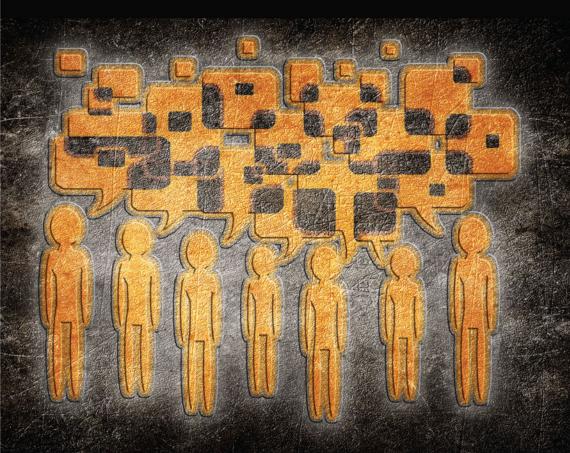# Dilemmas in Youth Work and Youth Development Practice

Laurie Ross, Shane Capra, Lindsay Carpenter, Julia Hubbell and Kathrin Walker

DILEMMAS IN YOUTH WORK AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

The fundamental aim of youth work is to build trusting and mutually respectful relationships with young people, creating transformative experiences for young people in formal and informal spaces outside of homes and schools. These complex and multidimensional situations mean that the day-to-day work of youth workers is full of dilemmas, pitting moral, developmental, motivational, organizational, and other concerns against each other.

By showing how different youth workers respond to a variety of such dilemmas, this authentic text makes visible youth workers' unique knowledge and skills, and explores how to work with challenging situations – from the everyday to the extraordinary. Beginning by setting out a framework for dilemma resolution, it includes a number of narrative-based chapters in which youth workers describe and reflect on dilemmas they have faced, the knowledge and experiences they brought to bear on them, and alternative paths they could have taken. Each chapter closes with a discussion from the literature about themes raised in the chapter, an analysis of the dilemma and a set of overarching discussion questions designed to have readers compare and contrast the cases, consider what they would do in the situation, and reflect on their own practice.

Teaching us a great deal about the norms, conventions, continuities, and discontinuities of youth work, this practical book reveals essential dimensions of the profession and contributes to a practice-based theoretical foundation of youth work.

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community partners on issues such as youth and gang violence, youth homelessness, and youth worker professional education.

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Lindsay Carpenter is a Career Counselor with Job Corps, whose youth work has focused on young women and violence prevention. She received her Master's in Community Development and Planning at Clark University in 2011. Her final Master's paper is entitled "A framework to analyze youth workers' response to risky behavior: considerations of youth worker skill and organizational capacity."

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Kathrin Walker is an Associate Professor and Specialist in Youth Work Practice at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Her research explores the dilemmas that practitioners face in their everyday work with young people and their strategies for addressing these challenges.

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1

BECOMING A YOUTH WORKER

Introduction: becoming a youth worker

The fundamental aim of youth work is to build trusting and mutually respectful relationships with young people. Youth workers create safe environments for children and teens to connect with supportive adults and to avoid violence in their neighborhoods and homes. They help young people to develop knowledge and skills in a variety of areas including academics, athletics, leadership, civics, the arts, health and well-being, and career exploration. Youth workers guide those harmed by oppressive community conditions such as racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and classism through a process of healing. In short, youth workers create transformative experiences for young people in formal and informal spaces, generally outside of homes and schools.

This work is not easy. The day-to-day life of youth workers is full of challenges and dilemmas that require deliberation and consideration of the merits of different possible actions. These situations are complex and multidimensional. They often pit moral, developmental, motivational, organizational, and other concerns against each other. Even the most experienced youth workers encounter situations that require them to balance competing goals and demands with the needs of youth (Larson and Walker, 2010). Yet in our research, practice, and teaching, we have found that highly effective youth workers are regularly able to size up situations and have a repertoire of effective responses. Unlike novices who can get stuck in determining a course of action and get sidetracked by a desire to be liked by the youth, experts steadfastly keep young people's interests and well-being at the center of their analysis and actions.

How does one become an expert youth worker? Are some people just born for this work? Is expertise developed and honed through experience on the job? Is there a role for professional education in the cultivation of the knowledge, skills, and disposition needed for transformative youth work? This book is aimed at

providing some fodder to explore and begin to answer these questions for aspiring, novice, and even experienced youth workers. Through telling actual youth worker dilemma stories, we illustrate how youth workers navigate and figure out what to do in the face of difficult situations that involve competing priorities including the interests of youth, the youth organization, families, and communities. We focus on the types of knowledge and thought processes as well as the abilities to act and reflect that are required to resolve complex dilemmas of practice. Youth worker stories reveal that the types of knowledge and skills most often drawn upon in the resolution of dilemmas tend not to be those that are being focused on in efforts to professionalize the field of youth work in the United States. Much of the current research into youth worker practice is rooted in the standardization of conditions for positive youth development. While this is an important area of study, it often creates a set of goals for youth workers rather than an effective means of honing skills or navigating the daily tumult of working with young people.

The dilemmas in this book arose largely in urban settings in the northeast region of the United States and/or with youth with special needs. They focus on forging relationships with youth; setting high expectations for youth while acknowledging the realities of their day-to-day lives; managing groups; maintaining boundaries; handling incidents of violence and fights; addressing youth drug use; negotiating youth's gang involvement; and countering oppressive societal forces facing youth. This book is not meant to be read as a "how to" guide, and the dilemma stories are not meant to be prescriptive. We are not claiming that the youth workers in this book necessarily did the right or wrong thing in each case. Rather, we make visible how youth workers with varying degrees of experience, personal knowledge, and education approach a variety of dilemmas.

Before we present a dilemma-based approach to understanding and cultivating youth worker expertise, we tell the story that provided the initial inspiration to write this book. The story in Box 1.1 was first told in a university class on youth work that consisted of aspiring, novice, and experienced youth workers. We further developed the story with follow-up interviews with Jacob, one of the featured youth workers.[1]

BOX 1.1 "YOUTH WORK IS JUST COMMON SENSE"— JACOB, VETERAN YOUTH WORKER

We had just spent almost an hour discussing two particularly challenging situations in class. One case involved a youth worker's struggle about whether he should call the police when he was told a young person in his youth center had a gun. The other involved a different youth worker's decision to call Child Protective Services after hearing and seeing evidence of abuse on one of the children in her program. By the end of this intense discussion, the class understood and agreed with the actions both youth workers took. Jacob, a youth worker with over 20 years of experience, then made the statement: "Well, youth work is just common sense."

As the instructor, I found Jacob's remark to be pretty surprising. The conversations about these two situations had been extremely nuanced. It was apparent that both youth workers possessed a deep understanding of family dynamics, youth development, the juvenile justice system, the importance of working in teams, and how to negotiate between organizational rules and standards and doing what is best for the young people. The dialogue made explicit the youth workers' unique knowledge, experiences, and thought processes that guided both of them to make what ultimately was an effective decision. I thought to myself: "How could this possibly all be 'common sense'?"

I found Jacob's comment to be even more interesting in light of a discussion about another challenge that was raised in class. Sue—a white college student—had shared a story concerning her high school mentee who was African American. Her mentee admitted to her that she did not want to go to college. Sue could relate to ambivalence about college. She had left her first university after one semester and, despite knowing higher education opens up many opportunities, she did not like to accept that attending college determined one's success in life. Sue knew she should tell her mentee about the importance of higher education, but she also thought it would be helpful for her mentee to hear how she had worked through her own ambivalence. However, issues of race, class, and privilege flooded her mind. She was paralyzed in the moment about how to respond. She was afraid to overstep boundaries and she decided it wasn't her place to tell her mentee what to do and what path to take. In class, Sue expressed that she was dissatisfied with her response but wasn't sure what else she should have done.

Looking at these situations together is enlightening. On the one hand, we have two very experienced youth workers handling life or death situations with a third experienced youth worker summarizing their responses as 'common sense.' On the other hand, we have a novice youth worker who is trying to help a young person through a struggle similar to one she had recently gone through, but is unable find a satisfactory response to the situation. If youth work was just common sense, we would have thought this would have kicked in for the latter case—but clearly it did not.

The juxtaposition of these stories shows that expert youth workers respond to complex youth problems in a way that *seems* like common sense. Expert youth workers appraise situations, formulate plans of action, enact the plans, and upon reflection—either alone or with others—conclude that they make effective decisions more times than not. It would seem that framing youth work as common sense grossly simplifies what expert youth workers do and diminishes the rich personal and professional knowledge they possess about youth development and culture, and how to read a situation.

If this knowledge is so rich then we are left to wonder why Jacob minimized his own practice. Why do youth workers tend to diminish the importance of their work? Why is there a feeling on the part of many youth workers that their work and role is misunderstood and unvalued by the larger community—particularly when compared to other youth-serving fields, such as teaching and social work? Through follow-up interviews with Jacob, we learned that he wonders: "Are we seen as glorified babysitters? *Do people understand that we develop youth?!*"

When pushed a bit more, Jacob suggests his expertise comes from growing up in the same neighborhood as the youth he works with now, being mentored by older youth workers, and his ability to study people and learn fast. When he looks at his 20 plus years in the field, he is convinced that he has acquired the knowledge at least equivalent to sitting through 4 years of college. Yet when he looks at his status, his workload, and the personal sacrifices he has had to make to do the work that he absolutely loves, he is convinced that his organization is benefiting from his lack of formal education:

> At the end of the day, we all want to feel as if we have been compensated adequately for the amount of effort you give. Because in most cases these organizations are not equipped to pay top dollar to bring in the degree-carrying "educated" person, they find themselves with heavy staff turnover waiting for a "Jacob" to emerge in their program.

Jacob feels that because he doesn't have his degree, he must continue to impress and improve. He doesn't want to see a "ceiling" hit him. At the same time, perhaps to justify his position and level of compensation to himself, Jacob constructs his youth work practice as "common sense."

Youth worker professional identity and education in the United States

Jacob's internal struggles are understandable. In the United States, youth work lacks many of the characteristics that by conventional standards would define it as a profession or its workers as professionals (Anderson-Nathe, 2010; Fusco, 2011, 2012; Phelan, 2005; VeLure Roholt and Rana, 2011). A profession can be defined as an occupational group that claims a distinctive body of knowledge and whose members practice competently, with accountability, and contribute to the development of the profession's knowledge base (Fusco, 2013; Higgs *et al.*, 2001). Cusick further elaborates that competence in a field is signified by practitioners "achieving appropriate standards in their understanding and application of specialized knowledge and skill" (2001: 91). VeLure Roholt and Rana argue that youth work in the United States lacks these characteristics: "[t]here are multiple competing definitions, disciplinary frames, and desired outcomes" (2011: 321). The lack of a core body of knowledge, common definitions, and standards of practice makes it challenging to define youth work as a profession and to identify

characteristics that are associated with youth worker expertise (Walker *et al.*, 2009; Walker and Walker, 2011). Nonetheless, while professional identity is at least in part associated with the acquisition of formally recognized qualifications such as college and advanced degrees, there has been acknowledgement in many fields that achieving expertise requires more than a degree (Schön, 1990). Higgs *et al.* claim that professional expertise in human services "resides in practice wisdom and practice artistry" (2001: 4).

The youth development field has developed a rich evidence base about the features of settings that promote positive youth development (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Ideals such as "clear and consistent structure and appropriate supervision," "supportive relationships," and "support for efficacy and mattering" have been correlated with positive youth outcomes in many program evaluations. In order to develop a workforce that is able to operationalize these ideals, the field has begun to articulate the essential knowledge, skills, and behaviors—also known as competencies—that youth workers should possess (Akiva, 2005; Astroth *et al.*, 2004; Vance, 2010). It is difficult to refute that youth workers should be able to do things such as "understand and apply basic child and adolescent development principles"; "communicate and develop positive relationships with youth"; "demonstrate the attributes and qualities of a positive role model"; and "adapt, facilitate, and evaluate age-appropriate activities with and for the group."

The challenge comes in applying these principles in the day-to-day practice of youth work. Youth workers often find themselves in situations that are comprised of multidimensional, intersecting systems that are different for each individual and, in turn, contribute to the quality of the relationships and activities that occur in youth development spaces (Larson *et al.*, 2009). As Larson and Walker (2010) have discussed, the principles and competencies are guideposts but the path to get to each guidepost is anything but straightforward, especially when the principles and competencies come into conflict when handling a particular situation. Bessant (2011: 62) further elaborates on limitations of focusing on the acquisition of competencies alone:

> Competency-based training can produce highly proficient technicians possessing both novice and beginning level capacities who are able to follow instructions. It does not do so well if we are looking for reflexive and critical professionals able to decide when rules need to be adapted or broken.

In short, most of the existing literature on youth work and youth development more broadly does not offer a guide to understanding the day-to-day practice of youth workers and how to navigate complex dilemmas.

Alternatively, an *expertise* frame focuses on the successful application of knowledge and experience in context. Anderson-Nathe has discussed expertise in problem resolution as "a professional's ability to unite theory and specialized practice across unique circumstances" and frames professionalism in terms of the workers' ability to "encounter a scenario, assess its content, select the appropriate