# RECOGNIZING THE FUTURE: CURRENT TRENDS IN YOUTH WORK & EDUCATION

*A Pilot Study Interviewing National Youth Development Leaders*

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ABSTRACT: *This article represents a new feature in The Journal where each volume will invite youth workers and their youth work professors to submit projects that are developed as a part of core child and youth care courses being offered in universities across the country. This article reports the pilot and exploratory research on trends in youth work and education conducted by ten students working towards their bachelor's degree in applied development with a concentration in child and youth care work. Sixteen national leaders in youth work were interviewed, and data was analyzed by the faculty and students together to provide an apprenticeship in evidenced-based practice scholarship. Structured using pilot and exploratory qualitative procedures and techniques, this study reports on challenges for the future of the youth work profession, opportunities for change, and the potential role for youth work to ensure educational success and lifelong learning.*

Key words: *youth work and education; trends; opportunities and risks for the future of the profession*

## INTRODUCTION

This article reports results from a pilot study conducted by the faculty and the youth work students at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education. The Pitt School of Education has a concentration in child and youth care work with bachelors and masters degrees in applied development. A central feature for the concentration is an intensive course, *The Core of Child and Youth Care Work*, which features evidence-based practices organized around the core competencies for child and youth care (Mattingly, Stuart, & Vander Ven, 2002). The course was originally founded by Professor Karen Vander Ven. Under the leadership of Professor Vander Ven and Professor Emerita Martha Mattingly, the youth work program at Pitt has played a central role in the development of the field; this includes producing the

Conference-Research Sequence (Vander Ven, Mattingly, Morris, Peters, & Kelly, 1982) and, most recently, contributing significantly to the development of the competencies. The core course, now taught by Professor Schneider-Muñoz, offers an interactive apprenticeship around direct care and applied research techniques and skills for the youth work practitioner-scholar.

## METHODS

As a part of the course, ten youth care students developed a survey based on their own discussion of trends in the field. It was administered to sixteen leaders in the field of child and youth care work. These leaders were drawn from a sample of convenience, based on their professional speaking and writing contributions during regional and national conferences, as well as their track record for leading large-scale, national youth development organizations, impacting a thousand children and youth or more. An attempt was made to draw leaders from the four regions of the country as well as to balance the interview pool with representatives from a range of youth work settings, including child welfare, juvenile justice, after-school, community youth services, service learning, and others.

The data collected in the interviews was reported and analyzed through course discussions focusing on training qualitative data analysis skills, including noticing trends in the data, clustering concepts, and establishing taxonomy for key ideas cutting through the interviews. The data analysis conducted as a part of the course was exploratory for the purposes of mapping the trends that were elicited from the interview participants. Together as a practice research team, the course members identified the suppositions, propositions, and theories found in the interview data question by question (Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

Subsequently, Professor Schneider-Muñoz and undergraduate research assistant, Matt Fasano, conducted a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Based on the patterns coded and trends identified—for this moment in our professional development as the field of youth work—the students, Schneider-Muñoz, and Fasano labeled four key themes:

*Theme (1)* Education, economics, and technology as risks and opportunities

*Theme (2)* Challenges for the future of the youth work profession

*Theme (3)* Corresponding opportunities for change among youth workers and youth

*Theme (4)* Advocating for youth as a shared national responsibility

### *Education, Economic, and Technology as Risks and Opportunities*

Youth work at its strongest utilizes the relationships and activities of everyday life to promote change in the skills and competencies that youth need to navigate life. Youth work goes where the youth are and does what the youth need. Therefore, our profession is often the first to adapt to changes in societal norms and conditions that influence the trajectory of healthy social growth for children and youth. Interestingly, the leaders interviewed in our pilot study saw education as both a major risk and major opportunity for the children of this country. Recently, schooling has been sorely tested by rising dropout rates, the controversy over teacher preparation, dwindling resources, and the question of what constitutes adequate preparation of youth across the lifespan for eventual gainful employment. There is a huge overlay in this country today between minority experience and socioeconomic status (SES). Could it be that simple—a good school can ensure life long success and a bad school can result in life long insurmountable risk, even when it comes to sustenance? Youth workers offer tremendous opportunity to partner with educators in strengthening schools.

The school reform movement has confronted the crisis of low achievement head-on by boosting hours of instruction, increasing accountability in measurable performance, and adding hours of extra homework. These strategies have reaffirmed in the public mind that children and youth should be getting the basics, but the constant drilling, teaching to the test, and focusing on huge amounts of material may be producing students who can repeat the lessons as taught but can neither explain what they have learned nor integrate their learning into everyday life. As the last bastion of democracy, public schooling is of utmost importance to all those concerned with the well-being of children and society. If we accept that all of this accountability has, to an extent, improved student performance, we must also agree that it has not been enough to fully restore graduation rates or to provide enough learning so that our children and youth are prepared for jobs and leadership roles in the world.

Complementing academic curriculum, the agenda to ensure social competency for youth as well as their ability to become life-long learners is often called "social and emotional learning." Youth development in general and the tools of youth work in particular provide tremendous opportunity for the future in providing for social and emotional learning in the school setting. Youth workers know how to build relationships in a way that connects everyday life skill to learning. The activities organized by youth workers could be instrumental in taking what the teachers teach and putting it to good use. An article by Pat Wingert in *Newsweek*, "The Black Board Jungle" (March, 2010), pointed out that new teachers, while understanding a variety of ways to teach their students, have struggled with managing their classrooms. Youth workers as partners with teachers in the school setting can be masters at shared productive discipline, honoring both the learning process as well as youth voice.

Not all students, however, find themselves subject to this kind of institutionalized risk. One leader pointed out that the decline in educational achievement relative to many other countries is "due largely to the poor quality of education for most of our lower-income population, and primarily for children and youth living in large urban areas. Our wealthier populations continue to do quite well. I believe this educational quality differential is our real achievement gap." Following suit, other leaders, unsurprisingly, identified poverty as another primary risk factor affecting the children and youth of this country. "The economic problems of the past five years, in particular, have placed many families in severely difficult situations, leading to more family stress, substance abuse, depression, and other challenges, all of which filter down to the children." The struggles experienced by families in poverty affect all domains of the youths' development. Adequate nutrition, for instance, becomes increasingly more difficult to provide, as "natural and organic" foods become luxury items. The youth workers' task of promoting positive social and emotional growth is made ever more difficult as the bodies of the young people they serve are denied the essential nutrients necessary to allow for optimal learning. Impoverished children and youth are not only more likely to suffer insult to their physical development, but also tend to live in communities stricken by dangerous environmental circumstances that can inhibit various aspects of social and emotional growth. For the poorest families in this country the threat of drug addiction, violence, and crime may be a daily reality. Healthy parental attachment and supervision, conditions that contribute significantly to the resilience of such high-risk youth, are also jeopardized because caretakers struggle to work long, irregular hours in attempts to provide as best they can for their families. Sadly, the adults responsible for supporting positive youth development have in some cases fallen victim to the same ecological risk factors that plague the children in their care.

Unfortunately poverty affects more than individual family dynamics. "Disappearing resources and the lack of funding for social services in the United Sates is causing many small non-profits to go out of business…so now the kinds of programs kids need are no longer available to them…" It is this kind diverse community programming, the leaders suggest, that is one of the most powerful ways to protect children and youth against the dangers of poverty and poor quality education. "Tutoring and/or mentoring experiences, high quality after-school programming as well as community service opportunities…" can provide youth with consistency, the chance to engage with authentic caring adults, and the means for developing a sense of self-worth. Therefore, current as well as future youth work must be as much of an endeavor to promote social growth and community efficacy as it is an effort to ensure life long educational success of individual children.

Fascinatingly, interviewees suggest that in the face of such risk, access to technology, particularly the Internet, can open worlds to previously confined populations of children and youth. The World Wide Web, the largest and most accessible social network on the planet, provides, *when utilized appropriately*, the virtual context

in which young persons may be exposed to the great cultural and intellectual diversity of the human race. Children who may never have had the opportunity to travel outside of their immediate community can be digitally transported to any place of their choosing with the simple click of a button. Minds are sparked, dreams are planted, and hope is fostered through the access to technology. "Young people that have access to the Internet can then have motivation and create their own positive developmental opportunities." Our profession would be wise to embrace and utilize the tools of the modern technological age as new avenues for reaching those children and youth most at risk and therefore most in need of what we as child and youth workers can provide.

### Challenges for the Future of the Youth Work Profession

If we are to provide the best for the children and youth entrusted to our care, we as youth workers must be prepared for the task. No one comes to this work with all of the knowledge necessary to truly optimize youth development; we as professionals need and deserve formal training. The Association for Child & Youth Care Practice (ACYCP) outlines the core competencies that should be a part of all child and youth workers education: professionalism, cultural and human diversity, applied human development, relationship and communication, and developmental practice methods (Mattingly, Stuart, & Vander Ven, 2002). Sadly, high quality trainings that are easily transferable to one's direct care practice are not the norm. Even more unfortunate, as one leader indicated, in an economic climate where "so many agencies are stretched [for funds], one of the first things cut is training…" Though a kind heart and charitable attitude are of course essential to our work, the ACYCP indicates that child and youth care is most effective when rooted in a knowledge base of developmental science and best practice methods. Currently only a handful of universities and colleges offer formal programs of study that prepare individuals to enter the field of child and youth work.

In addition to the need for robust training transfer, the leaders interviewed also commented about the fragmentation of the field; "we lack a unified vision for the field—I think we have too many factions that believe that each area is unique and there is little place for commonality." Until most recently when the competencies for youth work were developed and shared across settings, youth workers in juvenile justice often thought of themselves as completely different from, for example, youth workers in after-school programs. The competencies now provide a set of developmental tools and strategies that are equally effective across settings and open the opportunity for shared vision in the future. Youth workers also suffer from the lack of professional identity. The more society questions whether or not it is worth meeting the needs of high-risk youth, the greater the potential that youth workers become as marginalized in their profession as the youth in their care are marginalized from society. There continues to be a great societal lack of understanding, as one leader put it, "there's a lack of communication… as a society, folks don't under-

stand what child and youth care workers do so there no value placed on [the field as legitimately professional] and very little support."Lack of positive public image and, therefore, professional esteem can, in some cases, become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Several leaders proposed solutions that include expanding opportunities for mentoring novice youth workers and significantly increasing the amount of direct practice research. One leader commented, "[There is a] lack of more experienced people in the field really giving back in the form of research, internships, and mentoring… there is more than direct practice—we aren't nurturing the next generation of youth care workers."Youth workers need to be provided with the tools with which to do their jobs—raw compassion and empathy are not enough."When you only have a hammer everything becomes a nail."Helpful relationships between experienced and novice youth workers will foster reciprocal learning and teaching."

Precisely at the moment when the field of child and youth care is being sorely tested by a lack of public support and limited resources, the contributions of individual youth workers are needed more than ever before. The field is experiencing tremendous growth in its professional and academic maturity. New university programs are opening, distance education is flourishing, and youth workers are sought after for their high degree of adaptability and their capacity to get the job done even in a times of crisis and change. For example, new core courses in child and youth care are being offered at Palm Beach State College, Indiana University is opening a new master degree in youth work and leadership, and for the first time in a generation more than thirty doctoral dissertations are underway in the field of youth development. As one leader proposed, "The proliferation of evidence-based practice is a major strength. Before, we relied heavily on conventional wisdom… now with the publication of the *CYC Journal* we're getting a body of knowledge; we're finding out for a fact what is and isn't true and using that to influence direct care and direct service. We have lots of resources available to us now. Utilizing research to inform our practice is a challenge the can be viewed positively, in the sense that if we invest the time, we can develop more tools for ourselves and therefore return to our work refreshed and with new perspectives."

### *Corresponding Opportunities for Change Among Youth Workers and Youth*

Corresponding to youth worker experiences around technology, children and youth also have a far greater access to learning through the media when used wisely. One leader suggested that, "with technology, with the social media, with emailing, and with the Internet, kids have a lot more of a chance to be exposed to a wider variety of things" such as, "Internet-based engagement-type opportunities that are political, social, environmental in nature."Youth also have tremendous opportunities in gaining social skills and competencies from the social programs that youth workers are launching to supplement what they are learning in schools, including whole new nationwide service learning programs, community wide mentoring efforts, and the development of block-by-block neighborhood after-school activity

programs. "For young people, who are in communities that have these programs with youth workers, that is the best possible opportunity because those programs focus on young people's development. They also connect them with the community so they meet other young people who they wouldn't normally interact with; they get to interact with other adults and care about them." The best practices in service learning, mentoring, and after-school are as much an outcome of the practice research conducted in universities, as they are a product of the strategies that arise from full engagement of the youth workers with the youth.

### Advocating for Youth as a Shared National Resoponsibility

Responding to the question, "Who, in your opinion, is America's top advocate for children and youth?" one quarter of the interviewees cited First Lady Michelle Obama, who has, as one leader pointed out, "Stepped up as a voice and is holding up the power of great and attentive parenting to raise healthy kids." In her three years in the White House she has continued the new tradition for a First Lady to galvanize action around a top national need. In her work with children she has launched a national campaign to improve nutrition through healthy eating and exercise, personally participated in direct community service volunteer days, and launched a website to network volunteers, *Community To Community*, and has forcefully represented the needs of the children of the military in developing government policies and programs.

It was interesting, however, that a significant portion of the respondents saw no one individual as the top advocate for children but instead suggested that the responsibility should be shared. One leader responded that "for [her], the top advocates for children and youth are a) immediate and extended family, b) educators and school administrators, c) community organizations and human service professionals… This includes local, state, and federal government and all human service/social work organizations and professionals including child and youth care workers." Another leader agreed: "I would say parents and citizens who consistently show their needs/interests/concerns for children and youth through national polls, and when trained as community organizers are powerful advocates for policy change. They desire safe after-school opportunities for youth, more quality time with their children, etc." Still, others felt that it is the youth themselves who can be the most powerful advocates for their own needs: "It is the young people themselves. The young people, as their voices are expressed in the youth media movement, for example. Not one person, but young people themselves are the top advocates because they are finding avenues to get their voices out, finding avenues to talk about the reality of their life, they are using media in very creative ways."

### Youth Work and Success in Education

As we look to the future, youth work can play a vital role that strengthens the relationships for learning and creates the conditions for success in school.

"Youth work has historically focused on marginalized (those in urban areas, in low-income families, and students with behavioral issues). It has also historically focused on a wide range of outcomes beyond academics—behavioral, cognitive, emotional, social, and civic. Schools desperately need expertise in these domains in order to address current challenges, including the rapidly shifting demographics of school children, the complex demands faced by families, and the attention to academic test results."Youth work can powerfully complement school services and transfer knowledge invaluable to parents, teachers, and school leaders.

Another leader interviewed proposed that youth workers must advocate for parental engagement in learning and work together with parents and teachers to build a positive relationship-based school climate. "Academic quality is only half of success. The degree to which the supportive, hospitable bonds empower and enhance the impact of positive relationships also promotes success. We need to rally a passion, create opportunities for teachers to celebrate the positive impact on children's lives."

Most leaders pointed out that there are two major factors that promote educational success. These are healthy development and the quality of educational opportunity. By becoming near-peer mentors and tutors for children "who are off track" in their academic subjects, youth workers can "make a tremendous difference in the achievement outcomes of the children. The children more likely can trust them."Youth workers are willing to listen and respond in a caring approach and provide highly enriched activities to demonstrate the content that needs to be learned.

The leaders went on to say:"Youth work can be extremely important in its impact on student success in school and by extension success in the greater community:

1. Youth workers can partner with students, educators, and families by carefully understanding what the individual needs, goals of each, and what common interests and goals they may share.

2. Youth workers can support individual students in word and deed. That means youth workers can listen to and offer both direct and indirect guidance to students.

3. They can support educators and families by reinforcing the values, expectations, and outcomes that educators and families may have for students. They can assist students in specific strategies for success in academic life but also help students to identify strengths and interests outside of academics that they can be encouraged to develop and pursue.

4. They can acknowledge and reward student success as well as help others to identify and acknowledge success both inside and outside of the classroom.

5. They can partner with community groups and organizations to engage students in community activities that will provide positive outlets for youth as well as offer an opportunity for youth to be seen in positive ways and as having made contributions to the community.

6. Youth workers can serve as models for behavior, interpersonal skills, decision making, and taking responsibility for choices and consequences.

7. Youth workers can engage in personal hands-on activities with youth as well as develop programs and services both inside and outside of the school environment that can contribute to student success.

8. They can serve as advocates for students inside and outside of the school environment. There are so many things that youth workers can be a part of in contributing to student success."

It is significant that policy makers, educational thinkers, and parents are debating extending the school day. Should after-school youth work be more like school, or should it continue to provide enriched activities that are supportive to and reinforcing of learning? It may be that youth work in the educational milieu can provide a bridge to achieve both goals which are worthy. We not only want our youth to be accountable for learning, we want the youth to become lifelong learners. The four themes interwoven in these interviews demonstrate the powerful bridge that youth work can provide in school and after school for delivering success in learning. The challenges facing both youth and youth workers can be navigated through the interactivity of positive developmental relationships, hands-on learning, and technology. It has become a shared national responsibility to effectively advocate for high quality learning that engages the youth and will motivate the next generation for success in learning. Not only the high dropout rate but the high rates of youth worker and teacher turnover is clarion call to solve problems by collaborating. Youth work can provide the skills and competencies for this necessary partnership among youth educators and parents.

*Additional Reading–Selected Publications from the Leaders*

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| BOX I: RESEARCH INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: | |
|---|---|
| 1. | What are three problems facing children and youth? (In rank order) |
| 2. | What are three positive opportunities available to youth? (In rank order) |
| 3. | Aside from the obvious issues of low salary and a high burnout rate, what are the top three problems for youth workers today? (In rank order) |
| 4. | What are three beneficial opportunities available to youth workers? |
| 5. | Who is America's top advocate for youth today and why? |
| 6. | How can youth work ensure success for students in our schools? |
| 7. | Open ended: Students created their own question. |

| BOX II: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS: | |
|---|---|
| Penny Bailer | *City Year Detroit, Detroit, MI, http://www.cityyear.org/* |
| Peter Benson | *Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN, http://www.search-institute.org* |
| Jean Carpenter-Williams | *The University of Oklahoma National Resource Center for Youth Services, Tulsa, OK, http://www.nrcys.ou.edu* |
| Sandra Chavez | *Milwaukee Area Technical College Human Services, Milwaukee WI, http://matc.edu/matcmain.html* |
| Dale Curry | *Department of Human Development and Family Studies, School of Lifespan Development and Educational Sciences, Kent State University, http://www.kent.edu/ehhs/hdfs/index.cfm* |
| Frank Eckles | *The Academy for Competent Youth Work, College Station, TX, http://www.youthworkacademy.org/index.html* |
| Michael Gaffley | *Nova Southeastern University Fischler School of Education & Human Services, North Miami Beach, FL, http://www.schoolofed.nova.edu/oceda/ocedahome.html* |
| Carl Johnson | *University of Pittsburgh Psychology in Education, Pittsburgh, PA, http://www.education.pitt.edu/psyed* |
| Keith Kozerski | *St. Joseph's Home for Children, Minneapolis, MN, http://www.ccspm.org/stjoescontact.aspx* |
| Holly Kreider | *Harvard Family Research Project, Cambridge, MA, http://www.hfrp.org* |
| Martha Mattingly | *University of Pittsburgh Psychology in Education, Pittsburgh, PA, http://www.education.pitt.edu/psyed/* |
| Michael Mitchell | *Wisconsin Association of Child and Youth Care Professionals, Inc., Madison, WI, http://www.wacycp.org* |
| Mike Nakkula | *University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, Philadelphia, PA, http://www.gse.upenn.edu* |
| Judy Nee | *National AfterSchool Association, McLean, VA, http://www.naaweb.org* |
| Ben Webman | *EdSource, Mountain View, CA, http://www.edsource.org* |
| Wendy Wheeler | *Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, Takoma Park, MD, http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/home* |
| Stephanie Wu | *City Year, Boston, MA, http://www.cityyear.org* |

| BOX III: STUDENT INTERVIEWERS: |
|---|
| Kathleen Buffa |
| Christopher Carter |
| Patricia Christian |
| Celeste Clifford |
| Marcia Del Papa |
| Matthew Fasano |
| Angela Holeczy |
| Angie Kryser |
| Donna Lynn |
| Danielle O'Neill |

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