

Youth development organizations are uniquely well-positioned to do the work of addressing implicit bias because it is consistent with the process of youth development. Based on what neuroscience is teaching us, addressing implicit bias requires us to utilize the inherent plasticity of the brain, interrupting existing neural networks of unconscious judgments, engaging in intentional reflection, and establishing new neural networks employing the "System 2" thinking using the prefrontal cortex. The same brain plasticity that we are working with in educating young people is also our best tool in addressing and reducing implicit biases (J. P. Chaisson-Cárdenas, personal communication, May 6, 2016). So how can we address implicit bias in order to advance equity in legacy youth development organizations?

## **THE POWER TO MAKE CHANGE FOR EQUITY**

As organizations address implicit bias to advance equity, we must address the question that Celina Martina posed: "What is the intersection of power and equity? Is it that only power can propel effective equity work? Can equity happen organically without a power structure, without the forces of power?" (personal communication, May 23, 2016). This power can come from leaders who have positional power within an institution or from a movement among the grassroots staff and volunteers. But ultimately they must work at both the organizational/policy level and the individual staff/practice level. Chaisson-Cárdenas expressed this interconnectedness between individual and organizational change:

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*[I]t is both/and. I mean, we are trying to change the culture. It's not only a system. If you go back to the research on implicit bias, it is individual, but the same processes are paralleled within a system... because systems are living organisms. So the biases of individuals extend up to the biases of the organization. You cannot separate those. Any time you try to separate those...is when you get in trouble. That is why training has to go hand-in-hand with the policy change. It is the 'so what?' of policy change (personal communication, May 6, 2016).*

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Training can help staff and volunteers to engage in personal reflection, confront their unconscious judgments, and transform their habits of thinking. The changes, however, must be addressed at multiple levels of the organization because if they are not, policy-level changes that are not supported by the actions of staff will be empty policies, and conversely, staff who transform their attitudes and practices will find themselves running up against inequitable policies. I will lay out strategies for building equity and mitigating implicit bias that can be applied by people at various levels within the organization.

## **PROVIDING LEADERSHIP FROM THE TOP: ENGAGING IN ORGANIZATIONAL-LEVEL CHANGE**

People in a position of organizational leadership can make a powerful contribution to the work of advancing equity and addressing implicit bias by setting it as a key priority, inspiring change, and establishing accountability. Chaisson-Cárdenas stated:

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*I think really [taking] things from a systemic approach has been very successful, and so I think we are starting to change the tone and the culture of the organization. And I would say, actually, we took it from the top-down. At the beginning I was the flag bearer for equity and inclusion. And it's not because there's not great allies or folks in the organization, but because I felt that it really does have to [come from] the State Leader for a reason....But little by little, it began to be saturated or consumed by really wonderful folks in our organization...It is the buy-in that really makes the difference (personal communication, May 6, 2016).*

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He makes a strong argument for the role of a leader with positional power who can work on multiple facets: lead the strategy, spearhead execution, and establish accountability. Celina Martina explains further the organizational dynamics that make it advantageous to have a leader:

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*...[I]n my successful experiences working with equity, there is a level of power that has to be there in order to move the work forward. So whether it is a designated staff, whether it is a leader within a department, or even a youth participant that works toward that, it has to be assigned. It is work that has to be assigned and defined because [otherwise] it is overlooked and we are sucked into the current systems. So by dedicating money, time, staff, salary, title...we move towards equity work versus trying to have it happen organically. It may happen organically by...some, by movements of people, but it is harder...it is just hard to overcome some barriers. Because...the organic movements of equity work also have to know how to navigate the system, so within that movement also there is a leader (personal communication, May 23, 2016).*

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She highlights the fact that much of equity work depends on navigating systems of power so as to change them, and while this can happen from the grassroots, it is more efficient if it happens from a leadership level with positional power. This is the level at which HR policies and hiring decisions can be analyzed for their impact and changed as necessary. For example, if one of the qualifications for a job is having previous experience in the organization, and if the organization lacks diversity, then that is an inherent barrier to hiring more diverse staff. Simply by removing that expectation, an organization can transform its staffing (J. P. Chaisson-Cárdenas, personal communication, May 6, 2016).

The danger, however, of having efforts led by someone who is designated as the leader, either an individual or team, was expressed by all of my interviewees: the leader can become the scapegoat if things do not go well; they can be overloaded and under-resourced; their colleagues can see them as the "experts" to whom everyone else then defers; or it can be seen that equity work is "their work," rather than work on everyone's plate. McCargo Freeman suggests a way to counteract this danger: "My vision is that everyone is responsible for [equity]. The organization has to set a responsibility. But the leader can't make it happen until everyone in the organization is expected to drive that vision forward" (personal communication, May 27, 2016). Chaisson-Cárdenas describes how equity work is operationalized throughout their program: "It's a job expectation that got included in everyone's position description, so there is nobody who doesn't have it in our system now as...part of their work. If they're not doing it, then we're going to have words...It's a big part



of their review” (personal communication, May 6, 2016). This approach of collective accountability was agreed upon by each of my interviewees as critical for truly transforming the culture and functioning of an organization.

One of the most effective roles that a leader for equity can play is that of “disrupter,” using their role to pose critical reflective questions to engage people in deeper thinking (J. P. Chaisson-Cárdenas, personal communication, May 6, 2016). McCargo Freeman explains her approach:

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*My way, when I hear odd things, is just to turn around and ask questions...So I try not to argue with people about their idiosyncrasies because it's a bias that they carry, and the only way that you can deal with that is to help them to think, to bring it from the back of the head, as John-Paul tells us, to the front. And the only way you can do that is to begin to ask them questions. You can't get angry because we all have biases, and anger doesn't...do anything but cause people to want to hang onto their biases. So you have to engage them in thinking, you have to engage them in experiences if you can so that they come to a different understanding for themselves (personal communication, May 27, 2016).*

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This process of engaging critical thinking is actually moving people out of their more biased System 1 thinking, and engaging their analytical System 2 thinking which is able to reflect upon their initial judgment, and allows them a greater array of cognitive tools to revise their thinking.

It is also critical for youth development programs to be engaging directly with the youth and community members who are the target audience, and to listen to their voices in order to get beyond biased perceptions of them:

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*The ones that are not very effective, certainly, are the ones that are top-down without representation... of the youth you want to serve or the communities you want to reach. So basically, if you define a strategy, define a program without the impacted youth...if you don't know what they need and what they want, why would [you] develop a program? If you don't consider the needs and wants, and the authentic needs and wants (not what you learned, what you stereotype as a community), but authentic needs and wants...you might be surprised (C. Martina, personal communication, May 23, 2016).*

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Too often, organizations create programs without truly partnering with communities and youth, and they make the mistake of assuming that they can simply invite young people from different backgrounds into their existing programs, and then don't understand why no one comes or stays long-term.

For leaders who are interested in addressing implicit bias at the organizational level, there are strategies that research has found to be effective:

- **Crowdsourcing:** Groups who work together on a decision tend to make better and less biased decisions than an individual's decision, therefore engaging larger numbers of people can help to reduce bias (Lieberman et al., 2014).
- **Engaging in deliberative processing:** Implicit biases tend to be strongest in situations where a decision-maker is under time pressure or stress, so it can be helpful if the organization can intentionally slow down major decision-making processes in order to allow time for more deliberative, less biased thinking (Staats et al., 2015).
- **Mitigating objectivism biases:** Known as the “blind spot bias”, this bias is the result of us believing that our experience of the world is a direct and accurate representation of how things are in the world. Because we are convinced that our version of reality is the true one, it can be extremely difficult to acknowledge other people's realities. To mitigate this type of bias, it is helpful for an organization to establish decision-making processes that intentionally engage others' perspectives by requesting outside opinions (Lieberman et al., 2014).
- **Mitigating self-protection biases:** Known as “in-group/out-group biases”, these come from our natural tendencies to view people who are similar to us positively, and to have more negative perceptions of people who are different from us. These biases can be particularly harmful in organizations, especially as they are diversifying. One strategy for organizations to counteract these biases is to promote opportunities for people from different backgrounds to highlight the values and goals that they all share. Another strategy is to make it a policy in hiring processes to remove identifying features from applications in order to prevent potential bias (Lieberman et al., 2014).

While organizations are made up of a collection of individuals, organizational bias reflects larger societal issues of systemic racism and other prejudices, and these can only be transformed by insuring they are addressed consistently at an organizational level.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GRASSROOTS: TRANSFORMATION FROM THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL**

In order to be effective, efforts to increase equity and de-bias an organization must also engage individual staff and volunteers, since policies alone will not transform the organization. One of the strongest themes that emerged from my interviews was the importance of building relationships among people from different backgrounds as a de-biasing strategy in order to work effectively across differences. The benefits of diversity don't come from merely co-existing in the same organization, they come from having meaningful interactions beyond their own comfort zones; and those experiences often need to be facilitated in order to occur (Bruni, 2015).

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*But the implicit [goal] is to get our staff in contact with the [diverse] youth, so they can see that they're youth, so they can get past the fear....It's amazing what happens when we have staff that sometimes have struggled with that fear, just have contact and conversations. Their whole way of looking at the world changes. One of the mistakes I had made in previous positions... is that I did too much theoretical work where you don't have the chance to actually do the hands-on and work with kids who may be different. I don't believe that kind of training in absentia works very well. I think...this is just one of those things you've just gotta do. You gotta throw yourself in the pool (J.P. Chaisson-Cárdenas, personal communication, May 6, 2016).*

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Here he highlights the need for lived experience—many of these changes are not ones that come on an intellectual level, but rather that come from relational experience.

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*[On addressing bias] It is more about taking time to learn from one another, intentionally... You cannot always be the cultural broker, you cannot always be the person that really paves the way, because it is tiring. So how you develop opportunities for relationship building, for common understanding, that will eventually eliminate bias, and your unconscious bias will certainly be diminished... Then people take ownership of their own education, then people really do feel empowered....(C. Martina, personal communication, May 23, 2016).*

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Here she explains how building relationships allows individuals to take on their own active learning about diversity and equity, and it no longer needs to be mediated by a “cultural broker”. It is also at this individual level where transformation is most evident to the participants and community members we are trying to engage in our programs. “In equity work, there is this theory that you change policies and practices and that will then modify behavior, but I guess people of color are more particularly inclined to see individual change” (C. Martina, personal communication, May 23, 2016). Ultimately, it is this personal encounter that tends to define how people experience an organization and its ethics.

Fortunately, the implicit bias literature offers a variety of approaches for mitigating bias at the individual level, as well, as is recognized by Staats et al. (2015):

- **Intergroup contact:** By sharing experiences with people from the group about whom we have subconscious judgments, we can establish new associations. To be effective, the individuals should share equal status, common goals, and be in a cooperative rather than a competitive environment.
- **Sense of accountability:** Having the sense that one will need to justify one’s decisions, feelings, or behaviors can decrease the influence of bias.
- **Taking the perspective of others:** This strategy can reduce bias because the practice of considering others’ viewpoints or taking into account multiple perspectives moves the brain from automatic biases into more reflective processing.

These strategies need to be taught and implemented, and people need to have opportunities to practice them consistently in order to have them become truly transformative.

### **GROUP APPROACHES FOR BUILDING CAPACITY AMONG STAFF**

One effective strategy to facilitate this evolution is developing an employee-led learning cohort focused on equity and cultural competence. This strategy provides for a supportive space to learn together, take risks and make mistakes, and to build an organized group of change-agents within the organization who can help it to address issues of policy and practice. This makes the learning more personal and not just abstract, and can provide both the challenge for learners to grow, and also the support they need to rise to those challenges (Drago-Severson et al., 2001). Within this cohort, an essential focus should be on recognizing and mitigating implicit bias, both as individuals and also identifying ways in which the organization may address collective biases. A staff-led process which originates from the grassroots of the organization and which engages staff in multiple levels of power within the organization can help to address internal issues of power and privilege. This is a necessary step in order to make new power relationships possible, as well as to

open the space for questioning how the organization engages with power and privilege with youth and communities.

In my own organization, we have created two separate learning and action cohorts on the themes of diversity and inclusion. They have been tremendously important opportunities for taking risks, learning collaboratively, and creating an affinity group of staff with whom we have been able to engage in ongoing collaborations related to diversity and inclusion, as well as to lobby for policy changes. In the first state-wide yearlong cohort, 100% of participants reported that they had gained a deeper understanding of their culture and privilege, were better able to understand the role of diversity and culture in their work, and had improved their ability to shift between perspectives (Landrieu et al., 2014). The second cohort is still in process at the time of this writing, but it has had an increased focus on addressing implicit bias and addressing themes of power and oppression. Both of these cohorts have demonstrated that people have agency to make change in their own spheres of influence through collaborative learning, as well as creating a collective voice to make organizational change.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As legacy organizations adapt to the new reality of working with youth and communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they need to evolve in order to stay relevant. In order to effectively serve the broad range of diverse youth in the current population, these organizations and their staff and volunteers must embrace equity in their work. Ultimately, the process of organizational change will depend on where the primary awareness and leadership exist to provide the impulsion for change, but long-term it must be carried out at all levels of the organization if it is to be sustainable for the future.

While it can be highly effective to have an inspirational leader who is spearheading the changes, it also can leave the organization vulnerable to identifying the work as only “their crusade” (A. Curiel, personal communication, April 29, 2016). It also can be disempowering to staff and volunteers, much like adult dominance can disempower youth in youth programs. A bottom-up approach may be more grounded in the community and led by the frontline staff who have those direct contacts, but it may not be effective at changing the policies that can sustain change even when staff turnover occurs.

Topics I suggest for future research include engaging marginalized youth and communities to provide leadership in the transformation of youth development organizations; learning from the wisdom of organizations founded by and for marginalized communities; and exploring the science of organizational development and change literature to learn about processes that can facilitate this transformation. These topics will become increasingly salient as our country changes and youth development organizations find their changing place in it.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**KATHRYN SHARPE** is an Extension Educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development, based in the Urban office. Her primary focus in youth development is on advancing cultural competence and equity through efforts such as a statewide Diversity and Inclusion cohort and a Cultural Exchange program that she piloted, and on building the capacity of caring adults to work with young people through youth worker and volunteer training. In addition, Kathryn has led the development of many civic engagement/youth leadership clubs and experiences focused on engaging traditionally underserved communities, especially immigrant communities. Her graduate research in human geography focused on immigration and social movements. Through 4-H, she seeks to provide youth with opportunities to discover their own passions and to enlarge their sense of what is possible in life.

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# FOSTERING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING FOR YOUTH AND STAFF IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME

By Brandon Tice

When I was first introduced to the out-of-school-time (OST) field in 2013, I was struck by two realizations. First, the simplicity of the youth development principles that guided OST programs impressed me: foster supportive relationships with youth and adults, make learning hands-on and relevant to young people's interests and identity, and engage young people's families and communities. As a recent graduate of the formal education system, these simple tenets were new to me, but their truth and value was clear. Second, as I shifted to the research and messaging materials intended to communicate the value of OST programs to a public audience, I was surprised to see these materials focused mainly on the role of OST in impacting school performance: boosting young people's attendance, behavior, and grades in school. These materials also emphasized how afterschool programs helped working families and kept kids safe. These were all obviously meaningful outcomes to celebrate, but they failed to capture the vibrancy and meaning of OST as I had begun to understand it.

That's why I've been thrilled to see the emergence of new social science research and frameworks that define how high-quality OST programs foster the social and emotional learning (SEL) of young people. This language of how to foster young people's SEL has already sparked several new initiatives among funders and researchers in the OST sector. Additionally, it provides a welcome opportunity to increase public recognition and funding for the vibrant work of youth development that has been happening in high-quality youth and OST programs for at least a century. Nonetheless the history of youth work also reveals the risks that can accompany new funding opportunities, such as the advance of unrealistic expectations around assessment of youth outcomes.







The question of how Minnesota's OST field advances social-emotional learning is critical, because if approached the wrong way it could damage the meaningful youth-adult relationships and youth-centered approach that is the foundation of youth work practice, and is the source of the rich social-emotional learning that happens in afterschool programs. In this paper, I will examine foundational thinkers from youth work's past and the current context of Minnesota's OST field to reveal a promising approach to strengthen the OST field for the opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ultimately, I hope to make clear that because meaningful youth-adult relationships are the central strength of youth work and high-quality OST programs, Minnesota's OST field must first focus on fostering SEL competencies and intentional practices in its own workforce before it hopes to advance SEL for young people. This approach isn't a retreat from claiming and supporting the OST field's role in advancing social and emotional learning. Rather, it is a chance for the field to stay grounded in its belief in continuous human growth and development, while unlocking the passion and ingenuity of the OST field to test, refine, and share innovative approaches, practices, and tools to foster SEL.

Before we explore how the OST field's past and present context informs the ideal approach to advancing SEL, let's start by defining social-emotional learning as it's currently understood. First, keep in mind that the term "social-emotional learning" goes by other names depending on who's talking about it—non-cognitive skills, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and character development, to name a few—yet SEL seems to be the dominant frame for discussions in Minnesota's OST field, and I believe it is the most focused and descriptive term, so I will use it going forward. When it comes to defining what social-emotional learning is, I prefer the comprehensive definition set forth by the Collaborative for Social, Academic, and Emotional Learning

(CASEL), which defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2016). Depending on which framework you’re using, you could add or subtract specific skills to this definition. Overall though, this definition is well-established and widely used in both formal and OST settings, so it’s a good reference point.

While there are many existing frameworks for SEL, I argue that the most useful framing for thinking about how SEL happens in OST programs is *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices in Social Emotional Learning* put forth by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality and the Susan Crown Exchange (SCE) (2016). This “SEL Field Guide” lays out a framework for SEL in after-school programs composed of six key standards or domains of social-emotional learning as shown in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1: STANDARDS OR DOMAINS**

					
<b>Emotion Management</b>	<b>Empathy</b>	<b>Teamwork</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Problem Solving</b>
<i>Abilities to be aware of and constructively handle both positive and challenging emotions.</i>	<i>Relating to others with acceptance, understanding, and sensitivity to their diverse perspectives and experiences.</i>	<i>Abilities to collaborate and coordinate action with others.</i>	<i>Dispositions and abilities to reliably meet commitments and fulfill obligations of challenging roles.</i>	<i>Capacities to take action, sustain motivation, and persevere through challenge toward an identified goal.</i>	<i>Abilities to plan, strategize, and implement complex tasks.</i>

Source: SEL Field Guide, Weikart Center for youth Program Quality and the Susan Crown Exchange

The SEL Field Guide intentionally refers to these domains as “SEL skills,” to reinforce what the research shows: that these skills can be taught and learned, and that there are effective ways to foster this learning. What makes this set of domains particularly appealing is that they’re broad categories that other SEL frameworks can map onto. Each domain is also broken down into “Youth Experience” and “Staff Practice” indicators associated with it, which helps make them more concrete and accessible, and also keeps the focus on how staff are using practices to create youth experiences. Another feature of these SEL skills is that they’re not only based in research, but were also adjusted in response to feedback from the eight OST programs that participated in the 16-month “SEL Challenge” designed by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality and the SCE to identify promising practices, within the context of youth programs, for building young people’s SEL skills. Thus, they have been thoroughly vetted by expert researchers and on-the-ground practitioners. Finally, the SEL Field Guide also defines four “Curriculum Features” that serve as the foundation of a quality afterschool program, which align with the quality practices laid out in the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), which is the most widely-used quality assessment tool in Minnesota’s OST field.

There are many other frameworks for SEL, and it’s likely that reaching broad consensus on a single framework, even within Minnesota’s OST field, will be an ongoing and challenging process. This makes perfect sense because human social and emotional behavior is complex, and it’s impossible to put its rich diversity into neat categories. Yet because the SEL Field Guide presents a broad framework for SEL, which focuses attention on how high-quality staff practices create the conditions for youth to experience and



develop social-emotional skills, I believe the SEL Field Guide presents the most promising framework to guide the OST field's ongoing discussions about advancing SEL. Now that we understand SEL as it is defined in the present day, we can ask: how should Minnesota's OST field go about advancing its ability to intentionally foster SEL?

To answer this question, let's first get grounded in the thinking of John Dewey, a foundational philosopher and educational thinker who first expounded many of the principles of youth work such as experiential and youth-centered approaches to learning. In *Democracy and Education*, his treatise on the purpose and form of education in democratic societies, Dewey addresses the flaws in seeing education as merely a way to prepare the immaturity and dynamism of youth for the fixed and static nature of adulthood:

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*Our tendency to take immaturity as mere lack, and growth as something which fills up the gap between the immature and the mature is due to regarding childhood comparatively, instead of intrinsically. We treat it simply as a privation because we are measuring it by adulthood as a fixed standard... (1916/2004, p. 40)*

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*When we abandon the attempt to define immaturity by means of fixed comparison with adult accomplishments, we are compelled to give up thinking of it as denoting lack of desired traits... Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence, education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age. (1916/2004, p. 50)*

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These passages highlight an irony surrounding the OST field's discussions of fostering social-emotional learning in young people. While the discussions focus mostly on defining the right SEL indicators for young people to aspire to—sorting through the laundry list of aspirational skills like empathy, initiative, emotional regulation, responsibility, relationship skills, to name a few—they often devote little energy to discussing how to intentionally foster SEL in the adult OST staff who work with the youth. Dewey reminds us that in the genuine youth-adult partnerships that drive learning, we need to acknowledge the need for both young people and adult participants to have opportunities to learn and grow.

The importance of equipping adults as well as young people to understand, apply, and build social-emotional skills is based not only in foundational youth work values, but in research as well. In the *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Development Framework*, Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich and Heath (2015) synthesized knowledge from the fields of youth development, psychology, sociology, education, and the cognitive sciences to describe what young people need to grow and learn. Their report defined young adult success not only by educational attainment, but by young people's ability to "fulfill individual goals and have the agency and competencies to influence the world around them" (p. 1). Based on this definition of success, and their comprehensive survey of the research on learning, the report found:

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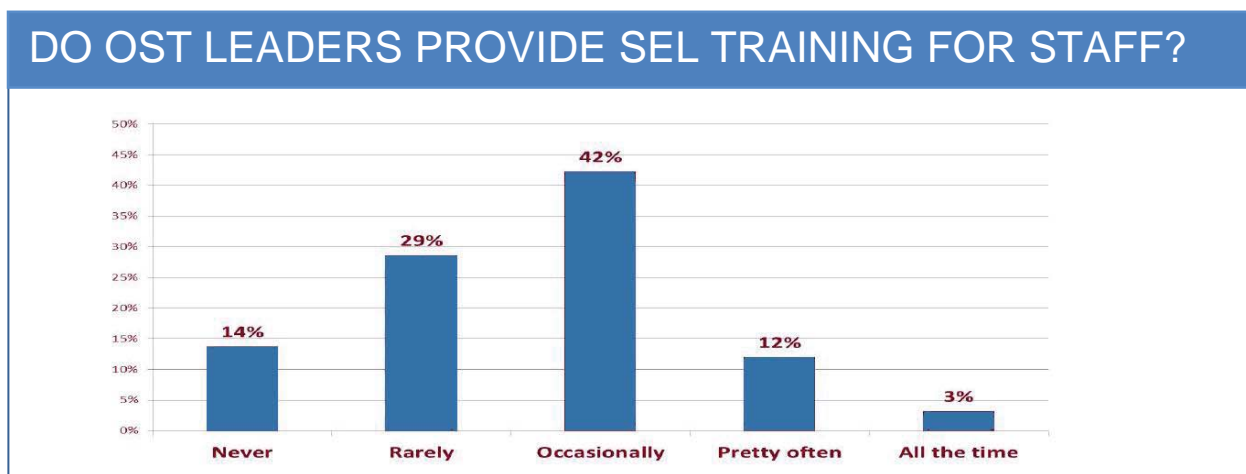
*What matter most for development is not the intentions of adults, but their actual enactment of practices in relation to young people... Critical to the process of making meaning out of developmental experiences are strong, supportive, and sustained relationships with caring adults who can encourage young people to reflect on their experiences and help them to interpret those experiences in ways that expand their sense of themselves and their horizons. (p. 5)*

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In short, the report concludes that for adults to effectively support youth's learning— including SEL—they must be able to experience, reflect on, understand, and interpret those SEL competencies themselves.

For many years Minnesota's OST field has embraced this truth about how youth and adults need opportunities for shared and continuous learning. This common knowledge was affirmed in Ignite Afterschool's *Believe It. Build It*, which posits supportive youth-adult relationships and intentional program design as key foundations of quality OST programs that positively impact youth. Yet in a recent survey of attitudes towards SEL among OST leaders in Minnesota, 14% responded that they never provide SEL training to staff, while 29% rarely provide it (Walker, Blyth & Sheldon, 2016). The most frequent response was that they "Occasionally" provided SEL training for staff (42%).

**FIGURE 2. FREQUENCY OF SEL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR MINNESOTA OST STAFF**



Source: Perspectives on Social and emotional Learning from Out-of-School-time Leaders in Minnesota

This lack of specific attention and training for social-emotional learning for adults mirrors a more general lack of professional development opportunities in the OST field. A survey of OST professional development providers conducted by Ignite Afterschool found that 51% of OST staff lacked adequate access to professional development, and that demand for OST was increasing, but not the systems to support it (Moore, 2014). Considering this, it's no wonder that when asked, "What should OST do moving forward?" in the SEL survey, the responses with the highest agreement were "Strengthen professional development opportunities" and "build stronger community OST systems."

If Minnesota's OST field wants to build capacity to intentionally build youth's social and emotional skills, the clear next step is to follow Dewey's instruction to supply "the conditions which insure growth" (1916/2004, p. 50) by strengthening professional development opportunities—both in general and

connected to SEL—to the adults in the OST workforce. These efforts need to go beyond just one-off trainings though, and should instead be viewed more broadly as an initiative to foster staff’s understanding of healthy social-emotional behaviors and how to promote them – both for youth and for themselves. By accounting for the current needs of Minnesota’s OST field, the research-based practices of effective OST programs, and the foundational youth and human development values at the heart of OST, this approach holds the most promise for Minnesota’s OST field to claim and sustainably advance young people’s SEL in the long run.

Yet how would it look for Minnesota’s OST field to go beyond supporting intentional SEL practices and start measuring the impact of these efforts on youth? This question inevitably comes up in discussions around advancing SEL, and it’s an essential question for the OST field’s ability to demonstrate its impact on SEL. Unfortunately, this question also seems to be coming too soon in a rapidly-developing area of social science research. To address this question, the American Institutes of Research (2015) provides useful guidance, advising OST programs interested in targeting and measuring their impact on youth’s SEL to, “Identify which skills, of the many listed in the [SEL] frameworks earlier, the program targets. Make choices. Think about program activities. Decide on what few key social and emotional competencies the program truly targets and measure those—not the universe of social and emotional skills that exist” (p. 1). In addition, they provide a useful note of caution, writing that, “social and emotional competencies are not universally agreed upon, and their measurement is both complicated and controversial” (p. 1).

While these approaches might not lend themselves to the OST field quickly and decisively claiming their role in fostering young people’s SEL, I believe they provide practical advice for the nascent state of frameworks and assessment tools in the OST field. That being said, the OST staff and youth self-assessment surveys provided through the *SEL Field Guide* are promising resources, because they were designed specifically for use in OST programs, come with guides on how to use the data in a Continuous Program Improvement cycle, and align with the widely-used Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool. However, these resources are new and untested, so shouldn’t be seen as “the” resource for evaluating the impact on young people’s SEL.

The increasing awareness among funders, policymakers, and researchers about the importance of SEL for young people’s success is undoubtedly an opportunity for Minnesota’s OST field. My task with this paper has been to recognize the importance of pursuing that opportunity, while grounding any next steps in the present realities of the OST field and the foundational principles of youth development. Based on my analysis, I believe the OST field must first focus its energies on fostering SEL competencies and intentional practices in its own workforce. The ideal system of professional development supports should empower OST programs to choose which SEL indicators or measures align with their program goals, strengthen their staff’s intentional SEL practices, and go through a Continuous Program Improvement process (such as *Making Meaning with Multiple Data Sets – M3*) that will allow them to reflect and improve on how they advance young people’s social-emotional learning. This approach will be challenging, but it carries the potential to brighten not only the future of Minnesota’s youth, but the future of the adults who fully invest themselves in young people’s success and wellbeing.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BRANDON TICE** enjoys seeking out new experiences that will challenge his thinking and broaden his perspective. He is endlessly curious about how to best design public policy that responds to the unique challenges of the 21st century, especially in the areas of education, the workforce, and youth development. Brandon's job as the Director of Strategic Initiatives at Ignite Afterschool, Minnesota's afterschool network, gives him plenty of opportunities to indulge that interest. He will also continue to explore these policy issues through the Masters of Public Policy program at the UMN Humphrey School, starting in Fall 2016.

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