



Accountability with a Youth Worker Voice Emily Schloesser



INITIAL EXPLORATION

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

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

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

CHANGING THE QUESTION

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

Some suggest that by professionalizing the field of youth work through licensure or certification, there would be a decrease in staff turnover and improvements in competence, pay, and ethical practice. However, as a couple of executive directors have pointed out to me, professionalization of youth work is unlikely to become mandatory unless organizations are able to see the benefit. They want to know why professionalization of youth workers matters and how professionalization would impact their ability to hire and pay youth workers. Walker and Walker (2012) point out, "...models [for professionalization] assume that licensed, credentialed, certified, tested and graded

equals qualified” (p. 50). Since this is not necessarily the case, I do not believe that licensing or certification is the way to go. This is important to the field of youth work because youth workers need to find a way to be able to hold accountable the organizations that make decisions about the work we do.

FRONTLINE CONVERSATIONS

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

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

The youth workers I spoke with felt, as do I,

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

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

A DIFFERENT SET OF EXPECTATIONS

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

If we look at the responses I received from the youth workers I spoke with, any number of

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

Ultimately, it will take time for the field to organize itself and come up with solutions beyond licensure and certification of youth workers or credentialing of organizations and programs. As I see it, there will need to be a coordinated effort—not just on the part of youth workers finding a united voice—but a collaborative effort of youth workers, community, organizations, and funders working to improve the field of youth work together.

REFERENCES

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

AUTHOR BIO

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

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