



## It's Complicated: Crafting a System to Support Youth Work

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Today there is a new theoretical paradigm in the development and policy world. Known as the “Human Development” approach...it begins with a very simple question: What are people actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities are available to them? This question, though simple, is also complex, since the quality of a human life involves multiple elements whose relationship to one another needs close study. Indeed, one of the appealing features of the new approach is its complexity: it appears well equipped to respond to the complexities of human life and human striving. —Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach, Martha C. Nussbaum

Human development is defined as the process of enlarging people’s freedoms and opportunities and improving their well-being. Human development is about the real freedom ordinary people have to decide who to be, what to do, and how to live...Central to the human development approach is the concept of capabilities. Capabilities—what people can do and what they can become—are the equipment one has to pursue a life of value.<sup>1</sup> —Measure of America, A Project of the Social Science Research Council

### THE CONTEXT

The state of Minnesota, where I live and work, has one of the largest academic achievement gaps between youth of color and white youth of all states in the nation<sup>2</sup>. In Saint Paul, Frequently Asked Questions connected to a new strategic plan put forth by the school district notes that “only half of our students are proficient in reading and math. The 2010 [Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment] II proficiency scores show that the widest gap

exists for African American and Native American students as compared to White students. This gap holds true regardless of income.”<sup>3</sup> The achievement gap is a real problem and it permeates our public discourse and the circles where I work.

The response and solutions to fix the achievement gap are many and come from every direction. The federal government encourages reform through competitive state grants like Race to the Top, while national service programs like VISTA, originally intended to address poverty, are pressured by federal and state agencies to narrow their focus on more in-school and academic goals like reading interventions. Local funders shift priorities to address clear academic outcomes like reading by third grade. Local communities are intent on replicating the Harlem Children’s Zone and Cincinnati Strive, two local initiatives that have gained national attention for their unrelenting focus on ensuring young people’s academic success.

Just as groups like the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, which advocates for a focus on non-academic skills like problem-solving and critical thinking, seem to be falling out of favor, Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman’s work complicates our understanding of what makes a young person successful. In his study on the effectiveness and impacts of the General Educational Development (GED), he found that mastering high school level content alone does not guarantee young people’s future success. Equally important— and maybe even a prerequisite for mastering content in a school or community setting— are a cluster of non-cognitive skills like curiosity and “stick-to-itiveness.” These findings make us all squirm in our chair. Whatever you call them, character

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.measureofamerica.org/human-development/> Retrieved October 14, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Education week- 2012 report card, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/marketplace/products/qc2012-shr.html?intc=EW-QC12-LFTNAV> Retrieved September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Strong Schools, Strong Communities Frequently Asked Questions, Saint Paul Public Schools p. 2, [http://www.spps.org/uploads/strongschoolsfaq\\_jan11.pdf](http://www.spps.org/uploads/strongschoolsfaq_jan11.pdf) Retrieved September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

traits, non-cognitive skills, or 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, they're complicated to define and difficult to measure<sup>4</sup>. Many argue it's easy to hold someone accountable to making sure a child can read, but holding them accountable to making sure a child is curious? That almost seems to border on the impossible.

This is the milieu of ideas, debate and conversation that dominate my work as director of Sprockets, Saint Paul's Out-of-School Time Network. Sprockets brings together large systems like the school district and city government with community organizations to improve the quality, availability and effectiveness of out-of-school time learning for all youth in Saint Paul. In this work, the focus is on learning outside the classroom and is most often done by youth workers who work alongside young people. Given Sprockets mission, my work has a lot to do with supporting youth workers to be effective at their practice. What becomes complicated for all involved is clarity in understanding what youth workers are ultimately responsible for in their work with youth. Is it academic success? Non-cognitive skills? Both? Or something else altogether?

It is from this context that I became part of a fellowship program that asked a group of Minnesota practitioners in the youth work field to explore issues about shared values and principles, theoretical and practical frameworks, and accountability systems for youth workers. As I talk to colleagues nationally and read literature in the youth work field, I am aware of the systems-level conversations and tangible work happening across the country to credential youth workers. Much of this work happens as a strategy to ensure the quality of out-of-school learning opportunities and to ensure youth workers are accountable to an agreed upon set of youth worker competencies. Often it is also argued that credentialing and/or licensing youth workers will improve the status, pay and work experience of youth workers. Given these national efforts and Sprockets' explicit charge to support both the quality and effectiveness of out-of-school learning, I was drawn to the issue

originally posed this way: *What would happen to youth work in Minnesota if we had a creative system of expectations and accountability for youth workers?* These days, the language of high expectations and accountability are fully loaded and often feel blaming and divorced from creating authentic spaces for learning and development—of youth or the people who work with them.

For the purposes of this paper, I focused on youth workers' accountability to themselves and to the young people they work with. I wanted to ensure that this creative system was less about compliance and more about supporting youth workers to develop their capabilities to grow as practitioners so they can create more powerful, meaningful and quality experiences with and for young people. Also instead of imagining creative systems and then asking what impact each of those possible systems would have on youth work in Minnesota, I instead explored what youth workers in Minnesota want and what type of system they feel would best achieve those goals.

This paper will ultimately propose key elements for a creative system that supports youth workers to develop their skills and capabilities as youth workers, but first I will define what I believe the role and goal of youth work is in communities. It is because of the swirling, often contradictory, public discourse about young people and what they need that I find it important to take a stance on what youth work is and what youth workers should be accountable for. Second, I will explore the national conversation and efforts around credentialing as it relates to creating systems of support for youth work. Lastly, I will describe conversations with youth workers in Minnesota around this topic and share proposed elements of a creative system informed by their perspectives.

## **DEFINING YOUTH WORK**

There is disagreement among people who work with youth outside of formal school settings about who youth workers are and are not. For

<sup>4</sup> Heckman, James J. & Yona Rubinstein. *The Importance of Noncognitive Skills: Lessons from the GED Testing Program*. The American Economic Review, 91: 2 pp. 145-149.

example, in the Sprockets network, youth workers typically work with young people in recreation centers, schools, community centers and churches. They facilitate after-school and youth groups, sports teams and a range of other after-school and summer learning opportunities. They work with young people from a variety of backgrounds, from more stable home environments to youth experiencing significant stresses related to poverty or other community and family instabilities. Young people in Saint Paul are diverse, speaking more than 100 languages and dialects within the Saint Paul Public Schools, and the Sprockets network partners work within and among that diversity. Youth detention centers and residential treatment centers are outside the scope of the Sprockets network, yet many would include staff in these settings as youth workers.

To get outside the debate about where youth work happens or does not happen, I find it more useful to describe youth workers not by the setting in which they work but by the approach and core values that guide their practice. I like the definition that came out of a 2006 Wingspread Conference where youth workers are defined as “individuals who work with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social and/or educational development and enable them to gain voice, influence, and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence (p.4).”

Youth work is about supporting holistic human development—the subject matter content is often secondary. This definition is even more critical given the social and political context described earlier that is pushing youth workers to be less focused on the whole child and to have a more myopic focus on young people’s academic success. Supporting young people’s identity as student is one part of the youth work definition, but it is far from all of it. If we are going to talk about holding youth workers accountable, it is critical to put a stake in the ground and be unwavering in our clarity that youth work is about human development, inclusive of but not exclusive to supporting

young people’s academic achievement.

### CREDENTIALING YOUTH WORKERS

With a clear definition of youth work, I turn to a more focused exploration of my question: What would a creative system of expectations and accountability for youth workers look like?

To begin, I wanted to know more about what credentialing advocates feel is promising and necessary about credentialing. An article reviewing professional credentials in out-of-school time by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOS) at Wellesley Center for Women for Cornerstones for Kids defines a credential as, “a certification that recognizes an individual’s performance based on a set of defined skills and knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> In 2008, the Academy for Educational Development’s (AED) Center for Youth Development brought sixteen leaders in the youth work field together to discuss the state of the field. A summary report based on the convening envisions “a day soon when all youth workers in the United States are fully trained and certified.”<sup>6</sup> The reasons provided for moving toward this goal are not simply laid out and they range from ensuring youth work has the same professional integrity as teaching and social work to an argument that youth workers will “not succeed in teaching lifelong skills and competencies for the success of youth if they are poorly prepared and lack support.”<sup>7</sup>

Many advocates of credentialing for youth workers cite studies—largely in early childhood education and school-based teaching—that show practitioner education, professional development and training to be key factors in producing quality outcomes for youth<sup>8</sup>. What remains unclear is how these findings lead to the conclusion that credentialing and/or licensing is key to a system of support for youth workers; professional development and

<sup>5</sup> Dennehy, J, Gannett, E, Robbins, R. (2006). *Setting the Stage for a Youth Development Associate Credential: A National Review of Professional Credentials for the Out-of-School Time Workforce*. National Institute on Out-of-School-Time Wellesley Centers for Women. P. 5.

<sup>6</sup> AED. *Youth Work: Organizing Pathways for Leadership Development and Social Change*. (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Dennehy, J, Gannett, E, Robbins, R. (2006). Curry, D., et al. (2012) Assessing Youth Worker Competence: National Child and Youth Worker Certification in D. Fusco (Ed.) *Advancing Youth Work: Current Trends, Critical Questions* (pp. 27-38). New York, NY: Routledge.

training and credentialing are not synonymous. The NIOST article states that, “despite the growth in professional development programs, there have been few formal scientific evaluations to measure their [credentials’] success. However, there has been a tremendous amount of research in both the out-of-school time (OST) and early care and education (ECE) fields demonstrating that more highly educated staff provide higher quality services to children and youth.”<sup>9</sup> This article also supports the work of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition which argues for a comprehensive professional development system with five key components, stating clearly that credentialing is one component that is not effective alone.<sup>10</sup>

There are others who agree that quality youth work requires professional development but do not conclude that credentialing based on core competencies adequately addresses the complexities of a practice focused on supporting human development. In their article, *Establishing Expertise in an Emerging Field*, Joyce Walker and Kate Walker explain that youth workers face complex practice dilemmas that require judgment and that the, “tendency to reduce youth work practice to measurable terms [competencies] risks reducing youth work to a purely technical skill....By whittling down practice to the ability to undertake specific tasks, it becomes largely stripped of its social, moral and intellectual qualities.”<sup>11</sup> Youth work is about supporting human development—young people’s journey to decide who to be, what to do, and how to live. This is a complex process and developing the skills, artistry, and judgment necessary to be an effective youth worker is complex as well. While we like check lists, because they simplify the complexity, we must be careful not to lull ourselves into the belief that attending a training aligned with each competency and walking away with a credential on its own will lead to better youth work.

## LISTENING TO YOUTH WORKERS: PERSPECTIVES ON CREDENTIALING OR LICENSING

Through two listening sessions, I spoke with 17 youth workers and youth program managers connected to the Sprockets out-of-school-time network in Saint Paul. All but two (or 88%) self-identified as youth workers; 88% also reported that they work directly with youth at least some of time. The two who did not work with youth at least some of the time act as youth program managers. Of the 15 who work with youth at least some of the time, about half do direct youth work only while the other half do direct youth work while also acting as a youth program managers. All 17 listening session participants had completed some form of higher education. One (6%) had an associate degree, 11 (67%) had a bachelor’s degree and 5 (29%) had an advanced degree<sup>12</sup>. During listening sessions, participants were first asked to share their initial reactions and assumptions about youth worker licensure and/or credentialing (free association brainstorm). Their reactions to the concept were then further discussed and “unpacked.” Next they were asked to share what they believe a creative system of accountability and expectations for youth workers should look like. As youth workers talked about credentialing and/or licensing youth workers, three clear themes emerged. No matter what question was posed, the groups always wove their way back to the following points:

1. *Racial equity*: It was feared that credentialing or licensing (these terms were used interchangeably by youth workers in listening sessions) would lead to a “whitening” of the field and that youth workers of color and/or from low-income backgrounds would have significantly greater access barriers to the field than white and/or higher-income individuals. Most felt this would not benefit the young people in Saint Paul because they would find fewer and fewer youth workers who look like them.

<sup>9</sup> Dennehy, J., Gannett, E., Robbins, R. (2006). p.10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Walker, J. & 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.

<sup>12</sup> I did not request information on the topic area of degrees and am not able to report how many had a youth work, education, or youth development related degree.

2. *Youth work is not a 100% learned craft:* Many believe that truly good youth workers bring something intrinsic to the table that can't be taught. Something more akin to an artist. Artists can get better through training, education, practice and mentorship but if you're not an artist, you're not an artist. The youth workers I talked with felt the same holds true in their line of work. You can get better but some folks, no matter how much training, just aren't youth workers. They did not believe that credentialing and/or licensure in any way will guarantee good youth work. They believe it is the responsibility of good youth program managers to recognize a talented youth worker when hiring.

3. *Licensure does not necessarily mean better pay:* Youth workers were clear that they want better pay and benefits. They argued that the youth work field is generally young because they have to move on to other positions in order to attain other life goals like having a family or buying a home. Youth workers noted that this also means that just when they feel experienced in their work, they no longer can sustain a direct youth work career. Most of the youth workers I talked to were very suspect of any assertion that licensing or credentialing will lead to better pay. When someone suggested that teachers are better paid because of licensure another responded it's more likely because of teacher unions. Another participant was not convinced that the private philanthropic or public funding sources for youth programs would have any interest in supporting higher salary lines in grant applications but would probably still expect a credential and higher outcomes anyway. Pretty much, they felt that efforts to create credentials may be about improving quality and raising accountability, but that paying more for it was not a part of most decision-makers conversation.

In 2005, the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition commissioned the Forum for Youth Investment to conduct a survey of 1,053 youth

workers, 195 organization directors and focus groups with 70 youth workers across eight cities. The goal was to better understand who youth workers are and the conditions of their work. The Forum produced a report that is considered one of the best views of youth workers we have, that included information from this study alongside a survey of youth workers conducted by the National Afterschool Association<sup>13</sup>. The youth workers surveyed were a diverse lot. While primarily under age 30, a good number were in their 40s and 50s. The surveyed youth workers were also majority people of color; they were fairly well educated: 60% had a 2-year degree or higher while two thirds had a relevant credential. While the sampling used in the study does not allow for the results to be generalized to youth workers more broadly, the Next Gen and Forum study still tells us some important things and gives some credibility to the perspectives of youth workers I spoke with in Saint Paul.

Some findings around youth workers salary and education were particularly relevant. While the median salary was between \$25,000 and \$25,999 (less as an hourly rate for part-time staff), those with two or more years of post-secondary education were more likely to be white with a social work or education credential (as opposed to a youth work or youth development credential), were paid more and were more likely to say that their background is different than the youth they work with (p. 29). The lower-paid, often part-time staff were more likely to be people of color who had a youth work credential such as completion of the Advancing Youth Development (AYD) program. These youth workers were more likely to say that their background was similar to the youth they work with.

It seems to me that some findings in the Next Gen and Forum study just might support Saint Paul youth workers' fears. It seemed that better-paid youth workers were better educated than less well paid youth workers. It was also true that these youth workers were more likely to be white and say they did not reflect the

<sup>13</sup> Yohalem, N., Pittman, K., & Moore, D. (2006). *Growing the Next Generation of Youth Work Professionals: Workforce Opportunities and Challenges*. Next Generation Youth Work Coalition by The Forum for Youth Investment.

backgrounds of the youth they worked with. I agree with my peers in Saint Paul, unless implemented in a very creative and non-traditional way, credentialing systems would probably exacerbate this finding. I also found it interesting that the youth workers who actually had a youth work credential (as opposed to the related, but different, field of social work and education) were less well paid. I understand that could be due to the fact that there is no one standard, agreed-upon system of credentialing youth workers as there is for social work or education, but I also do not believe that if we did have a common approach, higher pay would naturally follow.

Another finding from The Forum and Next Gen study is worth noting. When asked what they think would most help advance the profession, both youth workers and program directors said raising wages and increasing program resources, in that order, over things like professional development and minimum credentials. This aligns very nicely with what youth workers in Saint Paul said. So why are we asking about creative accountability and expectation systems instead of asking what we can do to make youth work an actual, viable profession? The youth workers I spoke with did value conversations about professional development, but they valued it more as an opportunity to improve their practice than as a strategy to gain higher pay.

### **CRAFTING A SYSTEM TO SUPPORT YOUTH WORK PRACTICE**

Whether someone is a proponent of credentialing or not, my research and conversations found that most agree that a creative system of supports for youth workers must have multiple elements. In this section I lay out the elements and characteristics of a system of youth work support that I've come to believe are important. In my conversations with youth workers in the Sprockets network, many elements of a creative system were identified. Themes from the listening sessions deeply influenced my final thinking and I do my best here to represent the ideas from those listening sessions. In addition, my final

conclusions are influenced by readings, discussions with colleagues in the Walkabout fellowship, as well as my own experience as both a frontline youth worker and director of an out-of-school-time intermediary network in the early stages of developing a system of supports for youth workers.

### **DYNAMIC SYSTEM**

In the Sprockets network we talk a lot about continuous quality improvement. What we mean is that quality never reaches stasis. Achieving quality is much more like growing a garden; you never reach a point where your final product no longer requires weeding, fertilizing, or tending. In order to maintain your garden, constant tending that accounts for changes in the environment is necessary. This is the first critical element for any system; it can never become static. Instead, a creative system of support for youth workers must be constantly attended to in order to ensure it remains relevant and is achieving its stated purpose. This does not mean that trainings are offered every year and therefore it not static; it means that there must be constant attention to youth workers' engagement in their learning and development within the system.

The youth workers I spoke with also identified this element and added that it is youth workers who must be on the team of "tenders." They warned against external sources of authority managing a system to support youth workers who are too far away from the day-to-day realities of direct youth work practice or who have competing interests and motivations. Part of the tending must also be to ensure multiple points of entry remain and to guard against standardization so that youth work continues to be a field accessible to people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. The system should never require every youth worker to gain a degree, license or credential that is exclusionary due cost or initial acceptance or entry (into a higher education institution). The system should be outside of formal higher education systems but could include higher education options for those interested.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The types of learning opportunities and experiences that should be available within the system are the next element to consider. First, professional development opportunities must be grounded in practice. Therefore, youth workers should have formal opportunities to reflect on their experiences in doing youth work. This is key to much of what Walker and Walker propose about youth workers building judgment. Youth workers need opportunities to talk with other youth workers about challenges and successes in a way that pulls those experiences apart and makes them “learning cases.” Related to this idea (or one example of it) is youth workers’ need for opportunities for apprenticeship and mentorship from those with more practice experience. It is possible that youth workers receive mentorship by program managers or others within their organization but many youth workers in the two listening sessions suggested that a more structured and formal mentorship or apprenticeship system would be valuable.

Youth workers do believe that trainings such as classes, workshops, one-time sessions and conferences must also be part of the professional development components. These provide important venues to learn key youth work concepts and skills. They did not feel that these, in and of themselves, are adequate but that strong mentorship with opportunities for reflection are what make trainings meaningful and able to be tied to daily practice.

## ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

Lastly, there are things that can be done to strengthen the ecology of youth work. Investments made in workers in the “middle” of organizations could help because these are the supervisors, managers and organizational leaders who are responsible to support the frontline, direct-service youth workers. A few youth workers who participated in the listening sessions made the interesting assertion that, if an investment is going to be made in a credentialing or licensing structure, it is program managers and not frontline youth

workers who should be required to have a credential.

It is critical to recognize that youth workers and the quality of their practice do not happen in isolation from the environment in which the work. The health and wellness of the organizations offering youth learning opportunities can greatly impact the ability for youth workers to practice effective youth work. Any system must also provide opportunities to address the capacity of organizations to ensure opportunities for reflective practice and that leaders in the organization also understand the key aims, skills, knowledge and experiences that lead to improved youth work.

While the focus on this paper was not explicitly to address the average pay and advancement opportunities for youth workers, I feel it would be too big an omission not to address compensation at all. Youth workers did feel that quality youth work is also tied to experience and that low pay and unclear opportunities for advancement make it difficult to remain in direct youth work once they become experienced. I agree with the youth workers I spoke with that these issues are related to systems that support quality youth work but that these issues cannot be solely addressed by creating professional development systems. They are influenced by political environments, funding streams and other factors that also need to be addressed in order to achieve adequate pay and advancement opportunities for youth workers. I do believe this is a topic that deserves more exploration and attention than could be given in this paper.

## CONCLUSION

While simple answers are generally preferred, crafting systems to support youth work practice is a complicated task. It is complicated by the push and pull of public discourse about what the role and ultimate impact of out-of-school time should be. I’ve argued that it is critical for youth workers to claim their work as human development, inclusive of but not exclusive to academic success. Even with this clarity complexity remains. Human development is complex—both the work to support youth in growing

their capabilities and the work of youth workers to develop their practice. Also, understanding and agreeing upon the elements of quality youth work practice is complex. Are competencies enough or is there something more nuanced that lives in the grey areas of human experience that requires youth workers to build judgment that is situational and can only be nurtured through reflection and mentorship, not competency trainings and exams?

Lastly, crafting the system itself is complex. It requires constant tending, multiple entry points and multiple types of professional development opportunities. It also requires attention not just to youth workers but to the organizations and settings in which they work. Yet complexity should not lead to our paralysis. As Martha Nussbaum argues in the opening quotation, one of the appealing features of the human development approach is its complexity because it is the *only* approach able to respond to the complexities of deciding who to be and what to do. While complex, the elements described above are possible and can be realized by engaging networks of youth workers and related stakeholders to make it happen.

## AUTHOR BIO

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