

## HEARING DIFFERENT VOICES: TWO LANGUAGES IN YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines how the talk of child and youth care workers may be analyzed to improve practice. The importance of being able to distinguish empowering, open, and inviting talk from unilateral, control-seeking talk about youth is emphasized. Data from a staff meeting of a youth empowerment program is used to support the claim that both empowering and unilateral languages actually shape this and other youth empowerment programs, despite youth workers' attempts to adopt only an empowering approach to practice.

### **The Nature of Youth Work Practice**

Today's youth are responding to a variety of challenges that many adults believe are quite different and more difficult than those faced by previous generations. Youth violence, AIDS/HIV, and substance abuse are just three large public health issues that are being faced by youth as they go about their everyday lives. Schools, according to many experts, are in a crisis, and many youth feel they are no longer places of learning. At the same time, young people are learning to live with one another in ever more diverse communities, as cities become more culturally and ethnically mixed. Similarly, perhaps more than ever, youth themselves are organizing for their own futures, whether that means working to protect the environment or to improve their own communities.

Alongside these historical changes, activity settings outside schools, such as tutoring programs, peer leadership groups, and residential care facilities, have become important sites of learning and development (see McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Child and youth care workers—those who have direct contact with young people who are “at risk” for becoming involved in gangs, drugs, or dangerous sexual activity—are critical players in protecting youth health. Consequently, understanding the practice of child and youth care work and learning how we can improve it are important tasks for practitioners and researchers alike. This paper is one attempt to articulate the practice of effective child and youth care practice using the tools of language or discourse analysis. It is my claim here that improving youth work practice requires practitioners and youth workers to be able to identify and listen to different voices of youth work practice and to understand which ones are empowering and which ones invite us to see youth only as problems to be solved.

## The Importance of Studying Talk for Youth Work Practice

When we speak to others, we often think of what we are doing as “conveying” information. In speaking, we imagine we are taking our thoughts that are inside us, and we are wrapping them in language. We expect that the words, phrases, and sentences we use to convey our thoughts will in turn be “unwrapped” by listeners, who take the important information out of the language used. In this view, language acts as a “conduit,” in which words serve primarily to represent and transmit information (Reddy, 1979). Communication, in this view, occurs when people transfer useful information successfully from person to person.

To be sure, the “conduit” metaphor contains an important insight—we do use language to represent things to others—but we also use language to construct our relationships to others. As child and youth care workers and researchers, we are particularly sensitive to this use of language (see also Penuel & Gereme, 1994). People who work in direct care settings interacting on a day-to-day basis to help support children and youth toward growing into healthy adults appreciate the importance of how we talk in our practice. Child and youth care practitioners know that the young people with whom they work typically hear many things said about themselves that contribute to their low self-esteem. From other adults, youth may learn that they are “no good” or “always getting into trouble.” Some hear that they are “throwaway kids,” or worse. At the same time, child and youth care workers can act to enhance self-esteem through a well-timed compliment, a creative turn of phrase, or through listening to a young person’s story.

More generally, Kurth-Schai (1988) has pointed out that youth in contemporary North American culture are faced with many contradictory representations of who they are and what they ought to become. Overwhelmingly, she notes, the representations fail to recognize the possible contributions of youth to society:

...[C]ontemporary images of childhood are united in their failure to acknowledge the potential of young people to contribute to the social order. Youth are confronted with confusing and contradictory patterns of protections and pressure, with conflicting perceptions of their abilities and inadequacies, rendering their social presence inconsequential and their social power invisible. (Kurth-Schai, 1988, p.116)

Many programs, to be sure, encourage a different way of speaking about and representing youth. Programs such as the YMCA, Girl Scouts, and Boys’ and Girls’ Club encourage youth to take on responsibilities for planning and implementing their own programs. In this way, these programs encourage a different language about youth, one that is more attractive and inviting to youth themselves. As McLaughlin (1993) notes,

The youth organizations that attracted and sustained young people’s involvement gave visible and ongoing voice to a conception of youth as a resource to be developed and as persons of value to themselves and to society. (p.60)

Even in these empowering organizations, though, adults still sometimes speak of youth as potential threats to society or as drains on its resources. It is important then to understand how these different discourses are actually *used* by youth workers in their everyday practice, if we are to evaluate youth programs effectively and improve our own practice. A "discourse analysis" (Brown & Yule, 1983) of youth programs can uncover patterns of talk about youth and show how these patterns shape decision-making and problem-solving in organizations.

### The Notion of a Social Language

Discourse analysts are more likely to take a social view of language than to adopt the view of language as a conduit for information. In other words, discourse analysts place more emphasis on what language *does* in a particular social activity than on what information language conveys. Of particular importance here is the approach of Halliday (1973, 1975, 1978). He has pointed out that

Language is the main channel through which the patterns of living are transmitted to him [the child], through which he learns to act as a member of a 'society'—in and through the various social groups, the family, the neighborhood, and so on—and to adopt its 'culture', its modes of thought and action, its beliefs and values. (Halliday, 1978, p. 9)

This process of learning makes language itself "a form of interaction," a tool in familiarizing children, youth, and other new members of a society with its practices, values, and institutions.

One theorist from whose writings discourse analysts have drawn extensively in the past is the Russian literary analyst M. M. Bakhtin. Bakhtin is perhaps most well-known for his *dialogic* view of communication and existence. By dialogic, Bakhtin is drawing attention to how our whole life is inseparable from communication and ongoing dialogue with others (Bakhtin, 1984; Morson & Emerson, 1990).

One of the most interesting of Bakhtin's claims involves his view that words *belong* to various social practices and activities (Bakhtin, 1986). In other words, we don't just learn the abstract meanings of words but also how to use them, in what settings, and when. For example, the sentence, "Please restore your tray to the upright position" actually belongs to an airplane context; it is unlikely that this particular set of words will be used any time other than as a plane is preparing to land, and that anyone but a member of the flight crew will be permitted to say it with the authority to enforce the command. To be sure, I can bring this sentence up in the context of this paper, but it takes on an entirely different meaning from the one in the airplane context. It is no longer a command but a part of my argument. According to Bakhtin, we learn these different language forms just as we learn to speak a national language: we experience recurring situations for a particular style of talk appropriate to the activities of eating a family meal,

meeting a new business acquaintance, responding to teachers' questions, and so forth.

Bakhtin also noted that there is another level at which talk is organized, which he called "social languages" (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1991). Social languages include professional languages, languages of different classes, and the languages of particular ideologies (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 262-3). Social languages not only constitute formal organizations of language; each constructs a "specific way of conceptualizing, understanding, and evaluating the world" (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 141). Social languages are a kind of "language within a language," which we can understand by thinking of the many times that we feel as though researchers and practitioners, for example, speak "different languages." Social languages are indicators often of the sorts of values particular people hold, of the kinds of tools and ideas they think are important (such as statistics versus interventions), and of the kinds of activities in which people have participated in the past.

### **Two Social Languages Among Adult Youth Workers**

One can use Bakhtin's notion of social language to understand the patterns of how adults talk about youth in youth organizations. To analyze these languages in use, I have chosen to analyze talk within a staff meeting held at a statewide conference for young people who have been trained as peer leaders in health promotion called the Peer Institute. The conference is unique in that it is planned and staffed by a team of adults and youth working side by side. The staff is united under the goal of promoting "power sharing" as a theme in their own collaboration and in their relationships with participants. Other key goals of the conference include multiculturalism, celebrating cultural, gender, age, and sexual orientation differences through program activities, and UJIMA, a Kwanzaa concept meaning "collective work and responsibility."

On the second day of the four-day residential conference, an emergency staff meeting was called by the adult coordinator to address an issue raised by some participants from the Boston area. They included a young person and her advisor from the peer leadership group with which she attended the conference. The young person was given the opportunity to speak before the entire staff of youth and adults and address her concerns, as was the advisor. Two young people came to the staff to complain that they were being treated unfairly by both youth and adult staff at the Institute. They stated that flashlights had been shone repeatedly in their faces while walking back to the dorms at night, that staff members had banged on their doors late at night demanding that they be let in to determine if participants were in their room; and that some staff had even rifled through personal items of participants.

Such behavior poses a particular problem for the Peer Institute, since the Peer Institute is supposedly dedicated to such values as "power shar-

ing" and "respect." While staff do need to ensure the safety of participants and make sure that they get enough rest, it is unlikely that any staff member would explicitly endorse the idea of banging on peoples' doors or of rifling through personal items. After presenting their concerns, the youth and her advisor left, and the staff discussed how to address the issue.

Originally, a colleague of mine, Lisa Comparini (see Penuel & Comparini, 1995), and I chose to analyze this staff meeting here in some detail, because in it a young person's story presents to herself and to many staff members a direct challenge to the staff to "walk its talk" about power sharing. In this respect, the staff meeting we selected is a local conflict, over a particular set of issues that other youth programs may not face. It is my belief, however, that this is typical of a struggle that other youth organizations undergo when they attempt to transform power relationships between adults and youth to create democratic spaces where youth voices can be heard and are addressed in key programming decisions.

Adults used at least two different social languages in use in this meeting in their responses to the conflict. These two social languages are the "Unilateral Youth Worker Language" (emphasizing youth as problems and as needing adult supervision and control) and the "Empowering Youth Worker Language." I describe each of these languages in some detail here and how they are used to solve a particular conflict that arose at the Peer Institute two years ago that the staff met to discuss and attempt to solve.

### Uses of Unilateral Youth Worker Language

This language is so named because it assumes a highly directive role for adults in promoting youth development. It charges adults with the task of *unilaterally* directing youth toward certain developmental goals. The term is borrowed from Selman (1980) and describes a style of interpersonal negotiation that is characterized by one party or person making demands upon or directing the behavior of another, without consideration of the other's perspective. If there is any consideration of youth in this language, it considers youth as objects rather than subjects with desires, plans, and competencies.

One of the organizing themes of this social language is control. Situations, problems or even youth themselves are seen as being either "under control" or "out of control." Most youth programs at one point or another encounter such problems as chaotic structure, erratic participation, high staff turnover, and sometimes open conflict among participants and staff. These problems are often attributed to individuals (rather than to systems or patterns of relating) within unilateral youth worker language, to be controlled or kept under control at all costs. There is emphasis also on *self-control* in this language, on controlling one's own impulses and desires. In this connection, responsibility is defined individualistically, as personal accountability and as the ability to control oneself. Most often, this demand is made not on adults, but on youth, who must learn self-control and responsibility.

One illustration of a speaker who uses a unilateral youth worker language to address the problems raised by the two youth is found in Fred's utterance. Fred appears to ignore many of the claims of the youth about unfair treatment, and to locate responsibility for breaking rules and for obedience to rules squarely on the shoulders of participants. In addition, he assumes that youth need to exercise personal self-control in order to be invited back again, placing the burden for correcting negative views of young people not on the adults who hold those views, but on the youth themselves:

**Fred:**

Stanza 46 (Personal Responsibility)

46a TODAY in my family group / I made it a POINT / to address TO THE GROUP that / what their PURPOSE was here /

46b and that THEY needed to be responsible for their own actions and TO MONITOR THEMSELVES / THEIR FRIENDS / and ASSOCIATES /

46c that we weren't HERE / to come and POLICE them / to act like their MOTHERS / their TEACHERS / you know to BAD MOUTH them / to take responsibility for their OWN actions

46d SHARE to try / and promote WITH THEM during this family meeting / which is NEXT I believe / um and make them feel COMFORTABLE / about their own personal level of RESPONSIBILITY /

**Coda (Why This is Important)**

47a So that we can BE INVITED back again / not say don't want these YOUNG folks back again / because they MESS up the place / or weren't RESPECTABLE / et cetera et cetera

While Fred does emphasize that he does not want to act as a police officer or teacher, the implication here is that he might have to, if the young people do not take responsibility for their own actions. The issue of how staff treat participants is left out of the picture altogether. The facilitator's subsequent comment, perhaps in keeping with the main values and objectives of the Peer Institute, appears to move on without addressing Fred's perspective at all.

### Uses of Empowering Youth Worker Language

A few turns later, another adult staff member, Tom, uses a different social language to put forth a different type of proposal. He uses what I call here a more “empowering youth worker language” in his proposed solution. Empowering youth worker language is consistent with the programming goals of youth empowerment itself: promoting the active participation of youth; viewing youth as partners rather than problems; and emphasizing adults “doing with” rather than “doing for” youth. The values of sharing, creating safe environments for youth where it is easy to learn and respect, is privileged in this language. Responsibility is recast as social responsibility, or keeping in mind the concerns and needs of others. There is oftentimes in the use of this language a conscious shifting of perspectives, a consideration of things from the perspective of the other. Finally, a space for youth themselves to be heard is typically legitimated by this social language.

Tom’s turn alludes to many of the implicit “ways of seeing” embodied in empowering youth worker language. He emphasizes that it is important for staff not to be suspicious or distrustful of other youth, but to make clear why a staff person is there in the first place knocking on doors. In addition, he emphasizes that he likes to consider that he, as an adult, may be wrong about a situation, rather than the young person.

**Tom:**

53a I don’t think that you have to uh tell people that  
you think they’re LYING / but that you can STATE why  
you were there in the first place

**Youth:**

54a I know that’s what I did /

**Tom:**

Stanza 55 (Giving the Benefit of the Doubt)

55a and yeah yeah so just SAY / “I KNOCKED on your door /  
because I THOUGHT I heard some noise / and it’s after  
lights out / we really need everyone to be quiet because  
there are PEOPLE on the floor who are trying / trying to uh  
to sleep and um you and THANKS” /

55b and then if it happens a SECOND time / you might go to  
a different a different LEVEL /

55c But THAT’LL let them know being maybe / I always like  
to think well maybe I was wrong about it /

55d GIVE them the benefit of the doubt

**Aside (Assurance to Youth)**

56a But you say them / you told them WHY they were there /

56b I think that really HELPS

Tom also here gives assurance to the young staff person who stated that she had stated the reasons why she was knocking on doors, emphasizing that “that really helps.” This validation is one way that empowering youth worker discourse both invites young people and adults to think critically about their role as staff, while at the same time respecting the particular decisions made by individual staff. Later, he refers to participants as “allies” who “want the same thing from the Peer Institute,” namely to have a good time and learn while they are there. This kind of perspective-taking is supportive of the goals of youth empowerment, insofar as it invites the kind of power sharing valued by the Institute to take hold, and legitimizes the perspectives of the participants.

**How the Languages Shape Problem Solving**

Across several turns, adults who speak in the staff meeting argue over what it means to be a member of the “staff.” Several adults argue persuasively that the staff have wrongly adopted a unilateral stance in dealing with the participants, while others promote the idea that regardless of what has happened, the staff ought to adopt a more empowering language to deal with future problems. The discussion comes to revolve around the symbolic meaning of the T-shirts worn by staff, and adults fight over whether the shirts belong to the Unilateral or the Empowering Language. Meanwhile, interestingly enough, the youth themselves tell counter-narratives in which they argue the “facts” of the problem, suggesting that there was no violation of privacy in the first place. In this connection, it might therefore be more accurate to name empowering youth worker language as an *adult language*, one that legitimizes but is not the same as youth voice. Ultimately, the solution revolves more about whether or not to wear the symbolically-charged shirts rather than about what happened, even though the youth are given a space in which to speak.

In this connection, the usefulness of Bakhtin’s dialogic approach to analyzing communication is not just in the identification of an array of voices used in particular activity settings. While this identification does help to name the differences among speakers as to their orientation to youth work, what matters most is to understand how these voices shape or fail to shape the ongoing dialogue of youth programs. It would matter little, for example, if several adults used the empowering youth worker language, but that they were never “heard” by the other members of the group. It would matter little, moreover, which language adults used if their use of either the empowering or unilateral language never allowed for youth themselves to speak. In short, it is as important to know who is speaking as it is to know how they are speaking.



### Implications for Direct Youth Care Work

Originally my colleague Lisa and I were interested in this particular staff meeting because it did not appear to be about the conflict at hand at all, but about something larger and more symbolic. Indeed, as we spent hours examining the transcripts, we were struck by how much this staff meeting was a struggle between two different “languages” of youth work. The facts of the case seemed to matter little to the adults (though they meant a lot to the youth), but the meaning of T-shirts mattered a lot. What could account for such a situation? Why did the adults focus so much on abstract meanings and symbols?

The answer lies in part I believe in the struggle that takes place as child and youth care workers themselves are trying to learn a new way of doing youth work. When youth workers are shifting back and forth between empowering and unilateral styles, they try out the different languages, sometimes resorting to one more than the other. Concrete situations like the one above become opportunities to practice the new language and to see if it offers enough tools to solve real problems. If we had looked only at the actions taken by the staff (a formal apology to the whole conference an hour later), we would have missed an important dynamic that took place within the staff meeting and made it so tension-filled for the staff. But by examining closely what was said in the meeting and framing it in terms of two languages of practice one could get a sense of what was at stake.

My experience with working with the talk from this staff meeting has also reminded me of the difficulties faced when youth workers want to change their practice. It is not so easy just to change the way one speaks about youth and the way one relates to youth. Other languages remain in our consciousness, available to our use, and if we have used them in the past, we may be prepared to use them again, even if we would prefer to use a more empowering language of youth work. Likewise, powerful institutions in our society maintain a unilateral language of youth—describing them in mainstream media mostly as problems to be solved or as drains on society’s resources. Those images are difficult to overcome, and at the Peer Institute and other youth empowerment programs, good youth workers struggle to open their ears to hear and to open their mouths in an open invitation for youth to participate.

May our study of talk, then, remind us first to be humble and generous to ourselves and our fellow youth workers when change does not come as quickly as we’d like. After all, the practice of youth work will be with us for years to come.

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