



Toward a Youth-Centered Approach: Creating a (New) Standard Operating Procedure through Shared Values

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In 2010, the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development hosted a history conference and critical conversation retreat which gathered youth workers from across the field—at a state, national and even international level—to reflect and discuss some of the current issues and trends of this emerging profession. This conference, titled “Looking Backward to Move Forward: Who and What Do We Want to Become?” was the basis for the creation of this Walkabout Fellowship. The Fellowship focused on three specific questions pertinent to the field. This paper addresses one of those questions: What would happen to youth work in Minnesota if we had a shared understanding of values, principles and ethics? For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on values.

LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

This Walkabout has truly been a journey of *looking back to move forward*. By sitting in conversation with other youth workers, I was able to examine the roots, or songlines of the field of youth work as well as my own practice. Asking tough questions, such as, “What *is* youth work?” and only finding more questions meant that there was a lot of unpacking of the terms we had all taken for granted. This “soul searching” was challenging and a bit daunting, but ultimately helped me find the path I needed to walk.

In beginning my journey, I became increasingly aware of the different experiences that brought my colleagues to youth work. Some of them received an education in teaching but found that type of work with young people unfulfilling. Others just happened upon this work through an internship or similar venture and had the fortune of turning it into a career—all of it seemingly unintentional. In order to move forward in my work, I needed to examine

my own youth worker identity and what my experience meant in the broader conversation about the field.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Even before I knew what a youth worker was, I knew I wanted to be one. As a young person, I had the opportunity to experience values I believe are at the heart of youth work when I was empowered to participate in the leadership of an emerging nonprofit as vice president of the board of directors. As I left high school and moved away to college, I knew that I wanted to create similar opportunities for other young people. Initially, I wanted to be a social worker with the clear intention of working with young people, but during my first semester I was introduced to the world of youth work. Ever since then I have made clear, purposeful steps in the direction of youth work, first as a freshman when I declared my minor in Youth Studies and then again when I enrolled in the Youth Development Leadership M.Ed. program at the University of Minnesota. My career has run the gamut of working in school settings as an educational assistant to working in restrictive residential settings with youth who have significant emotional or behavioral needs. Whatever my job title, my professional identity has always been that of a youth worker.

My professional experience helped shape my perspective as I began this Walkabout. I came to our discussions from the standpoint that *anyone* who interacts with a young person has the potential to be a youth worker. This was in contrast with others who sought a more manageable, but perhaps also more limiting understanding of the frame of out-of-school time work with young people. This language is defined as the scope of work done during non-school hours and encompasses opportunities for youth to experience coordinated activities

that help them “grow, learn and develop” (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006).

As we started sharing our experiences, understandings and perceptions, I began to question my own identity as a youth worker. We began dissecting the nature of youth work, who youth workers are and who they are not. Making distinctions and establishing boundaries seemed to be an important component in order to move forward with the bigger questions.

These discussions left me to ponder my identity. How could I, as a person who has worked in educational, therapeutic and social service settings be considered a youth worker? After all, isn't one of the fundamental frameworks of youth work its voluntary nature? (Jeffs & Smith, 2008). The idea that young people can enter into relationship with a youth worker of their own volition and choose to end that relationship at any time is a key distinction for some (Smith, 1999, 2002). Yet none of the young people I have worked with have ever truly come to me of their own free will. They were required by the state to attend school, required by their social workers to live in the group home and automatically assigned to my services as an Educational Support Advocate because their family received a housing subsidy.

After grappling with this I have concluded that my *approach* and the *values* that influence it are what has made me a youth worker. I believe that the strength of youth work is not necessarily the content of the work, but the approach, and that this approach is guided by values that can be shared across professions.

RESEARCH ASSERTIONS

The initial question, “What would happen to youth work in Minnesota if we had a shared understanding of values, principles and ethics?” offers a lot to digest. There is the question of what youth work even means—who are youth workers? It's hard to figure out what a “shared understanding” looks like, until we know *who* is sharing it.

In order to tackle this question and go into the world to find answers, I needed to make a couple of critical assertions about my viewpoint. The first is that I believe there is a potential youth worker in any person who serves as a guide in a young person's life, be it a professional or a caring neighbor. Though this statement is overly simplified, it is the root of my understanding and my values around the work. To maintain clear distinctions in my language, I will refer to the traditional out-of-school time professional as a **youth worker** and will use **youth-serving professional** when speaking of the broader set of disciplines that include people working in education, law enforcement, social work and counseling.

My second assertion is that the field of youth work is uniquely positioned to create a shared understanding of values across other youth-serving professions, which can be harnessed to have a profound impact on young people. Youth work is interdisciplinary—utilizing the knowledge of multiple disciplines to inform its own best practices. It is that interdisciplinary nature that can be a bridge builder, a means of creating permeable boundaries between distinct professions.

MAKING CONNECTIONS IN THE BROADER CONTEXT

The field of medicine, like youth-serving disciplines, has not been immune from professional silos. It has gone through a long evolution, from ancient, holistic practices like acupuncture and reiki, to the modern, specialized practice we often see today. As technology has advanced, it has given the field more and more information about each organ in the body. So much so that medical practitioners may be experts on the brain, but have nothing more than a superficial understanding of the organs that brain operates. A parallel can be drawn to the adults who are prominent in the lives of young people. A teacher is an expert at teaching, but may have very little understanding of the life experiences and circumstances that each learner brings with them as they walk into the classroom.

Improved outcomes and efficient service delivery are concerns across many disciplines. As the medical field has attempted to address these co-concerns, there has been an increase in literature related to what workforce experts are calling *interprofessional* training, a strategy that “seeks to encourage researchers, students, educators and professionals to integrate the expertise and methodology from two or more disciplines in the pursuit of a common task” (Health Workforce Information Center, 2012). Health care professionals have made a between their current multidisciplinary practice, and a new interdisciplinary practice. An article in the *Journal of Interprofessional Care* (Pecukonis, Doyle, & Bliss, 2008) made the following distinction between these two forms of practice:

Multidisciplinary: Several disciplines working in parallel, each implementing its own plan of action based on discipline-specific outcomes. Team members are only responsible for the activities related to their discipline and there is little sense of shared responsibility for patient outcomes or team development.

Interdisciplinary: Incorporates a collaborative and integrated program of care that celebrates and utilizes the interdependent knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and methods each professional brings to the health care system.

These definitions serve us well, whether our focus is the health of the human body or the human spirit. Professionals across the spectrum of youth-serving systems are likely to have broad experience with the multidisciplinary approach, where a common saying is, “That’s not my job.” This attitude can arise when too much emphasis is placed on content rather than approach, creating a tangle of criticism and blame for the youth-related concerns in society such as achievement gaps, teen pregnancy, juvenile crime, and others.

LEARNING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

The history of youth work is filled with the influences of luminaries in other disciplines—some of whom were social workers like Gisela

Konopka, others educators such as John Dewey and psychologists like G. Stanley Hall. These pioneers forged new pathways of thought about young people, pathways that have helped to create this discipline called youth work. By its very nature, youth work is interdisciplinary, because it uses a vast network of thoughts and ideas to influence a practice that takes a holistic view of youth.

The method for the field, thus far has been to seek the wisdom of others, to tread down the paths they worked to establish and expound upon their ideas. These songlines— or contributions to the field—range from Gisela Konopka’s conditions for healthy development to John Dewey’s philosophy of experiential education. Both embrace an interdisciplinary approach to working with young people so that the wholeness of the human experience is not lost.

As we look to the future, some believe that the only way to find strength is to distinguish our work—make it separate or distinct from the work of other professions. I would argue that our interdisciplinary nature is our strength and is essential to working with young people in an authentic, meaningful way and that creating another siloed professional structure would do nothing for the advancement of youth workers or the young people they serve. Gisela Konopka would likely feel the same, as she once wrote, “Work with people cannot be looked upon only from the viewpoint of separated professions. We must build far more integrated knowledge and methods” (Andrews, 2000, Minnesota section para. 15).

It is important to maintain differentiation between disciplines; however, this differentiation often creates barriers for effective collaboration. One way to address this need is to separate content from approach. Some disciplines, such as education, are highly structured around the content that is being delivered, which can develop expertise in one’s career. This expertise becomes a grounding source for interdisciplinary work. Teachers have knowledge and skills about academic learning that have influenced how youth workers promote educational success.

I contend that the expertise of youth workers—what grounds their work, amidst their complex web of content—is their youth-centered approach. This discipline has paved the way to promote an interdisciplinary practice, and is well positioned to create a shared understanding of values that can have a positive impact on the lives of young people and enhance the work of more content-driven disciplines. By bringing together these interdependent disciplines, and encouraging a collaborative and integrated response through shared values, we can ensure positive outcomes for youth—which in turn, means positive outcomes for education, for health care, for juvenile justice and for all other stakeholders.

VALUES

My first research assertion—that anyone has the potential to be a youth worker—led me to ponder the set of shared values that may already exist amongst different youth-serving professionals. I began my research by speaking with professionals who work with young people but whose primary identity may not lie in the traditional sense of youth work. I interviewed a police officer, two teachers, two social workers, someone in juvenile justice reform and another working in youth intervention (an area some contend is not youth work). In addition to connecting with these professionals, I also interviewed two youth workers and surveyed 16 more to find out what values they bring to their work with young people.

Values are an aspect of our personal and professional identities that often guide the decisions that we make throughout the day and the way in which we behave. They can help us find common ground and remove barriers of understanding. There were numerous values that came out in the interviews that I conducted with professionals from other fields: integrity, community, relationships, connections, equality, education, honesty, golden rule, forgiveness, and restoration. Youth workers reiterated many of these and added the following: youth voice, mutual respect, and “respect for youth as people, not blobs to form.” None of these values are mutually exclusive of one another; they each rely on the

other to become fully realized.

The everyday lives of young people are touched by adults from all different educational and professional backgrounds—there are police officers in their schools and on their streets, teachers and other staff in their classrooms, shopkeepers at the corner store, and depending on life’s circumstances countless other helpers such as social workers, therapists and probation officers. Each one of these adults, whether they intend to or not, has the potential to have a deep impact on the life of a young person and a practice grounded in shared values

YOUTH-CENTERED APPROACH: CORE VALUES WORTH SHARING

Two separate surveys were conducted of youth workers over the course of this fellowship. One, designed by another fellow, asked youth workers to complete the following sentences: “Youth work is _____” and “The skill/talent youth workers share is _____”. The second survey was designed and implemented as part of my research and asked youth workers about the values they bring to their work and in what ways, if any, they would like to influence the practice of other youth-serving professionals.

A number of themes began to emerge as I combed through the data from both surveys. Youth workers consistently used the following words to describe their work and the kind of influence they would like to have on the work of others: relationships, collaborative, empowering and human. I would assert that these are four core values of the discipline and are central to maintaining a youth-centered approach. These values mirror what Walker and Larson (2012) have identified as the four dimensions of a youth-centered response:

- 1) engaging directly with youth,
- 2) turning the dilemma into an opportunity for youth’s development,
- 3) incorporating youth into the solution or response to the situation, and
- 4) advocating on behalf of youth as well as teaching youth to advocate for themselves (p. 11)

Youth work is steeped in *relationships*. Many youth workers used the words connection, support, encouragement, and communication to describe their practice. The relationship between youth worker and youth is central to being effective guides, mentors, and advocates. As stated in *The Art of Youth Work* (Young, 2006):

The relationship is everything because personal growth, development, learning about values are human tasks that can only be done within a relationship. Actually, the relationship is not only a base for sharing values but also the environment within which young people construct their sense of self..." (p. 61).

For many youth workers, it is essential that the relationships that they form with young people are *collaborative*. The hierarchical structure that often pervades adult-youth interactions is contrary to the value many youth workers share—that young people are capable and competent as they are, not vacuous “blobs to be formed” as stated by one interviewee. Youth workers tend to see young people as equals, partners, teammates, who deserve the same respect that they (as adults) expect. In many cases, youth workers described the need to understand and appreciate the lived experience of young people so that they can “meet [youth] where they are at.” A ubiquitous statement, often followed by, “... and help them go where they want to go.” This complete idea forms a solid foundation for collaborative work with young people.

Part of this collaborative relationship is the value many youth workers shared for the principles around *empowerment*. Youth workers often spoke of sharing their power with young people to use their voice, become leaders, and make meaningful contributions to their community. Youth are often marginalized by adults and made to believe that their perspective is unimportant. In *The Art of Youth Work*, Kerry Young (2006) states, “...one consistent experience shared by [youth] is the imbalance of power between young people and adults, which means that despite wanting to be shown respect, young people often feel that

their views are not taken seriously” (p. 32). The youth workers surveyed spoke of challenging social norms and engaging young people in ways that help them “recognize their inner strength.”

The final value that emerged from the surveys was the notion of *human* development. A number of youth workers described the need to “honor [youth] as human,” “approach them first as people,” and to “value them as people with experiences and knowledge and opinions.” There is a shared sense that youth development is really human development and that growth and learning happens through experiences across a lifetime-- that youth are not a work in progress, but instead that their present (rather than future) lives are something to be valued (Young, 2006). This value was solidified in *Requirements For Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth* which states, “Basic to our view is the concept that adolescents are growing, developing persons in a particular age group—not pre-adults, pre-parents, or pre-workers, but human beings participating in the activities of the world around them” (Konopka, 1973, p. 6).

This youth-centered approach, commonly shared by youth workers, puts a youth worker alongside a young person as an ally, working in collaboration with them to navigate their everyday lives. I would distinguish this from a content-centered approach that other youth-serving professionals may use, like academics, behavior reform, or health care. These are all essential aspects of a young person’s well-being, but when the content is the focus, the young person becomes a label like student or delinquent or patient rather than a whole person with “...experiences and knowledge and opinions,” as one youth worker described.

YOUTH-CENTERED WORK IN ACTION

Despite the fact that a vast majority of professional training for teachers is related to content and its delivery (The Finance Project and Public Education Network, 2004), I have witnessed teachers that I would also identify as highly skilled youth workers. There are numerous examples of these professionals

among social services, law enforcement, and others who have also made deliberate and intentional steps toward a youth-centered approach. I had the opportunity to interview a number of these individuals over the course of this Walkabout.

I interviewed a teacher who had a pivotal experience as a child. She watched as her teacher placed limitations on the abilities of special needs students in her class, stating, “Oh they can’t do that.” After having the opportunity to work side-by-side with those students in their special education classroom, she was able to recognize that they could do that and decided in second grade that she would be a special education teacher so she could give kids the opportunities other adults may disregard. Like this teacher, many youth workers want to give young people opportunities that others think they cannot do and “...to practice with limited hurt if they fail, because while their inexperience does not make them inferior to adults, it does make them different” (Konopka, 1973, p. 10).

I talked with a police officer who went out of her way to learn how to be more effective in her work with young people, stating:

As police officers, we’re not trained in that kind of thing. Nobody tells you, “Well this is how you deal with a little person and this is how you deal with a big person.” It’s all good or bad people. I saw a need for a more diverse training in working with kids.

I spoke with a social worker who takes a holistic approach to her work with young people by valuing each youth she encounters, developing authentic relationships, creating a sense of belonging, and providing a setting for open and honest communication. She has taken the stance that, “I might not have the answers, but I do have the ear,” and in doing so creates space for the wholeness of the young person’s experience and how that experience can inform the decisions that are best for them.

The personal values of the youth-serving professionals I have highlighted led them to

embody characteristics of a youth-centered approach. Their experiences in life and in work created a need for an intentional practice that went beyond the standard trainings within their discipline. In many ways, they are the exception rather than the rule. Their personal values encouraged them to move beyond the narrow, content-focused expectations of their professional systems.

As professionals, we could learn much from examining the values that we bring to our own work. Instead of creating exclusive “clubs” of understanding, we could be building common ground, keeping our values and our desire to encourage the healthy growth and development of young people at the center of our intention. Creating a shared understanding and common language is essential to supporting the teacher who believes in her students’ abilities no matter the test score, and encouraging the police officer to move beyond the labels of good or bad.

Individuals can make a difference when their personal values are supported by professional practice. Enrique, a youth worker in St. Paul, has spent years working with the police in his community to build bridges—bridges that began with relationships, creating a shared understanding that has led to an interdisciplinary, youth-centered approach to dealing with gangs in the community. As he described:

The gang unit has always had a suppression plan and [the police chief] realized that suppression works to a certain extent, but you keep chasing these guys over and over and over again—not getting results—just a cat and mouse game. [The chief] realized that he needed to connect with people in youth development to come help them, because [the police] didn’t have youth development [experience].

Enrique began working with the police, encouraging them to move away from suppression-only tactics. Youth workers are helping the police develop intervention, prevention, and re-entry strategies. This shift in

approach is evident at Cinco de Mayo, an annual community celebration that has been interrupted by gang violence in the past. “Two years ago they did a gang injunction where, if you were a Sueño 13 [member], you would be arrested on the spot.” That year, the police and the community worked separately to address the concerns of violence.

As a youth development person, I was really mad because I thought, “Wow, if I’m a Latino kid and just happened to be rolling with 13’s, I’m not allowed to come to my own cultural celebration?” and as a parent, I thought, “Wow, no Sueño 13’s? Safe place.” How can we change that so I don’t feel so bad on either side?

The following year, Enrique worked with police to find an alternative that addressed the concerns without prohibiting participation of young people in this important cultural event. In preparation for the event, the gang unit picked up the young people who were on their list—who had a warrant, were at-risk, in a gang or had started trouble—and brought them to the community center to meet with Enrique and other members of the community. Enrique described how the gang unit said to the youth, “We have this on you, this on you and this on you; we could put you in jail today... [but] we’re going to give you the opportunity to listen to these people.” Community members offered the young people resources and alternatives and if they chose to participate in the Gang Reduction and Intervention Program (GRIP) they wouldn’t be arrested. “They were given a choice they didn’t have before.”

The success of this interdisciplinary response opened the door for a truly youth-centered approach at this year’s event. The police department implemented a community-policing model that drew on community members as additional eyes at the celebration. Previously, this Cinco de Mayo celebration had a lack of activities for young people so youth workers from the neighborhood went a step further and created a free Sports Zone that engaged the young people’s interests. These youth workers, who “aren’t scared to walk up to a group of kids and engage them and may be connected to

[the youth] already,” walked the event and redirected young people to the Sports Zone if they appeared to be “doing something naughty.”

By collaborating and utilizing the knowledge and skills of both police and youth workers, the community was able to shift the emphasis away from fear and exclusion and instead, embrace a model that was inclusive of the community while still maintaining safety for everybody. Enrique’s interdisciplinary training in youth development, gave him the knowledge and the skills he needed to work in partnership with police to advocate for youth in the community, and in the process encouraging the police department to develop more practices that foster a youth-centered approach.

FROM INDIVIDUAL VALUES TO CULTURAL NORMS

Values can shift from individually held beliefs to collectively shared cultural and societal norms. Those in the field of youth work have an opportunity to promote their core values to other youth-serving systems in order to develop a broadly held culture of youth-centered work, and in turn support the personal values that many of these professionals already try to maintain and weave into their work with youth.

New Zealand is one country that has sought to develop a common vision for their young people, as “A country where young people are vibrant and optimistic through being supported and encouraged to take up challenges.” Their Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa and the Agenda for Children seek to:

- Build a common understanding of what is needed to support [young people’s] healthy development
- Promote a broad, whole person approach to address [youth] issues and needs
- Raise [youth] status and profile in government business
- Encourage a multi-sector response by government (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002, p. 6).

The Ministry's guiding principles and values, written below, underpin these goals:

Beyond

Focusing on 'at risk', negative labels, problems
Blaming teachers, parents, TV
Reacting in an ad hoc manner to youth issues
Fixing single youth problems in isolation

Towards

Understanding young people as partners in their development
Encouraging adults to be supportive mentors
Planning being intentional, having a plan and setting high goals
Achieving an inclusive economy/society - where young people are innovative and energetic participants (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002, p. 2)

The United States has yet to embrace a common set of youth-serving values, which can lead to unintended consequences for youth. For example, I recently participated in an intensive two-day meeting that sought to uncover root causes of some significant concerns for youth in the foster care system. There were conversations about how to develop culturally appropriate responses and wraparound supports, and questions about what kinds of supports to offer and who would deliver the supports to youth in care. It wasn't until the *second day* of conversation that someone voiced a fundamental aspect of providing support to young people—to ask *them* what and who would be supportive in their lives.

This was a 'duh' moment for some, but there were others who acknowledged that this wasn't an aspect of their standard operating procedures, especially as it relates to case plans and treatment options for youth in foster care. Standard operating procedure meant that if you experienced trauma you went to therapy, regardless of whether this is culturally appropriate. If there was a wraparound meeting held to discuss supports, professionals and

"approved" family members were invited, but no thought was given to the caring teacher who consistently plays a supportive role in that young person's life.

A (NEW) STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

If there were a shared understanding of core youth work values and a youth-centered approach were adopted by all youth-serving disciplines, there could be a new set of "standard operating procedures." For example, it wouldn't take two days of intense brainstorming to come up with the realization that young people should be actively involved in decision-making about their lives. This value would be ingrained into the work as an essential element of youth-serving practice.

If this youth-centered approach became a cultural norm, much like it has in New Zealand, our communities would work with young people to develop strategies that would help them thrive, not just survive. In schools, youth would feel more connected because there would be a stronger emphasis on caring relationships—not at the expense of test scores, but in support of them—and current strategies that exclude participation in the learning community would be disavowed. Youth in care would be collaborators in their case plans—ensuring that the supports that are offered to them are truly supportive, rather than just a standardized response. Young people who have had encounters with law enforcement would have opportunities to learn from their mistakes. They would be offered the opportunity to make amends and be empowered to move forward as stronger citizens, rather than de-humanized through incarceration and impeded from positive opportunities for employment, education and housing because an adult-sanctioned record has slammed the doors of opportunity shut.

It's time to give something back to all of the fields that have informed this interdisciplinary practice called youth work. Youth workers have learned how to walk between these disciplines, using the songlines of many, to build bridges and develop an approach that keeps young people at the center of their work. The values

of relationship, collaboration, empowerment, and human development guide this approach—an approach that can be used, no matter the content.

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