The Occupational Culture and Identity of Youth Workers: A Review of the Literature

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The Occupational Culture and Identity of Youth Workers: A Review of the Literature

Qualifying Paper

Submitted by

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

In this paper, I review the existing research on youth worker culture and identity in the United States. By framing this paper with a brief history of the youth work field and a conceptual background introducing the sociology of work, professions, and occupations, I argue that the current preoccupation with professionalizing the youth work field (i.e. what this occupation ought to be) has obscured an examination of current youth worker culture and identity (i.e. what this occupation already is). In light of this concern, I suggest examining youth work as an existing occupation rather than confining analysis on its emerging professional status. While the research on youth worker culture and identity is fairly limited, I identify four salient areas of research on this occupation: (1) demographic studies on workforce patterns, (2) portrayals of expertise and practice, (3) beliefs and attitudes around approaches to children and youth, (4) interpretations of occupational identity. The research reveals a diversity in youth workers’ backgrounds — their ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and education levels — that expands upon commonly assumed understandings of this workforce. Additionally, despite the documented complexity of youth work practice as well as the passion and care that fuels their work, youth workers are beset by organizational challenges and external pressures that undermine and compromise their persistence in the field. Utilizing a framework developed by Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno (2016), I explore the empirical research on youth workers through the lenses of “becoming,” “doing,” and “relating” to deepen and expand inquiry into youth worker culture on identity. This framework helps to elicit a set of unanswered questions and exposes areas in need of further examination.
Introduction

Youth workers, the practitioners who educate, guide, and care for young people outside the classroom, have little visibility in educational discourse. This is true, even though children spend most of their waking hours outside of school (Silva & Headden, 2011) and dual working and single parent households are increasing (Catalyst, 2015). Such is surprising, particularly given that youth workers facilitate a range of activities with documented developmental and academic benefits for youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Halpern, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000; Vandell et al., 2006). Within these activities, caring relationships between practitioners and young people are central to positive experiences and outcomes (Carnegie Corporation, 1992; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hirsch, 2005; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Rhodes, 2004). Additionally, youth workers oftentimes serve youth who face discrimination and vulnerability within schools and society writ large, such as youth from low-income backgrounds, LGBTQ youth, immigrant youth, youth experiencing homelessness, and youth of color (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Baldridge, 2014; Fusco, 2012; Ginwright, 2015).

However, like many of the adolescents they serve, youth workers have also experienced marginalization. They have experienced a lack of career support and growth, low compensation, and increasing regulation (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Thomas, 2003). These working conditions have resulted in frequent staff turnover in youth programs as well as exits from the field altogether (Halpern, 2000; Wilson, 2009). Practitioners have also struggled to form a collective sense of occupational identity and visibility. Their diversity — in educational background, career experience, and population focus — is an asset to their practice but also a challenge to ascertaining their shared work culture and identity. Without clear occupational boundaries, youth workers have confronted new obstacles to their
practice caused by the market-based demands of testing and standardization in the education sector. For example, funders and school districts increasingly require academic activities and measurable outcomes from youth serving programs, setting expectations of accountability that may be misaligned with the typically long-term developmental and civic-oriented approaches of youth work practice (Baldrige, 2014; Fusco, Matloff-Nieves, & Ramos, 2013; Noam & Rosenbaum Tillinger, 2004).

Collective visibility, working conditions, and conflicts regarding priorities in the purpose of youth work have all raised important questions for the field. For stakeholders invested in high quality youth development experiences for all young people, these dilemmas have led to immediate practice-based questions of how to recruit, retain, and unite this workforce. The resounding response from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners has focused on professionalizing the youth work field (see Borden, Garza, & Stone, 2004; Curry, Eckles, Stuart, Schneider-Muñoz, & Qaqish; Emslie, 2013; Freeman, 2013; Fusco, 2012; Krueger, 2002; Pittman, 2004; Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009; Thomas, 2003).

Professionalization is a process in which a workforce creates unified systems of training, certification, and ethical standards, ultimately laying claim to specific content knowledge that shapes the standards and quality of the work (Abbott, 1988; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In theory, professionalization holds the promise of external recognition and internal occupational control. These efforts in the youth work field have led to the development of several policy reports, training materials, and scholarly essays discussing what these practitioners can and should be (see Bouffard & Little, 2002; National Afterschool Association, 2011; Wisman & ProYouthWork America, 2011). However, while this movement is happening, it is helpful to return to the discourse on who youth workers already are, which
entails an understanding of their existing work culture and identity, including their roles, practices, and beliefs.

Therefore, in this literature review, I synthesize the existing empirical research on youth workers, with a specific focus on their work culture and identities. I situate this discussion within existing conceptual approaches to the study of work, occupations, and the professions. To begin, I describe my methodology in identifying and analyzing sources for this review. I then share a brief history of youth work in the United States to further explain the development of the field and to provide a context for this review, after which I introduce a conceptual background on the sociological study of work, occupations, and professions. I then share key themes across empirical findings on youth workers in the United States. By linking the sociological literature on occupational identity, beliefs, and practices to existing empirical research on youth workers, I aim to create new understandings of this occupation and expose areas in need of further examination by generating a new set of research questions that will guide and lead into my dissertation research.

Analytical Strategy

This paper asks these primary questions: **How might existing occupational research complicate and offer nuance to the existing discourse on youth workers?**

**How might it help guide future inquiry?** To answer these questions, I have drawn on both conceptual and empirical bodies of literature. First, to build a conceptual framework in which to examine the mechanism and phenomena of work, I have identified literature from the sociology of work, professions, and occupations. This component of the review is driven by the question: **What key insights can we gain from the study of occupations that will inform the study of youth workers’ culture and identity?** Given the expansiveness of this field of literature, I have
focused on conceptual texts – mainly articles and books – that provide an overview of this field of research. These overviews feature concepts and vocabulary in the sociology of work and professions (Abbott, 1993; Leight & Fennell, 2001; Vallas, Finlay, and Wharton, 2009; Wilensky, 1964). I have also identified research on occupations related to care work and education, such as teaching, social work and nursing (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998; Darling Hammond, 2005; Hargreaves, 1984; Johnson, 1984; Lortie, 1975; Mehta, 2013). These occupations, also emerging professions, have been more thoroughly studied and theorized than youth work. Finally, I analyzed literature that discussed the work of occupations more broadly, beyond the confines of professions, considering new research on occupational identity construction and meaning (Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, 2016; Cerulo, 1997; Christiansen, 1999; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). As a way to situate this conceptual literature, I have continued to build connections to the discourse on the professionalization of youth work.

Second, I have identified empirical articles and books on youth workers. In the United States, the literature on youth work can be found through the educational subfields of afterschool, youth development, and out-of-school time. This empirical component of the review was guided by the following questions, which I have formulated from my conceptual framework of occupational study. First, what do we already know about youth workers’ backgrounds and experiences in the U.S.? Second, what are the emerging themes regarding youth workers’ roles and practices? Third, what are the emerging themes regarding youth workers’ beliefs and identity in relation to their work and their position(s) within the field of education?

To conduct a search for articles and books, I have used EBSCOhost’s 3-in-1 Education Articles Search, which identifies articles based on key word search terms in ERIC, Education Abstracts, and Academic Search Premier (ASP). Beyond my brief historical
overview of youth work, I have restricted my search to work written in 1980 or after, because key professionalization efforts (through conferences, journal publications, and collective advocacy) have mostly occurred in the past thirty-five years (Fusco, 2012). Given the many job titles associated with youth work, I have run a series of searches beyond “youth worker,” such as “afterschool staff,” “youth work practice,” and “youth development practitioners,” in conjunction with “beliefs,” “practices,” “orientations,” and “identity.” Given limited findings in these searches, I have also scanned national scale research on out-of-school time programs to identify sections of analyses about practitioners (The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000). Finally, I have mined further studies by examining the citations of these articles.

What Is Youth Work?

*At its heart, youth work is educational. It is not neutral. It is invariably laden and political by the very nature of what it chooses to teach and promote. It has traditionally been the purview of nonprofit organizations that select programs and activities that support their mission. (Walker, 2003)*

The youth work field, also discussed as youth development or the out-of-school time sector, entails the theory, knowledge, and practice of providing support and developmental guidance for children and adolescents. It lies at the intersection of education, human development, and social work (Fusco, 2012). However, like teaching, youth work in practice varies depending on the program activities, goals, context, and beliefs held by the individuals and organizations involved. The job titles associated with the practice of youth work – “coach,” “youth leader,” “program director” -- demonstrates some of this diversity in context and delivery (Pittman & Yohalem, 2006). As Hirsch (2005) writes in his book about afterschool centers, “into this void of adult leaders, into this gap in the parental, educational, and community support systems, steps the after-school programs. Or so everyone hopes.
Afterschool programs have been around for a long time and clearly have relevant strengths. Yet there is no clear consensus about overarching goals and program design” (p. 5). In the following section, I briefly trace the historical development of youth programs as it relates to the development of a related occupation committed to young people in community-based contexts. I then discuss some of the philosophical developments and tensions in this field that inform professionalization efforts.

**History of Youth Work in the United States**

The emergence and development of youth work reflects changes in household, labor, community and urbanization patterns. Out-of-school time activities have been an essential part of the American childhood since the Industrial Revolution. As child labor decreased in the late nineteenth century, local educators, social activists, and pastors began providing clubs and events for children and youth in schools, settlement houses, storefronts, and churches (Benson, Harkavy, Johanek, & Puckett, 2009; Brooker, 2014; Halpern, 2002; Hirsch, 2005; Warren, 2005). These original community programs were informal while purpose-driven; they primarily focused on activities such as sports, English language learning, and cultural celebrations (Brooker, 2014; Halpern, 2002; Hirsch, 2005). Originally segregated by gender, the first activities began as “boys clubs,” only later expanding to include girls at the turn of the century (Freeman, 2002; Halpern, 2002). Many of Jane Addams’ foundational programs at Hull House in Chicago sought to socialize girls growing up in the city, helping them find a sense of independence in rapidly changing urban contexts that offered new roles for women outside the home (Addams, 1909). Settlement houses like Hull House also offered assistance to new immigrant families through programming focused on academic and work skills. Youth work continued to develop during World War II when
many women went to work, which created another wave of need for afterschool child care (Dryfoos, 1999). In response to the war, faith based organizations such as the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Brigade prioritized fitness, considering physical health to be a key component of citizenship (Brooker, 2014). In the 1950s and 60s, youth workers were integral in running group homes and residential care centers (Freeman, 2002).

Youth workers have also created programs as sites of resistance to school, at times out of necessity rather than choice (Ginwright & Cammorata, 2002; Kirshner, 2015). As Amory Starr (2003) has shared in her analysis of interviews with youth workers, “[y]outh workers see their work in the context of historical struggles for liberation in their local communities” (p. 5). Some out-of-school time programs have offered alternative spaces to rethink and redress education received or erased in public school curricula. For example, during the Civil Rights movement, local Black leaders, White college students, and activists came together to develop “Freedom Schools” in Mississippi, alternative summer spaces of academic learning, civic education, Black history, and empowerment for Black youth (Sturkey, 2010). Programs like the original Freedom Schools have continued to be spaces that celebrate heritage and are particularly critical for youth of color who may never learn their own people’s histories in schools. For example, more recently, when “ethnic studies” were contested by Arizona state politicians and ultimately banned from public schools, educators have continued their work focused on Mexican-American history through weekend and after school programs (Cammarota, Romero, & Stovall, 2014).

In 1994, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) endorsed the role of out-of-school time programs as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. To address the lack of extracurricular opportunities and supplementary academic support for students from low-income households, the DOE granted $200 million
dollars to school-based afterschool programs in low-income rural and urban schools in 1998 (Phillips, 2010). In 2012, 2.5 billion dollars were allocated to “21st Century Community Learning Centers” (21CCLC), and approximately 1.2 billion has been appropriated by states for distribution (Afterschool Alliance, 2012). Currently, this is the only federal funding stream dedicated to afterschool programs. With the advent of 21CCLC, there has been increasing attention on out-of-school time as a context for supporting math and literacy, which has been referred to as “compensatory” or “supplementary” education. Additionally, museum and librarian educators have advocated for “informal learning spaces” such as maker spaces and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) learning. However, despite the influx of public and private financial support, funding for these programs is precarious, dependent on measurable academic outcomes, and many youth from low-income households still have limited access to enriching extracurricular activities that their middle-class peers access through payment (Afterschool Alliance, 2013; Snellman, Silva, Frederick, & Putnam, 2015). Halpern has illuminated these complexities in the current era of out-of-school time: “In the face of growing, and disparate, interest stands a field that is itself a complex mix: identifiable yet extraordinarily heterogeneous; vibrant yet fragile; a protected space for play and enriching experiences, yet increasingly burdened with compensatory tasks” (p. 186).

Today, youth work occurs in a variety of contexts, such as schools, community centers, nonprofit sports clubs, libraries, museums, public gardens, and juvenile detention centers. Youth workers serve diverse populations of youth, including youth in foster care, youth experiencing homelessness, gang involved youth, and youth who have dropped out of school. Finally, youth workers may specialize in content areas such as arts, writing, college access, sports, leadership, and service learning (Ginwright, 2010; Halpern, 2000). It is
important to note that most organizing and advocacy efforts have been driven by community nonprofits and government funded school-based afterschool programming, organizations which often serve children ages 6 to 12. “Youth work” and “youth worker” are monikers that have been most frequently applied to practitioners working with adolescents in cities and high poverty neighborhoods.

While out-of-school time programs persist because of the enduring leadership of youth workers — program directors and frontline (direct service) practitioners — it is only over the past thirty-five years that these practitioners have come together to discuss their practice and future work collectively. This has occurred through the creation of city and national level professional learning opportunities, the development of research centers, as well as the coordination of national and local advocacy organizations (Borden, Garza, & Stone, 2004; Fusco, 2012; Quinn, 2012; Wisman & ProYouthWork America, 2011). The increase in dual working households, advocacy for low cost out-of-school time programs, and the establishment of 21st Century Community Learning Centers have propelled efforts to “professionalize” the afterschool workforce through training, publications, professional membership organizations, research-based staff competencies, and the development of credentialing systems (Emslie, 2013; Freeman, 2002; Fusco, 2012; Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). This professionalization process has animated conversation around youth work while also revealing disagreements, which complicate a single narrative of purpose, knowledge, or philosophy around youth work. Below, I discuss some of these differences.

**Philosophical Approaches & Tensions**

Youth work has emerged from community-based practices of care, mentorship, guidance, and support. Scholars and practitioners alike have typically refuted static
boundaries around approaches, scope, and content. An English writer, Brian Belton (2014), has proclaimed:

What I have found, as an accidental international practitioner, is what makes youth work exciting and dynamic is that it belongs to nobody because it belongs to everybody. Youth work is not what one person says it is, youth work is what all youth workers do. I love this about youth work; it is defiant in the face of categorisation – it makes fools of the academically pompous and those who believe in their own power over the shape and direction of general practice. You might not agree with this, this time next year I might not agree with it, but in the words of Eldridge Cleaver, former Head of the International Section of the Black Panther Party, ‘Too much agreement kills the chat’. (xiii)

This excerpt offers a glimpse of the openness, ambiguity, and flexibility in this field.

University of Minnesota Professor Michael Baizerman (1996) has further confirmed this in his essay on street outreach. Rather than offering a specific set of guidelines around the work, he claims it is “the praxis of a community’s moral compact with its youth” and a “family of practices” comprised of diverse pedagogies, ethics, and orientations toward youth (p. 161).

While this open-ended, relational nature of youth work exists, there are differences and tensions regarding central beliefs and goals. In an interview study with youth workers in St. Paul, Minnesota, Joyce Walker (2003) shared the general desire among youth workers to find common ground, commenting, “the field cries out for a common language that bridges the divide of place, site, history, discipline, and organizational turf” (p.385). Generally, there has been an intellectual and practical move in the field away from deficit or “problem”-centered understandings of youth (Baldridge, 2014; Ginwright, 2015; Kirshner, 2015). The predominant current youth work approach is grounded in principles of “positive youth development,” which focuses on reinforcing and facilitating developmental assets and strengths of young people (Baldridge, 2014; Ginwright, 2015; Mahoney, Eccles, & Lord, 2005). However, given this current era of test-based educational accountability, the positive youth development approach has not prevailed in the face of demands of youth
programming to focus explicitly on academic remediation and support (Fusco, 2012). In response to the pressures that youth work connects to school-based academic outcomes, Fusco (2012) has called for “critical youth work” that is guided by emerging youth need rather than scripted academic activities intended to promote school success. Additionally, scholars have considered the limitations of positive youth development principles to consider the structural and contextual complexities of young people’s lives, particularly for youth who have experienced social and emotional trauma (Ginwright, 2015; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Kirshner 2015). Youth work, in this paradigm, has required a constant questioning of power in adult-youth relationships as well as attentiveness to systems that influence individual experiences.

Given the breadth of youth work contexts and goals, Roholt and Cutler (2012) have suggested codifying youth work by the specific form of engagement with youth. They proposed “civic youth work” as a specific way to “name a type of youth work and pay tribute to youth workers who have sought to make real opportunities available to young people to be citizens” (p. 173). Additionally, Jerome Beker (2001) has distinguished “clinical youth workers,” practitioners who tend to work in residential care and specialize in interventions for youth experiencing trauma, from youth workers working for the general population around healthy development and leisure activities. Consequently, this heterogeneity in approaches and distinctions in practices invite several questions regarding work roles, practices, beliefs and identity.

**Conceptual Framework**

Sociological inquiry into work offers insights into both macro structures and micro processes of culture and identity construction. Past research on work has illuminated
individuals’ experience within organizations, considered their experiences in aggregate, examined how social norms shift due to new markets and technologies, and exposed the relationship between informal relations and rules and “formal expectations” in the workplace (Vallas, Finlay, & Wharton, 2009). It has also revealed the ways in which American people interpret and understand their roles within society, particularly in relation to capitalistic hierarchies of value. Such hierarchies include people’s understanding of their work through constructs of status and prestige as well as through morally bounded perceptions of self worth and dignity (Lamont, 2000; 2012).

Past research on work has: considered questions of knowledge, practice, control, and agency within occupations (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998); exposed inequalities in experience based on race and gender identity; and revealed the formation of common standards and ethics in rapidly changing workplaces (Abbott, 1993; Leight & Fennell, 2001; Vallas, 2003). In a review of research on work, sociologist Andrew Abbott (1993) described two predominant strands of inquiry into understanding work structure and culture, the first being research on broad industries or “fields” of labor, and the second being an analysis of the individual experience within the workplace (e.g. as related to their job satisfaction, motivation to work, etc.). These shifts in work life in the 19th and 20th century also shaped how scholars studied work. For example, sociologists have worked closely with management to better understand the behavior and motivations of workers that influence their overall productivity and “success” on the job (Vallas, Finlay, & Wharton, 2009). Therefore, the changing context of where and how work happens influences occupational roles, practices, and identity.

Sociological concepts of work, professions, and occupations have informed my thematic analysis of empirical literature on youth workers and have offered an analytical lens
through which to propose further inquiry. In this conceptual framing, I consider previous studies on work — particularly in occupations related to youth work such as teaching, social work, and nursing — to interpret the discourse on youth workers. First, I discuss how examining youth work through the lenses of professions and the professionalization process can manifest critical issues of power, status, and inequality. Also, importantly, an examination of professionalization can help uncover who defines the work and demarcates practice, reveal tacit knowledge and expertise, and expose the valuation of different forms of work (in particular, work that includes care). However, I argue that there are limitations to interpreting youth work within the boundaries of research on professions. Therefore, I ultimately propose a broadening of empirical research on youth workers, particularly suggesting a move to organizing existing literature through the occupational lenses of becoming, doing, and relating proposed by Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno (2016). These lenses not only offer a heuristic in examining current research on youth worker culture and identity, but also expand the types of future questions we ask about this occupation.

**Studying Professions**

The research on both professional work and occupations striving for professional status has illuminated central matters of status, power, and inequality, which are applicable to interpreting professionalization efforts in youth work (Abbott, 1993; Hughes, 1970; Vallas, Finlay, & Wharton, 2009). In fact, the study of youth work as an emerging profession has been a primary topic of interest in recent years (Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012; Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2013; Krueger, 2002). Historically, professions were defined as a subset of occupations that were altruistically oriented, produced and legitimated by popular need, and offered within-group control and autonomy over their knowledge base (Abbott, 1988; Hughes, 1970; Wilenksy, 1964). Earlier scholars examined this process of acquiring
legitimacy in society, such as Wilensky, who determined in his examination of eighteen occupations the criteria, rules, and event patterns that led to successful professionalization. He claimed that occupations that attained professional status followed this series of events: (1) public acknowledgement that people need to engage in the work full time, (2) the creation of training programs and schools to prepare people for the work, (3) the creation of professional associations, which continue to explore and contest core tasks, knowledge, and defining elements of the work, as well as consideration of “neighbor” occupations, (4) political advocacy that leads to legal parameters, such as certification and licensing requirement, and (5) the development of a code of ethics.

While Wilensky (1964) offered a tidy storyline of the professionalization process, Abbott’s approach (1988) better represents the power dynamics and struggles at play in youth work professionalization. Indeed, Quinn (2012) has described the development of youth work through conferences, publications, and higher education programs as a “patchwork of efforts” (p. 207). Additionally, while there is a demand for and interest in youth care, it remains unclear if there will be consistent public will and advocacy to support and fund this occupation, and this investment varies by location. More formalized systems of afterschool have occurred at a city or regional level (Halpern, 2003). In Abbott’s analysis of the field of medicine, he disputed Wilensky’s sequence of professionalization, demonstrating that the order and location of occupational activity within medicine varied, which manifests the complex and contextual nature of occupational development and acceptance. Abbott (1993) further purported that professions existed in systems of related occupations, meaning that professionalization was actually a competitive process, in which practitioners stake a claim around particular knowledge and expertise. This can be seen in
youth workers’ challenges to define their practice in relation to classroom teachers and childcare professionals.

Why do youth workers seek professional legitimacy? One common refrain in the youth work literature is the desire for status, that is, public recognition of the value of this work (Fusco, 2012). In a conference forum on recruiting and sustaining youth workers, a participant posed this central question: “How do we get past the public perception that anyone can do this work? We will always be struggling, if people cannot get past this perception. We need to recognize the professionalism of our youth workers” (Borden, Garza, & Stone, 2004, p. 4). This particular quote relates to a desire for acknowledgment of “expertise,” which is both the visible and tacit forms of knowledge and skills related to this work (Lam, 2010). In addition to this recognition, the desire for status is inextricably tied to a second reason for professionalizing — to improve job conditions for youth workers. Working conditions include financial reward, growth opportunities, and a sense of agency on the job, ingredients for sustaining good work and thriving practitioners. Emslie (2013) has written, “improving the standing, funding and career structures of youth workers would be a welcome development for those practitioners who have been sidelined and lacked influence in multidisciplinary situations and are concerned about inadequate resourcing, job insecurity and precarious wages” (p. 127). Third, trainers and academics are invested in preparing future youth workers by defining and shaping a unified body of knowledge for the field (Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012; Pittman, 2004). As Borden (2002) has posed:

The fragmentation of educational opportunities prevents youth development professionals from acquiring the necessary educational foundations and the skills to create quality youth development programs that promote the positive development of young people. We can no longer afford to have youth development professionals who are forced to use only their best instincts and guess work at what makes a difference in the lives of young people. (p. 7)
Lastly and relatedly, there is the belief that training requirements and credentialing systems can ensure “high quality” staff (National Afterschool Association, 2012; see Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006). In a study on the North American Certification Project, a competency based examination process for child and youth care workers, certified practitioners were 2.7 times more likely to be scored as high performers by their supervisors than non-certified practitioners, after controlling for the effects of race, gender, education, experience, and certification exam score (Curry, Eckles, Stuart, Schneider-Muñoz, & Qaqish, 2013). Shared competencies and evaluation systems could provide trainers and organization managers more standardized methods for hiring and evaluating youth workers.

Issues of status in youth work can be interpreted and illuminated through the literature on gender and care work. In the American imaginary, the understanding of work and its value have been implicitly connected to financial compensation (Daniels, 1987). Arlene Daniels (1987) has critiqued this “common sense” notion of work, which typically masks labor connected to family and community, such as developing relationships, providing care and support, planning public activities, and organizing at the neighborhood level. Women have often taken responsibility for these types of activity, which occur within both the public and private sphere, with little to no pay. Indeed, even in our current era, implicit gendered expectations around family-based work for women influence their experiences of “enrichment” with outside work and “depletion” from family work (Rothbard, 2001). Hochschild (2003) has furthered this examination of invisible work through analyzing emotional labor, and the exploitation of this type of work, in service industries. Abbot and Meerabeau (1998) and Mehta (2013) have suggested that the undervaluing of work associated with women – work focused on emotion, care, and support - has led to marginalization of occupations such as nursing, social work, and teaching. These fields,
oftentimes numerically dominated by women, have been understood to be service oriented “semi-professions,” as opposed to the structural professionalism discussed in “male-dominated professions” of medicine and law (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998). This subjugation seems salient to youth work, which is also a field that is dominated by women, focused on care and support, and perceived as primarily service oriented and voluntary (see NAA, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006).

Hence, while the reasons for youth worker professionalization are apparent and manifold, there has been debate among youth work scholars about the ways in which it should happen and its potential outcomes. First, scholars have argued that organization-controlled professionalism can pose a threat to youth worker autonomy (Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012; Walker, 2003). Indeed, sociologists have documented the rise of work models that prioritize production, efficiency, and managerialism in the 20th and 21st century. These models, reflections of industrial and postindustrial capitalism, have transformed workplaces and people’s everyday experiences within them (Leight & Fennell, 2001; Vallas, Finlay, and Wharton, 2009). Leight and Fennell (2001) describe the modern workplace as “characterized by flatter organizational hierarchies, downsizing of the permanent workforce, post unionized bargaining environment, and virtual organizations” (p. x). In fact, regardless of professional status, most people work in “complex,” bureaucratic organizations where control is actually in the hands of managers (Wilensky, 1964, p.149). A sociological perspective on teaching as a profession has revealed the tensions between managerial and evaluative expectations with the development of an occupation in which practitioners control their own preparation and standards (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Lortie, 1975). As suggested by Jal Mehta (2013), professions should reflect the collective expertise of practitioners; but rather, teaching has
been unable to escape the trappings of bureaucratic governance in which top-down management and scripted hierarchical roles prevail.

A second concern with current professionalization efforts has been that it undermines the core principle of youth work to “meet young people where they are at” (Johnston-Goodstar & Roholt, 2013). Youth workers typically bring an ecological perspective to their work, in which they invoke contextually grounded knowledge and understanding as part of their knowledge and skills (Ross, 2013; Starr, 2003). Karen Pittman (2004), director of the Forum for Youth Investment, has critiqued professionalization arguments put forth by advocates of afterschool programs, who focused on the youth work occupation as complementing teachers by time and place rather than by differing strategies and outcomes. The prevailing professionalizing efforts, which align youth work with school-based efforts, focus on their accountability to schools, funders, and policymakers, rather than the communities being served (Baldridge, 2014; Fusco, Mattloff-Nieves, & Ramos, 2013). As Pittman (2004) has contended, “young people do not grow up in programs; they grow up in communities. Therefore, youth work should not just be practiced in programs but be present in communities” (p. 97). Again, this tension between occupational work and organizational structure has been raised across sociological studies of professions (Abbott, 1993; Leight & Fennell, 2001; Wilensky, 1964). Abbott and Meerabeau (1998) have interpreted these fraught relationships in nursing and social work, noting that that both groups of practitioners are “employed within bureaucratic organizations – which means they might have to take actions against the wishes of their clients” (p. x). They also consider the ways in which professionalization might actually be “disabling” to very individualized, client needs based approach of care work. Thus, management driven standardization may undermine the relational nature of youth work.
Finally, professionalization that demands specific degree pathways may disrupt the existing experiential, educational, and racial diversity of youth workers (Johnson-Goodstar & Roholt, 2013). In the research, youth workers often reflect on their own childhood experiences in urban environments as a way to both relate and work with young people (Halpern, 2000). Professionalization, through increasing higher education demand, may actually decrease the current diversity of youth workers. This might have unintended consequences for the outcomes of this work, as these practitioners may have insider community and content related knowledge that may be equally or more valuable than college degrees or licensure. As a youth worker in Urban Sanctuaries has described, the types of connections and familiarity needed to engage youth cannot necessarily be cultivated in professional development sessions: “I hired someone who has a Ph.D. in the streets. [Cruz] had been working the streets for the last ten years. He knows the whole structure. He knows gangs are structured and run out of prison…I found a guy that got out of [gang life] but understands it and can relate to it” (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994, p.134).

**Studying Occupations**

Understanding professions and professionalization efforts is critical when analyzing work status and power, however, it may actually limit the scope of questions we can ask about current work culture and identity. Research on the professions and professionalization is prolific, not just in youth work, but also across sociological studies of work. Andrew Abbott (1993) suggests that there is a general intrigue in understanding hierarchy and power rather than actual work practices that are occurring across fields. Additionally, Hughes (1970) has discussed the desire of practitioners within a given occupation to seek the status and prestige of the professions, which can actually shift occupations’ internal questions away from exploring work culture, activity, and identity.
By expanding research beyond professions and professionalization, there are more opportunities to understand work culture and meaning making in action. For example, through an occupational research lens, work expertise can include a variety of forms of work knowledge, even if it has not been obtained through formal training. Gorman and Sandefur (2011) discuss a move in understanding professions from (a) expert knowledge, (b) technical autonomy, (c) a normative orientation toward the service of others, and (d) high status, income, and other rewards, to a new “demarcation,” between jobs that require *expert knowledge* and those that do not. In particular, this new distinction signifies which jobs require formal higher education and those that do not. However occupational studies have also revealed that work culture and practices may override any knowledge learned formally. For example, ethnographic inquiry in schools has revealed that even when teachers are trained in educational theory, they typically draw on their own past classroom experiences to inform school-level decision-making rather than research (Lortie, 1975; Hargreaves, 1984). These everyday logics of knowledge use were similarly confirmed in an interview study with youth workers (Walker, 2003). Indeed, tacit and explicit forms of knowledge used by practitioners can influence and shape organizational culture and workplace dynamics (Lam, 2000).

Developing inquiry beyond the quest for professionalization opens inroads into exploring individuals’ current identification with their work, the “meaningfulness” they associate with it, and the boundaries between private and public work (Rosso, Dekas, Wrzesniewski, p.95). People place different values on their work, which can range from perceptions of their chosen work as a “job,” to a “calling” or “career” (Hirschi, 2012). These distinctions, and the implications it has for the work, are interesting given discussion of youth work as a *vocation* or a “stepping stone,” as well as the question of practitioner
persistence and longevity in the field. There is also recent literature on occupational identity, which refers to the evolving awareness of one’s self as a professional (Brown, 1996; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). The development of occupational sciences and identity theory is fairly new (Christiansen, 1999), however, it offers a novel way to consider practitioners’ meaning making processes outside the boundaries of traditional professions. Positive occupational identity has been linked to both a sense of personal wellbeing and success in the workplace (Hirschi, 2012). Moreover, there is additional room to explore this relationship between occupational work and organizational structure. Within organizations, there are often several coexisting and complementary types of occupational work occurring. For example, in both schools and community centers, there are often administrators, teachers, counselors, social workers, and custodians who all interact with young people and their families (Intrator & Siegel, 2014; Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Susan Moore Johnson (1990) emphasized the important connection between workplace and occupational identity in her analysis of the teaching profession. She put forth a set of “working conditions” that impact effective teaching practice, which included the physical, organizational, sociological, political, cultural, psychological, and educational features of a workplace.

Relatedly, Antebay, Chan, and DiBenigno (2016) have introduced an analytical framework of “three lenses” on occupational research. In their review of research on occupations and professions, they have identified three lines of inquiry: “becoming,” “doing,” and “relating.” In a becoming lens, researchers look into how people are “inducted” and “socialized” into “shared cultural values, norms, and worldviews” of a job (p. 11). Becoming studies include research inquiry into control and inequality within the workplace. A doing lens “concerns itself empirically with how people act and how these actions matter” (p. 28), often moving from individualized experiences alone to a collective understanding of role and
expertise. A focus on doing mean examining work practice, political work of reorganizing responsibility among occupational groups, and considering the emergence of new occupations. The third lens, a line of inquiry focused on relating, moves away from competitive interpretations of occupational formation to ones in which roles are understood as complementary. Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno (2016) note: “A relating lens focuses attention on understanding when and how occupational groups collaborate with other groups to perform interdependent work or collectively expand their social influence” (p. 46). These lenses capture the substance of work culture and identity and offer a helpful analytic for discussing the current literature on youth workers.

An Analysis of the Empirical Research on Youth Workers

The research on out-of-school time that emerged in the 1990s set the stage for deeper inquiry into the role of youth workers. During this era of research and evaluation, studies revealed the ways in which programs increased youths’ self esteem, sense of self efficacy, leadership skills, sense of psychological and physical safety, reduction of drug and alcohol use, and a range of improved school outcomes (e.g. test scores, attendance, class participation) (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Fredricks & Eccles, 2008; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Vandell et al., 2006). Three national reports on out-of-school time are seminal to understanding the initial discourse on youth workers in the United States. First, A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity during Nonschool Hours, highlighted adolescent wellbeing and particularly focused on community programs that support and strengthen young people’s identity, skills, networks, and sense of belonging (The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992). Second, in 2000, Milbrey McLaughlin compiled a decade’s worth data on the role and impact of community-based organizations (CBO)
serving young people, conducting surveys and interviews on 120 youth program in 34
different cities. A related report, funded by the National Academics came out in 2002 by The
Committee on Community-Level Programs (a joint project led by the National Research
Council (NRC) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM)). This study integrated reviews of
program evaluations and nonexperimental research on youth programs with current research
on adolescent health. Through this synthesis, the committee identified key evidence-based
programmatic features that promote healthy development in adolescence (Eccles &
Gootman, 2002). In this report, researchers were speaking to policymakers, funders, and
practitioners about attributes of quality programs. These features included physical and
psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong;
positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building;
and opportunities for integration among family, schools, and community efforts.

Through these syntheses, researchers found that community youth programs were
essential sites of continued learning and positive development for school-age children and
adolescent in cities with high concentrations of poverty and violence (Eccles & Gootman,
2002; Halpern, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000). They identified the unsupervised afterschool hours
as a time of increased risk of physical and psychological harm for youth. Within these
formative studies about the youth program context, researchers intuitively began discussing
the “critical ingredient” – caring relationships between adults and youth – and characterizing
the practitioners in these contexts as well (Halpern, 1990; Hirsch, 2005, McLaughlin, 2000;
Rhodes, 2004). In their research, The Carnegie Council (1992) found that “Youth-serving
agencies, religious youth groups, sports programs, parks and recreation services, and libraries
all report that the adults who work with young people in their systems, whether serving on a
paid or voluntary basis, are the most critical factor in whether a program succeeds, but do not receive adequate training, ongoing support and supervision, or public recognition. (p.87)

In the following section, I explore the burgeoning literature on youth work practitioners in the United States during the past thirty five years: uncovering and analyzing the existing work on their backgrounds, practices, beliefs, and identities to identify what we know and need to know about this workforce. This research is fairly limited, however, I identified four areas of existing research on this occupation: (1) portrayals of practice and expertise, (2) demographic studies on workforce patterns, (3) beliefs and attitudes around approaches to children and youth, (4) interpretations of occupational identity. The research that captured broad features and characteristics of youth workers were survey-based and quantitative; findings on practices, beliefs, and identity were based on ethnographic study, qualitative interviews, and participant observation. I situate this review of the empirical work in the conceptual framework I developed above.

**First Sketches of Occupational Culture: Youth Workers’ Roles and Expertise**

He [the youth worker] made it so fun, and he did so much stuff with us. He tried to be our dad, our big brother; he tried to be our everything. And I think that’s maybe because he showed us that he cared. - youth program participant (Jones & Deutch, 2011, p. 1389)

Evaluators and researchers of out-of-school time programs instantly observed an occupational culture among youth workers of warmth and care for youth participants. In a yearlong ethnographic study of a network of community organizations in a low-income Latino neighborhood in Chicago, the authors described the formation of genuine relationships formed between youth workers and afterschool participants (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000). Later, in his evaluation of a three-city afterschool program initiative, Halpern noted his general observations of youth workers: “Staff–child relationships in afterschool programs are typically warm and comfortable” (2002, p. 186). These types of
ongoing family–like support are similarly reflected in McLaughlin’s (2000) national study of neighborhood programs. She observed: “As in the ideal family, adults provide caring, consistent, and dependable supports for youth and are available as needed” (p. 16). It should be noted that in these two articles (Halpern, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000), the primary unit of analysis was the organization or program and its influence on youth, and so, these authors’ insights were more emergent through their qualitative work rather than their entry into it.

This idea of warmth is further echoed in the book *A Place to Call Home*, an ethnographic study of youth experiences in six Boys and Girls Clubs (Hirsch, 2005). In his team’s time at these afterschool centers, Hirsch (2005) comments, “we were struck by the warmth and caring readily evident in the relationships between club staff and youth, and the ways in which these adults strove to educate their charges about the ways of the world” (p. 58).

Qualitative research on out-of-school time has depicted practitioners as highly invested and passionate about their work. In their study on youth engagement in out-of-school time programs, Intrator and Siegel (2014) have described youth program leaders as individuals who are willing to “throw everything and the kitchen sink’ at the intractable problem of helping high-need but promising young people fulfill the American dream” (p. 5). Through close examination of four youth development programs, they found the staff working with youth to be “young, enthusiastic, intelligent, and enthusiastic” (p.63). To build trusting relationships and culturally grounded communication, youth workers are oftentimes available and accessible both inside and outside programs, oftentimes communicating with youth beyond formal hours. This type of high investment can lead to “blurred boundaries between adults’ professional and personal lives” (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 16).

These depictions of care and investment in youth are also connected to descriptions of youth workers’ multiple roles in programs. Intrator and Siegel (2014) have mentioned the
variety of roles that youth workers take on, such as “friend, advocate, coach, tutor, mentor, and repository of procedural knowledge” (as related to organizational structures) (p.64). These different descriptions, however, are not examined or discussed in further detail. They have observed program staff who were from selective colleges and universities, who took on academic and college access support roles; there were also former program participants who could share their own lived experiences, offer advice, and brought with them an energy to the work that was not “domain specific-expertise” (p. 63). These findings on roles relate back to the research on the network of neighborhood programs in Chicago (Halpern et al., 2000). Via weekly observations and in-depth interviews, this team of researchers found that younger youth workers often took on a closer support role, their relationships were more like older siblings, and they struggled with authority. Older youth workers took on a “parent-like” role with youth.

Across the research, youth workers’ roles are defined by their relationships with youth (Hirsch, 2005; Jones & Deutch, 2011; Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Through long-term observation of afterschool and youth interviews, Jones and Deutch (2011) have identified strategies of relationship building that they call a “relational pedagogy.” These features include (1) minimizing relational distance through using less authority-driven techniques and finding cultural and interest-based connections; (2) active inclusion of marginalized youth; and (3) attention to relational ties such as peers and family members. Hirsch (2005) identified mentoring as the “greatest strength” and “core foundation” of programs he and his team observed. He explored the ways in which clubs have become new contexts for “old heads” and “othermothers” who were originally part of the ecosystem of adult support in African-American communities. Describing one of the club practitioners, Charles, Hirsch (2005) discussed the ways in which this youth worker mentors through
culturally “consonant” and “grounded” conversations with Black male teens at the club about difficult topics such as gender identity, racism, employment, and belonging (p. 61). Through a case illustration of Charles, Hirsch interpreted how this kind of mentorship was based in a long-term development of trust, appreciation and affirmation of youth’s identity development, and a willingness to set expectations without micro-managing youth’s behavior. This type of ongoing mentorship requires a kind of holistic approach to young people’s lives that one youth worker described as an “antidote” to school (Halpern, 2000).

In *Urban Santuraries*, McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994) have offered the most in-depth ethnographic account of youth worker culture, particularly focused on their work related to building community relationships. The book highlights common features of six children and six adults working at what these scholars determine to be highly successful yet remarkably different neighborhood programs (e.g. YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, a Gymnastics Club, Girl Scouts Troop, etc). The authors called these youth workers “wizards” because of their long-term commitment to the work, their ability to successfully engage teenagers in their programs, and a connection that “is almost as difficult to emulate because it is highly personal” (p.37). They found that these practitioners believed in the potential of their youth, prioritized youth voice and choice in their programs, believed in their own ability to make a difference in youth participants’ experiences, felt they were giving back to the community something that they owe, and were authentic and genuine in building relationships with youth. The authors also consider youth workers’ roles as shaped by their personal backgrounds. They portrayed three “home grown” community leaders and three “outsiders” (e.g. geographically, socioeconomically, etc.), determining that regardless of their “insider” or “outsider” identities, all have gained the respect of the community through leveraging their cultural and social capital to benefit neighborhood youth and families.
These interpretations of youth workers’ roles also connect to their expertise, that is, both their knowledge and experienced-based practice. There are many sets of competencies regarding what youth workers should know, which have been developed at a city and state level (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). While these competencies vary by context, they all focus on core information and capabilities needed in this work, including knowledge of safety procedures, curriculum planning, and relationship building with schools and families (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). While research on competencies have laid out foundational areas of theory and practice, McLaughlin et al.’s (1994) interpretation of youth workers as “wizards” exposes the enigmatic, experiential, and tacit dimensions of practitioners’ knowledge. Empirical research suggests that youth workers frequently draw on childhood experiences as well as past work experience to make sense of their roles and expertise and to connect to youth in their programs (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000; Hirsch, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000). In addition, researchers have found youth worker expertise to be situated in “practice wisdom,” which is the skills learned from the everyday “tumble of events” that occur within out-of-school time programs (Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker, 2009; Larson & Walker, 2010). In their review of six years of training and support of a Parks and Recreation system, Baizerman, Roholt, Korum and Rana (2013), shared this definition of practice wisdom:

> It is often what older, more experienced workers know about and know how to do. This is not a softer knowledge; although it likely is not scientifically confirmed, it is how much of the world works. In fact, it may not be recognized, accepted, legitimized, or studied for what it is: knowledge about “the way this world works and the ways of making stuff happen, around here, now.” (p. 125)

Thus, practice wisdom considers the evolving, contextualized nature of knowledge gained over time.

Scholars have examined how practice wisdom informs youth workers’ approach to
ethical dilemmas. Through qualitative matrix analysis of 125 interviews with youth program leaders discussing 250 dilemma stories from 12 programs, Larson & Walker (2010) found that the primary ethical dilemmas raised issues about the boundaries between the professional and personal, as well as the conflicts between organizational policies and rules and the lived realities of youth. As discussed earlier, trusting, personalized relationships are, empirically, the foundation of youth worker practice; however, these relationships can also cause issues about what is the appropriate caring response. Interpreting this same data, Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker (2009) have distinguished the decision-making logics of skilled youth workers from novice ones. Whereas skilled practitioners applied ecological reasoning (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) to approach these scenarios, taking into account various dimensions of youth’s lives in their decision-making process, novice youth workers tended to focus on a singular goal of the program and respond to the immediate behavior of youth (p. 81). Ross (2013) has furthered this investigation of how youth workers apply knowledge to dilemma situations. She has offered an in-depth case analysis of two experienced youth workers’ response to the threat of gun violence in their programs. Similar to Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker (2009)’s interpretation, experienced youth workers were able to approach the complexity and intensity of the dilemma from an ecological perspective, while also drawing on their experiential and contextual knowledge to respond:

These youth workers’ expertise in part comes from their ability to make decisions when confronted with conflicting rules of youth organizations and the streets. Urban youth-worker expertise can be explained in part by the extent to which youth workers are able to integrate personal knowledge about the rules and practices of the streets with the values, expectations, and policies of youth organizations. (p. 283)

However, assuming that practice wisdom and enigmatic “wizardry” of youth workers merely exists overlooks research-based knowledge and strategies in the field, as well as the desire among youth workers for more preparation and support in their work (Noam,
Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013; Walker, 2003). Noam and Bernstein-Yamashiro (2013) found that youth workers often develop strong relationships with youth in schools, providing social and emotional support, and are expected to manage “traumatic dimensions” of young people’s lives in their non-teacher role (p. 66). Through phenomenological inquiry into 12 youth workers’ experiences, Anderson-Nathe (2008) explored moments of “not knowing,” which occurs for youth workers on the job in relation to other “helping” professions such as nursing. The research demonstrates that these occupational moments of not knowing can lead to burnout. Anderson-Nathe found that “an adherence to a standard of supercompetence and reluctance to admit to or share experiences to the contrary” have led to feelings of vicarious trauma and crisis for youth workers (p. 19). Additionally, he discovered that for youth workers, who frequently describe their work as a “vocation,” not-knowing can be even more jarring, as it undermines both the assumed expertise of a calling as well as a potential sense of professional identity absent adequate training and skills to address these in the moment dilemmas.

The Big Picture: Workforce Demographics and Occupational Trends

Youth services is the least documented, least understood, and probably the most varied field we studied – Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003, p.12

In contrast to the abovementioned intimate ethnographic accounts of youth workers, survey studies have captured key demographics and trends of this workforce on a national scale. Although the research discussed in the previous section portrays the commitment and conviction of youth workers, the literature has frequently raised the concerns regarding the quality of youth workers, occupational retention, and persistence (Borden, Garza, & Stone, 2004; Hirsch, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000). In 2002, 57 percent of youth care workers had left their jobs, and the cost of hiring and training was estimated to be 30-50 percent of an annual
salary (Wilson, 2009). The concern with turnover relates to both sustaining passionate practitioners in the field as well as the impact of having consistent practitioners working with youth. In her ethnographic study of community-based programs across the United States, McLaughlin (2000) described her alarm when she observed a “leader motivated by passion and commitment” being replaced by “an individual who saw the position as a responsibility to manage rather than a mission to achieve,” decrying “the prominence of passion in effective youth organizations signals the need to identify and back that penchant and energy in the community” (p. 18).

What, then, encourages youth workers to stay in the field? Through an online survey, Hartje, Evans, Killian, and Brown (2008) have explored how self-reported competencies, characteristics, and job satisfaction predict youth workers’ (serving 10-18 year olds) intention to stay in the field (n=886). They found that although higher education was not a strong predictor of continuity, job-related training was. Other predictors of the intention to continue included a perceived belief in their work competence and connection to the life experiences of the youth they work with, on-the-job support from colleagues, and opportunities to engage in organization decision-making.

Efforts to develop a national profile of youth workers began in 2003, when the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) launched a national research initiative to examine the workplace conditions of frontline human service workers in sectors such as child welfare, childcare, juvenile justice, and youth services. Their initial report, framed by the direct impact that frontline workers have in the lives of “vulnerable children and families,” presented their overview of findings with a tone of urgency. From an institutional perspective, AECF found that service agencies — whether nonprofit, government, or private — struggled to hire and sustain “quality staff.” Whereas from the vantage point of frontline human service workers,
AECF illuminated heavy responsibilities combined with tenuous work conditions; these practitioners were consistently paid less than other occupations with comparable skills and demands, experienced scarce career development, advancement opportunities, and on-site mentorship, and finally, faced several rules and regulations that constrained creativity, individuality, and opportunities to build relationships that initially attracted people to these sectors.

While the AECF report offered a broad estimate of how many people work in youth services in the United States (2-4 million), the authors expressed their failure to identify coordinated, nationally representative information about youth workers, attributing part of this as a mistrust that they sensed from programs about sharing their data. The report deemed the youth services sector, among the examined social service occupations, as “the least documented, least understood, and probably most varied field” that was investigated within human services (p.12). Without any existing national data sets on youth workers, this report gleaned key findings about this sector from the National Assembly (1999) study on Salaries and Benefits in Youth Development Agencies, which sampled 1050 community-based organizations across the country. Based on their secondary analysis of youth worker data, AECF concluded that “the lack of good information about youth workers and what they do stands in sharp contrast to the documented benefits of youth programs” (p.12).

As AECF findings created waves across social services sectors, several state level afterschool intermediary organizations were already attempting to capture a more robust picture of their youth serving practitioners, both direct service staff and directors. Through survey development and dissemination, organizations such as the Indiana Youth Institute, Achieve Boston, the CUNY Workforce Development Initiative, San Francisco Beacons, and the Illinois After-school Partnership collected information such as demographics, work
satisfaction levels, reasons for entry and exit, and incentives to stay in the field. The analyses produced from these state surveys offered critical regional insights, however, the research questions, the age boundaries for youth workers, and sampling of both frontline staff and managerial staff in these surveys varied greatly, which made it difficult to piece these studies together into a broader story of this occupation.

Therefore, this patchwork quilt of state profiles coupled with the AECF report motivated national scale inquiry into youth workers. Two initiatives, one conducted by a national collaborative – the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition (led by the Forum for Youth Investment (FYI) (Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore, 2006) – and the other by a membership organization, National Afterschool Association (NAA, 2006) – sought to illuminate youth worker characteristics and trends through broad-reaching surveys and theoretically sampled focus groups. In the FYI Study, Yohalem at al. (2006) responded to AECF’s call, acknowledging that the field of youth work had been left “dangerously undefined,” which “has an impact on both the public recognition of the work and on its ability to advance as a profession” (p.4).

FYI surveyed 1,053 frontline youth workers and 195 organization directors, and held focus groups with approximately 70 youth workers in eight mid-size and large cities across the United States. Based on their sampling, 59 percent identified as African-American, 7 percent as Hispanic/Latino, and 27 percent as White. Approximately 70 percent identified as female and more than half of the respondents reported being under the age of 30. 50 percent of survey participants indicated that they worked full-time in youth work and 60 percent of youth workers had a minimum of a two-year college degree or more of education. FYI found that 80 percent of youth workers indicated that they were either “satisfied” or “very
satisfied” with their current employment, which greatly exceeds mean satisfaction across other types of employment.

In the NAA study, an intentionally similarly designed survey was disseminated to the organizations’ members. 4,346 afterschool practitioners responded to the survey from a wide range of member organizations such as YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, 21st Century Community Learning Centers (federally funded, school-based programs), as well as a wide variety of independent community and school-based programs serving children ages 5 to 18. Whereas NAA also did not make any claims about the representativeness of youth workers in their study, their sample included respondents from all fifty states as well as those from a range of urban, rural, and suburban locations. Interestingly, in the NAA sample, 42 percent of youth workers were over the age of 40, 60 percent identified as full time workers, 86 percent as female, and 73 percent as White/Caucasian, which already differs greatly from FYI findings. NAA survey findings conflicted with longstanding assumption that youth workers were typically people under thirty who are paid part time. (Baizerman, 1996). However, the discrepancy between the FYI and NAA demographic findings could be in part due to NAA’s membership, which consists of more nationally recognized and institutionalized school-age care organizations, as opposed to the FYI study that focused on the city-level nonprofits serving adolescents. Additionally, because of growing advocacy for early childhood caregivers, school-age care professionals may have had more state and district-level financial support than youth program practitioners.

These national studies revealed a stunning diversity, ranging from racial background to years spent in the field to the ages of youth workers. In light of these various forms of demographic diversity, NAA (2006) shared the challenges in determining any uniform
description of youth workers. However, they did argue that the data revealed a “tale of two workforces:”

[W]e have one set of workers who are mostly full-time, better educated, better compensated, and less prone to turnover (although many do leave for other fields after gaining several years’ experience); these workers see afterschool work as a profession. The other is a group of workers who are part-time, likely to be less educated, usually paid hourly wages at the low end of the reported scale, and, like part-time workers in general, lack benefits. These workers are more likely to change jobs frequently and, while they enjoy working with children, they think of afterschool as a great job, not as a profession. (p. 6)

While there is an intriguing stratification among respondents to this survey, the leap to interpreting youth workers’ understanding and meaning making of their work seems speculative rather than evident. For example, it is unclear if there are alternative stories if we break down the workforce based on race, gender, or by community context (e.g. urban, rural, suburban). Additionally, it is unclear whether part-time workers similarly view their work as a “vocation,” a “calling,” or what youth workers have described as “necessary” work (Baizerman, 1996; Starr, 2003). With these types of occupational attachments, practitioners might acknowledge that traditional financial remuneration or career ladders are ideal but not essential for their engagement with young people (Baizerman, 1996; Starr, 2003; Yohalem, Pittman, and Moore, 2006). Indeed, a regression analysis of a self-report survey (n=459) showed that youth workers believed in their ability to build positive relationships with youth in spite of scarce career advancement opportunities and ineffective management (Davidson, Evans, & Sicafuse, 2011). This may mean that youth workers can identify as a positive practitioner without great attachment to the traditional professional mobility narrative or organizational affiliation.

Although neither national study, independently nor combined, purports to provide a generalizable demographic portrait of youth workers, the findings are worthy of discussion and further inquiry. First, the FYI study, with its focus on urban youth work, captured an
almost inverse proportion of youth workers of color than the NAA survey. Yohalem et al. (2006) found that “African Americans are more represented in the youth work workforce than they are in the general population, sometimes significantly so. In Kansas City and Jacksonville, for example, the proportion of those surveyed who are African Americans is more than twice that found in the general population” (p. 14). This representativeness is intriguing, especially in a time in which most public school teachers are White (Ahmad & Boser, 2014), and recent research has revealed that non-Black teachers having significantly lower expectations for Black male students in comparison to Black teachers (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). The FYI survey also identified a much younger workforce than NAA, which, as I mentioned earlier, may speak to the unstable, under-valued, and under-resourced nature of youth-serving jobs in urban centers in contrast to suburban areas.

These studies also characterized and challenged presumptions about occupational backgrounds, investment, and persistence. First, more than half of youth workers had a four-year degree or higher, which counters generalizations about the education level and attractiveness of this work. Additionally, both survey findings manifested youth workers’ anomalously high levels of self-reported work satisfaction (in comparison to other occupations) and commitment to working with children and youth, regardless of full time or part time employment. Survey results confirmed and complemented ethnographic accounts of youth work (Hirsch, 2005; McLaughlin et al., 2004). However, in spite of this reported interest and investment, “extrinsic factors” on youth workers — such as pay, organizational dynamics, a dearth of growth opportunities, and a lack of recognition — have led to burnout, frequent “hopping” across jobs, as well as anticipated exits from field (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006, p. 7). One interpretation, based on focus group findings, is that youth workers tend to leave the field in their 30s when they are looking to support their families (Yohalem et al.,
which speaks to the financial and emotional toll of this work. Another interpretation could be supported by the work of Arthur (1994), who argued that work research has wrongly assumed that people’s sense of career identity is bounded to a single organization. In this concept of “boundaryless careers,” people find work validation outside of employers, frequently hop across jobs, and develop networks to sustain their interests. As suggested by Yohalem and Pittman (2006), this seemingly contradictory pair of findings — strong commitment and high turnover among youth workers — indicates that this purported workforce dilemma “may be less about finding quality workers and more about creating quality jobs” (p. 6). As I will discuss in the next section, bureaucratic demands, inflexible alignments with school-day academics, and deficit-oriented fundraising for youth programs may actually be deterring youth workers from staying in the field they believed they were part of in their work.

**Making Sense of the Work: Youth Workers’ Beliefs and Orientations**

“We are pressed to do the truly complex and responsive work around the edges and in spite of narrow restrictions” Irma Rodriguez, Executive Director of Queens Community House (Fusco, Lawrence, Matloff-Nieves, & Ramos, 2013, p. 10)

You gotta know the political understanding, we ain’t just out here because we wanna be workers. We out here because we have a cause, and we have values. We have a cause. We have a cause. Because it does not pay to be out here. It does not pay — all these years, can’t even buy a house, right? — Urban Youth Worker (Starr, 2003, p. 4)
color in 18 U.S. cities with a primary focus of understanding their “social and political theory making” about working with youth. According to their findings, “Youth workers work to support families, work to disrupt pathological accounts of what is going on in their communities, and simultaneously work to hold families responsible for taking care of children. They recognize the influence of racism and classism on “dysfunction” and the inadequacy of state programs to address these problems” (p. 16). However, because youth workers are oftentimes playing a support role for youth with difficult home lives or youth involved in gangs, Starr located a tension and tendency for youth workers to fall into “culture of poverty” narratives, such as describing low aspirations or broken families as part of the issues in young people’s lives. Travis Jr. (2010) further examined the attributions youth workers’ made about youth participants’ life circumstances the in-depth interviews and participant observation in four out-of-school time programs serving predominantly African-American and Latino communities in Los Angeles. Youth workers described youth as “inherently positive” and “talented,” but also felt they were “abandoned” by social supports from schools or other adults that influenced their sense of responsibility (p. 458). They took a systems-based approach to understanding the challenges that youth faced, referring to issues of toxic relationships or housing instability, but not centering the problem on the young people or their families. Unlike findings from Starr (2003), youth workers in the Travis (2010) study were careful not to critique the families and schools; they discussed “strained positive supports” instead of any “inherently negative supports” (p. 458).

Research on youth worker beliefs has considered the complex relationship between the climate of high-stakes testing and organizational dependency on funding streams requiring academic outcomes. This research considers how and in what ways organizational and individual ideologies compete and influence youth workers, their practices, and youth
participants. Fusco et al. (2013) have described the increasing organizational bureaucracy, top down demands about academic outcomes, and strict participation policies in programs as an “accordion effect,” in which youth workers are squeezed out of the relational work they intended to engage in with young people. For example, through an interpretive case study, Anderson and Larson (2009) explored the beliefs that a director of an Upward Bound program and his influence on program practice, policy, and the academic experiences of the young people being served. This research was conducted in response to an evaluation of Upward Bound (Myers & Schirm, 2000), a federally funded college preparatory and support programs for high school students typically affiliated with universities. The program demonstrated little to no change in academic outcomes for participating students and almost 40 percent of students dropped out during the first year of participation in the program. In this particular case study, Anderson & Larson (2009) found that this director’s beliefs about educational equity play out in ways that are detached from youth participants’ life experiences: through encouragement of work ethics aligned with “rugged individualism,” an emphasis on young people’s futures, and programming fully focused on test prep and academic enrichment. Through interviews with three young men of color in the program, the researchers illuminate that the director’s beliefs overlook a needed attentiveness to the social and emotional issues that they face in their lives, with their families, and in their neighborhoods. Additionally, the director’s assumption about the aspirations and academic orientations of students and their families conflicted with their perceptions. The students interviewed felt already highly motivated and supported by their families. However, they still faced conflicts and struggles that affected their academics that they wish the program addressed.

This Upward Bound director’s beliefs are perhaps not surprising given the pervasive
meritocratic beliefs and bootstrap narratives imbued in U.S media and schools. Baldridge (2014) further inquires into youth workers’ beliefs and attitudes toward Black youth in relation to “the current neoliberal educational market, which incentivizes after-school spaces to frame marginalized youth as socially, culturally, and intellectually deficient in order to compete successfully with charter schools for funding” (p. 411). In her ethnographic inquiry of a college preparatory and completion program serving over 200 youth, Baldridge (2014) examined youth workers’ interpretations of obstacles facing Black youth and their approaches to working with students. She found that these youth workers hold asset based views of youth and have an understanding of how neoliberal policies are influencing their work. Youth workers desire to have more time to focus on emotional and cultural work, even within a youth leadership component of the organization, but are beholden to the organization’s focus on academics and making certain “numbers” with their students. Stereotypical images and portrayals of Black youth posed by their board as well as from donors conflicted with youth workers’ beliefs. In this study, youth workers found ways to resist the pervasive narrative of youth of color through constant reframing in their practice through conversations with students and intentional hiring of new youth workers who believed in the positivity of young people and who did not think they were “saving” Black and Latino youth.

Boundary Work: Youth Workers’ Relational Constructions of Identity

“[Work] is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.” (Terkel, 1972, p. xi)

The idea of occupational identity formation relies on a critical underlying assumption in Western culture that there is both choice and agency in deciding one’s work, and that there is an individual pursuit of meaningful work (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). Few scholars have
undertaken the task of understanding how youth workers interpret the “daily meaning” of their work. Perhaps this makes sense given common perceptions of this work as a “stepping stone,” “babysitting,” a rung on a ladder rather than a place to land (see Borden et al., 2004; Fusco, 2012). Some of the most powerful examples of identity construction emerge from Amory Starr’s study. In this research, urban youth workers described their work as “necessary,” “a cause,” and felt a sense of urgency that “it’s going to have to be us [the youth workers]” who support young people (Starr, 2003; p.3). Youth workers in this study shared aphorisms from a variety of traditions, such as “all the children are our children,” “it takes a village to raise a child,” and “To whom much is given, much is expected.” Starr compared urban youth workers’ sense of community responsibility and collective commitment to youth to “race men” and “race women,” African-American community member engaged in social uplift in many city and towns across in the United States (Portwood, 2010). This reveals that youth workers’ occupational identity was deeply tied to community obligation.

A few researchers have considered how youth workers construct their identity in relation to other occupations. For example, Noam and Bernstein-Yamashiro (2013) examined teachers and youth workers’ construction of their identity within schools, with the premise that teachers should focus on academic content and cannot take on all roles for youth and schools need more adults who primarily focused on creating a climate of care and concern. While building trust and positive relationships is the work of both teachers and youth workers, they argued that:

We believe teachers should be mentors without becoming social workers. Their mentoring will most likely be supportive of success in schools, and learning and academic success. But we have seen that the teachers who talked to us about this issue are sometimes dealing with a far-reaching set of topics and tasks. While teachers can mentor, youth practitioners must do so. (p. 64)

Epstein (2013) studied how teachers and youth workers construct their roles when
collaborating with students. Through observations and narrative interviews, she discovered that youth workers and teachers participated in distinct ways within the parameters of the social action projects. These roles were ones that they assigned for themselves and each other through narrow scripts, in which teachers were depicted as “concerned with rigor, mandates, and discipline” and youth workers “as the appropriate figures to offer a fun, social, and inquiry-based curriculum promoting student voice” (p. 503). For example, youth workers discuss teachers’ burdens of top-down mandates and responsibilities, which they believe they can counter and support through their sense of flexibility and freedom to promote youth voice. Ultimately, Epstein questions these dichotomous constructions created by both teachers and youth workers, exploring the multifaceted roles of both sets of practitioners. Importantly, Epstein focuses on the “relational lens” of occupational work, through situating youth workers as part of an education ecosystem in which adults take on various roles.

**Discussion**

Examining occupational culture and identity through the analytical frame of “becoming,” “doing,” and “relating,” reveals themes and gaps in the research on youth work culture and identity (Antebay et al., 2016). It is important to note that these lenses provide a heuristic in which to organize research on occupations and professions, and so, there are ways in which I found overlap between these lenses when categorizing research on youth workers. For example, I noticed that many articles on youth workers asked a combination of research questions about “becoming” a youth worker, that is, the underlying beliefs and culture or the work, as well as how one is “doing” the work, which focuses more on roles,
practices, and identity formation. Below, I discuss each of these three themes and implications related to issues of power, status, and inequality in youth work.

**Becoming**

A “becoming” lens on occupations considers the predominant culture and beliefs within a field of work as well as processes of being inducted into the workplace. Based on the current research, youth work culture is often characterized by warm, supportive, and caring relationships between practitioners and young people. While youth workers’ approaches to their work with youth vary, the prevailing culture seems to be one in which youth’s interests and needs are prioritized over prescriptive, structured goals. This occupation is driven by a responsive culture, in which youth workers make intentional determinations about adult-youth power dynamics, younger youth workers take on more of a peer or sibling-like role with program participants, and older youth workers take on more of a parent-like role.

Youth worker culture calls for long-term, connected investment in the lives of young people, both in and outside of program hours, in which building positive relationships are central to the work. Practitioners’ understanding of quality work relates to developing positive relationships and youth’s sense of belonging and safety, which can conflict with organizational or policy logics around efficiency and academic outcomes. These practitioners are deeply connected to community traditions and culture, particularly to histories that have been marginalized in mainstream schooling. For the most part, youth workers have an asset-based orientation to the youth they work with, even at times in spite of organizational messaging that would frame youth as “at-risk,” “underachieving,” or “unmotivated.” However, because of this individualized attention to youth, sometimes youth workers feel like they are protecting youth from their families and neighborhood, slipping into a “culture
of poverty” narrative about their work. Relatedly, survey research demonstrates that youth workers are a far more diverse group than current classroom teachers, and more racially representative of the youth they serve (NAA, 2006; Yohalem et al., 2006). These family-like and community-driven orientations seems to expand beyond the confines of designated hours of their work, blurring the lines between youth workers’ personal and professional lives (McLaughlin, 2000).

There are several unanswered questions about youth worker culture as related to this idea of “becoming” a practitioner. First, most of the existing research that discusses youth workers is secondary to that which addresses youth experiences in programs. Many of the studies I identified focused on a particular organization, such as Upward Bound or the Boys and Girls Clubs, which may more accurately depict organizational culture rather than occupational culture. Thus, it is unclear if understandings of occupational beliefs and identity depend on organizational missions, personal experiences, or other factors. Does occupational culture stay consistent across contexts? Is it changing with the rise of more education and school-focused youth programs? Second, there is still minimal understanding of youth workers’ personal histories and journeys into youth work. What does occupational identity formation look like in this field? It is unclear how personal experiences, professional training, the populations being served, or the content of the program (e.g. arts, activism) shape a sense of motivation, affinity, or passion for the work. It is empirically evident that youth workers enjoy working with young people, but the research is slim on their motivations and own meaning making around persistence, moving across organizations, or exiting from the field. If this work is a stepping-stone to other types of jobs, where does youth work lead? What can we learn from youth workers who remain in the field through their 30s, an age group with less involvement in youth work? (NAA, 2006; Yohalem et al.,
Relatedly, we do not know how youth work fits into individuals’ broader interests or career-path. Is it primary or secondary to other occupational identities (e.g. artist, poet, soccer player, etc)? Are youth workers bound by organizations or by their personal convictions and missions (Arthur, 1994)? What are the implications of this type of work identity? As discussed in Anteby et al. (2016), previous research shows that occupational attachment, regardless of the compensation connected to it, is in fact a way of being controlled, and at times, exploited by organizations. Third, given existing research on care and emotional work (Daniels, 1970; Hochschild, 2003), when might this dimension of the work lead to burnout or workplace dilemmas? Additionally, while research touches on issues of hiring and on the job training practices (Baldridge, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 1994), there is no in depth inquiry into how hiring occurs or the experiences of new hires, both of which would offer windows in youth work culture.

**Doing**

The existing research sheds some light on occupational “doing,” that is, youth workers’ roles, practices, expertise, and identity formation. The research demonstrates that mentorship is the central role of youth work (Hirsch, 2005; Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro (2013) consider youth workers’ roles as multifaceted – that of educator, mentor, connector — though there is still much to be understood about the enactment and experiences of these role constructions. Researchers discussed both the explicit and tacit dimensions of practitioner knowledge. It has been described as “practice wisdom,” that which is gained through work experience or a “Ph.D. in the streets,” that which is gained through life experience (Baizerman et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 1994). The research discussed the dangers in assuming all-knowingness, “myth of supercompetence” (Anderson-Nathe, 2008), which may overlook youth workers’ need for professional guidance,
training, and support in their work. Dilemma-based research has revealed that experienced youth workers employ more ecological and complex reasoning in their decision-making, whereas novice youth workers tend to jump to more immediate, behavior-based solutions.

There are several ways in which to further research on youth workers’ roles, practices, and expertise, their “doing.” In their review of literature on youth development practice, Larson et al. (2015) confirmed my own conclusion here that there is scare research on youth workers in action, that is, their everyday experiences and enactment of youth work. How can we open the enigmatic black box on youth worker expertise? How might exploring forms of capital (e.g. cultural, identity, human, social, etc.), help in better understanding youth workers’ strategies for working with young people? Also, while current research mostly centers on youth workers’ roles as mentors, what do youth workers roles as “educators” and “connectors” look like in practice (Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013)? Finally, much of this research has situated youth workers within “fixed” practitioner roles. Alternatively, how can we interpret the fluidity of these roles and practices? For example, how do teachers who work in afterschool change their role and positioning in the out-of-school hours? Conversely, do youth workers adapt or change their practices when supporting classroom learning?

Relating

Lastly, a “relating” lens considers practitioners’ relationships with clients and managers as well as other practitioners who work with similar populations or in the same workplace. There is a general sentiment that youth workers’ feel misunderstood and disregarded within conversations about education and public service. Research has revealed that youth workers perceive themselves as distinct from classroom teachers, and, in many ways, more closely connected to youth’s neighborhood and community experiences rather than their school experiences. Youth workers have either framed their work in opposition to
schooling or as a complementary to the roles of teacher. Here, I see an opportunity to further explore both collaborations and fissures between teachers and youth workers. When it is so clear that teachers cannot take on all roles for young people, how do we understand or acknowledge youth workers in their communities? How do youth workers interpret relationship and partnership building with teachers?

Generally, youth workers report high levels of satisfaction with their work with youth, but they are also challenged by organizational policies and restrictions. Baldridge (2014) offers the most in-depth portrayal of ideological tensions between youth workers, organizational directors, and funders. Examining youth workers’ experiences with management and funders across several organizations could add to this line of inquiry. It would be interesting to understand how funders perceive the occupational role of youth workers. How do they choose to fund a youth program? How is it related to perceptions of competence, quality, or exceptional work with youth? Also, as youth workers frequently work within or in partnership with schools, it would be important to illuminate youth workers’ meaning making as related to their connections and collaborations with these institutions. Furthermore, it would be interesting to better understand youth workers’ distinct relationships with families, community leaders, and other youth programs, in relation to or in absence of school partnerships.

**Moving Forward**

This is a critical time to illuminate youth workers’ meaning making of their everyday practices in support of young people and their communities. Further inquiry about youth workers’ culture and identity can reveal dynamics of power, status, and inequality, experiences which can affect youth workers as well as the young people who seek their
support and guidance. Today’s youth workers face an increasingly complex web of controlling bodies and institutions — nonprofit management, foundations, municipal boards, school administrations — that influence their everyday practice. When No Child Left Behind initiated an era of test-based accountability in schools, charitable foundations echoed a similar sentiment by requiring nonprofits to demonstrate their efficacy through measurable academic outcomes (Halpern 2000; Hoole, 2005). As discussed in this paper, several youth-serving nonprofits have moved from developmental and relational logics to academic and outcomes-driven rationales for their work, and nonprofits’ missions and activities have changed in response to competing institutional pressures (Dolnicar, Irving, & Lazarevski, 2008, Fusco, 2012; Jager & Beyes, 2009). Recent professionalization efforts similarly expose how youth workers’ culture and identities have been contested and subject to external pressures. In light of these phenomena, it is important to further research that illuminates youth workers’ perspectives on what is gained and lost in regards to their practice and sense of work identity. As policymakers, advocacy groups, and funders continue to debate the merits of extending the school day and the purpose of community-based youth programs, understanding these practitioners’ current culture and identity seems especially urgent — for the youth they work with and the future of this occupation.
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