

This chapter reviews key issues in professional development in the youth development field, describing important work done over the past two decades and lessons learned from major philanthropic investments in capacity building both nationally and locally.

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Professional development in the youth development field: Issues, trends, opportunities, and challenges

Jane Quinn

MY ENTRY INTO THE YOUTH WORK FIELD over three decades ago was launched by a graduate school course on the psychopathology of adolescence. In fact, I had wanted to deepen my understanding of *normal* adolescent development, but no such course was offered.

In many ways, this snapshot from my career encapsulates the history of youth work. It is a field that has moved from a sole focus on the treatment of youth problems to their prevention, and more recently, the promotion of normal, healthy development. Concurrent with this trend to a more comprehensive approach to youth services (one that serves a continuum from promotion to prevention to short- and long-term treatment) has been the growth of professional development strategies that prepare and support workers in the “shallow end” of the services continuum—that is, in their role as youth development specialists.

This chapter provides an overview of the main issues involved in professional development in the youth development field today and examines accomplishments and challenges from a national perspective, while also discussing local practice that exemplifies many of the principles of best practice in youth development.

A brief history

Professional development efforts have existed for several decades in the youth development field, especially among national youth organizations that have paid significant attention to training for youth work executives and to program support, such as handbooks and short training courses, for volunteers.

Early efforts had limited scope

For example, when I became the national program director at Girls Clubs of America (now Girls Incorporated) in 1981, I learned that this organization conducted a well-established weeklong management seminar for new club executives each year. Similarly, I learned that several other youth-serving agencies provided support for new and more seasoned leaders, and organizations such as the Scouts, Camp Fire, and 4-H had a long tradition of providing guidance and support to their volunteer troop and group leaders.

As worthy as these early efforts were, several levels of these organizations were all but ignored in the professional development offerings, and much of the guidance and support for volunteer leaders had a limited focus. For example, these programs suggested an array of possible activities for use in group meetings but offered little or no guidance on developmental stages of youth, group work techniques, or how to deal with behavioral issues.

A landmark initiative

Professional development among national youth organizations took a giant leap forward in the mid-1970s when the Lilly Endowment made a multiyear grant to support the National Youthworker Edu-

cation Project. Under the leadership of professor Gisela Konopka at the University of Minnesota, this initiative linked theory to practice in a meaningful way by offering a rigorous and extended course of study to carefully selected emerging leaders in the youth work field. The ten-day course included classes on such varied topics as “adolescenthood” (youth development), cultural diversity, adolescent sexuality, special challenges of youth in the juvenile justice system, working with youth in crisis situations, and program planning. A follow-up evaluation by researcher Judith Erickson indicated that the project was successful on several fronts, particularly in creating a cohort of youth work leaders in several national organizations who stayed in the field and made significant contributions to their respective (and other) organizations.¹ Despite this positive evaluation, professional development in youth organizations garnered precious little foundation interest or support for at least a decade, until the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund (now named the Wallace Foundation) made a multiyear investment of \$55 million at both national and local levels.

Recent accomplishments

Over the past ten to fifteen years, as the field of youth development has matured and come into its own, professional development programs have proliferated, along with an increased consensus about the competencies needed for effective youth work practice. Other chapters in this volume will explore the competency issues in depth, and will describe specific national and local delivery systems. My purpose here is to offer a brief overview of several key accomplishments and to outline a set of findings on principles of best practice that have emerged from these initiatives.

The \$55-million-dollar question

Early in my nine-year tenure as national program director at Girls Clubs of America, I observed that most of our professional development work focused on local club directors. Although I understood

the rationale for this approach, I grew increasingly worried about the obvious gaps in these professional development offerings, particularly at the direct service and program development levels. Whenever I raised this need with potential funders, I would find the conversation shifting quickly to “And what are your other priorities?” It was clear to me that the professional development of program staff, including front-line workers, was simply too basic, too bedrock, too unsexy to generate philanthropic interest. Or so I thought, until I met Donna Dunlop, who served as program director of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund from 1987 to 1992. In what might be best characterized as a wide-ranging discussion (by now I knew to come into such meetings with my list of categorical program priorities), Donna listened carefully and then asked me a question that no foundation staffer had ever posed: “What is the single greatest need your organization is facing right now?” Without hesitation, I replied that we needed to create an ongoing professional development system for the program staff at our local clubs. Instead of changing the subject as I expected her to do, Donna responded that she had heard similar thoughts from other youth organization executives and that she was open to pursuing the idea. Under her leadership (and later, mine and Pam Stevens’), the Wallace fund invested \$55 million in professional development at youth organizations over a ten-year period. Three strategies drove these investments: (1) a national strategy, through which twenty-one national youth organizations² received grants to build their professional development infrastructure and systems and to create new approaches targeted at multiple levels, including direct service workers, program directors, and board members; (2) a local strategy through which fourteen local intermediary organizations³ provided professional development to youth workers in their areas, revolving around the Advancing Youth Development youth work training curriculum⁴ and coordinated by the National Training Institute of the Academy for Educational Development (see Chapter Four for additional information); and (3) a field-building strategy through which cross-cutting studies (for example, on youth worker hiring and

compensation patterns), concept papers, and clearinghouses resulted.⁵

In 1995, the Wallace fund commissioned an external analysis of these investments, conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children.⁶ The following year, the fund itself published a monograph based on this and its own assessment of its investments.⁷ This report concluded that there had been many positive outcomes:

These grants strengthened individual youth-serving organizations by allowing them to concentrate resources on the professional development of their workers; they also strengthened the field of youth work by providing intermediary organizations [the] funding necessary to begin developing a theoretical framework to support youth work as a distinct profession. This commitment has been pivotal to the advancement of the field and has made the fund a leader in this effort.⁸

An emerging consensus

Concurrent with this expansion of national and citywide professional development initiatives, a consensus is emerging in our field on several critical issues, including that we need basic definitions of youth development, an underlying research base, and agreement on essential competencies for youth work practice. For example, Karen Pittman and Michele Cahill made important conceptual contributions through a set of papers and monographs that outlined basic definitions in the field.⁹ The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development drew on this work and added substantially to it by commissioning twelve papers on various aspects of youth work practice, convening two national meetings on key youth work topics (evaluation and professional development), and publishing and widely disseminating a book-length report on American youth organizations.¹⁰ Subsequently, the National Research Council established a definitive research base for the youth development field.¹¹ During these fifteen years of progress, another contribution came from the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York, which convened experienced youth workers over a multiyear period to define the core competencies of effective youth work practice. The resulting document¹² has influenced the youth development field in

many ways both in New York City and nationally—for example, informing the content of the Advancing Youth Development curriculum and the National Collaboration for Youth’s youth workers competency project (described in Chapter Two of this volume). The sidebar shown here outlines these competencies.

Working together with experienced youth work staff from nine of New York City’s leading youth development organizations, the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York created a publication entitled *Core Competencies for Youth Work*. This consensus document outlines the following knowledge and skills as essential to effective youth work practice:

Program Development

- Knowledge of youth development framework
- Knowledge of agency mission
- Knowledge of organizational policies and procedures in regard to youth
- Knowledge of adolescent developmental stages
- Ability to foster youth empowerment

Communication

- Ability to develop and maintain a relationship of trust with young people
- Ability to convey information so it is received in the manner intended
- Ability to communicate effectively (including ability to convey and interpret information in dominant language and in language of the community)

Program Implementation

- Knowledge of group work
- Ability to facilitate groups
- Knowledge of planning activities
- Ability to plan and implement activities
- Ability to motivate and engage young people
- Ability to recognize and respond to youth needs and interests

Advocacy-Networking

- Knowledge of youth rights (for all youth, regardless of legal status)
- Ability to network with a variety of external systems

- Knowledge of school and career options
- Knowledge of social context of youth

Assessment

- Ability to reflect on one's practice and performance
- Ability to organize and manage workload

Community and Family Engagement

- Ability to understand and respect culture of youth and families
- Knowledge of community, especially in regard to youth and family
- Knowledge of family structures

Intervention

- Ability to recognize need for intervention
 - Ability to deal with conflicts
 - Knowledge of intervention strategies
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The state of our art: Lessons learned and principles of best practice

A clear set of lessons and principles emerges from these multiple efforts of the past fifteen years:

- Professional development involves more than training.
- The cost of professional development is legitimate, necessary, and essential to doing business.
- An effective system of professional development encompasses multiple levels, including administration and program levels; board members and staff members; paid and unpaid workers (volunteers).
- An effective system of professional development builds on the emerging consensus on essential knowledge and core competencies of youth work practice

Professional development involves more than training

Although training is certainly an essential component of it, an effective system of professional development pays attention to a much

broader set of issues, including recruitment, hiring, orientation, supervision, coaching, and assessment—in addition to pre- and in-service training. Our experience at the Children's Aid Society in New York City can serve to illustrate this point. We have made significant progress over the past several years in effecting such a system through several concrete steps:

- Hiring a director of human resources who has a graduate degree and considerable experience in the human resource field
- Offering regularly scheduled orientations that introduce new staff to the history, mission, and culture of our organization (supplemented by departmental orientations)
- Offering daylong training workshops for all direct service workers in our afterschool programs on a biannual basis (and paying part-time staff for their participation in these events)
- Centralizing our employee recruitment functions through Internet postings and job banks
- Instituting an agency-wide performance management system
- Offering on-site observation and coaching directed toward program improvement

This system is far from perfect and is never complete but the elements currently in place represent solid cornerstones of deliberate agency-wide efforts and investment—which leads to the next point.

The cost of professional development is legitimate and necessary

In my view, our field has come a long way in recognizing the necessity and value of investing in professional development. Fortunately, this recognition on the part of practitioners is increasingly supported by funders. For example, in our own practice in New York City, the After-School Corporation (TASC; an intermediary organization founded and funded by philanthropist George Soros) encourages its grantees to include a line item for professional development in their proposals and annually publishes a catalogue of professional development trainings that

TASC sites can purchase in order to strengthen their programs. (See also issue 94 of *New Directions for Youth Development*, Gil G. Noam and Beth M. Miller, eds.)

Effective professional development occurs at multiple levels

It is becoming the rule, rather than the exception, that youth development organizations offer a variety of professional development opportunities geared to the multiple levels of their work—development of board leadership around policy setting and fundraising, development of staff leadership around management and administration, and development of program staff around program planning, delivery, assessment, and continuous improvement. Many organizations take account of the fact that their program staff consist of two very important groups: permanent, full-time staff (such as program directors), and part-time, often seasonal, group leaders who constitute some or all of their direct service staff. Many have experimented with innovative approaches to developing part-time staff, including online courses and train-the-trainer courses that are often combined with content-specific program curricula and other user-friendly materials.

Effective professional development builds on the emerging consensus on knowledge and core competencies

Although it is probably true that some in the youth work field continue to “reinvent the wheel” because of their isolation from the growing knowledge bases and networks, more and more organizations are following the emerging consensus on what youth workers need to know and be able to do. Clear statements from such groups as the National Research Council, Forum for Youth Investment, Chapin Hall Center for Children, Academy for Educational Development, National Collaboration for Youth, and Youth Development Institute represent both a consensus and a set of guidelines for busy practitioners. Building on models like 4-H and the National Youth Worker Education Project, our field is beginning to embrace models of professional development that link institutions of higher education to youth work practice (see Chapter Six in this volume).

The road ahead

The road ahead surely holds both bumps and smooth spots, challenges and opportunities. Key among the challenges are ongoing issues of high staff turnover (particularly at the direct service level) and funding uncertainties brought about by budget deficits at the state and federal levels and fluctuations in the stock market and broader economy. These macroeconomic issues, of course, affect youth development organizations in all areas, not just professional development. In my view, the opportunities outweigh the challenges, however daunting they may appear at the moment. Consider how far we have come in just fifteen short years. Remember, for example, that youth development language has found its way into important federal and state legislation. Recall too that a substantial portion of the \$1 billion in 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds is designated for training and technical assistance. And do not forget that the Younger Americans Act, if passed, will help to build additional professional development infrastructure in the youth development field.¹³ Finally, the introduction of the Federal Youth Coordination Act in June 2004 signals that the importance of professional development will only increase. This legislation, if eventually signed into law, will seek to bring greater accountability for outcomes in the youth development field. Professional development will play a key role in helping federally funded programs meet these accountability standards.

To make a reality check, I contacted my graduate school to see if it had caught up with the times. Had the youth development messages permeated the walls of academia? The answer was a resounding *yes*—three of six separate courses on working with adolescents were now focused on promotion of healthy adolescent development. Even a pessimist would have to admit that we have come a long way and that the landscape ahead is looking fairly sunny.

Notes

1. Erickson, J. B. (1986). *A follow-up study of the national youthworker education project, 1975–1980*. St. Paul: Center for Youth Development and Research, University of Minnesota.

2. These groups included the Academy for Educational Development (Center for Youth Development and Policy Research/National Training Institute for Community Youth Work), Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, Boy Scouts of America, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Camp Fire Boys and Girls, Center for Population Options (now Advocates for Youth), Child Welfare League of America, Congress of National Black Churches, Girl Scouts of the USA, Girls Incorporated, Jewish Community Centers of North America, Junior Achievement, Inc., Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, National 4-H Council, the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services (now National Network for Youth), Search Institute, United Neighborhood Houses, WAVE, Inc., YMCA of the USA, and YWCA of the USA.

3. These groups included a wide variety of local intermediaries, such as YouthNet in Kansas City (Missouri), the Pinellas County (Florida) Juvenile Welfare Board, the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York, and Community Network for Youth Development in San Francisco. See Chapters Four and Five for additional information about these organizations and their work funded under this initiative.

4. Center for Youth Development and Policy Research/National Training Institute for Community Youth Work. (1996). *Advancing youth development: A curriculum for training youth workers*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development.

5. One of several examples of this funding was the establishment of a Youth Development Information System, a national clearinghouse created by the National Collaboration for Youth (National Assembly). This organization also received a grant to conduct a youth worker compensation study.

6. Ogletree, R., Garg, S., Robb, S., & Brown, P. (1995). *Strategic analysis of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund's grantmaking in support of the recruitment and development of youth workers*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

7. DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. (1996). *Strengthening the youth work profession: An analysis of and lessons learned from grantmaking by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund*. New York: DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

8. DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, p. 12.

9. Pittman, K. J., & Cahill, M. (1991). *A new vision: Promoting youth development*. Washington, DC: Academy for Education Development.

10. Carnegie Corporation of New York. (1992). *A matter of time: Risk and opportunity in the nonschool hours*. New York: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.

11. Eccles, J., & Appleton Gootman, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Research Council, 2002.

12. Pitts, L. (n.d.). *Core competencies for youth work*. New York: Networks for Youth Development, Youth Development Institute, Fund for the City of New York.

13. The Younger Americans Act was introduced as proposed federal legislation in 2001. Known as H.R. 17 in the House of Representatives, the bill has seventy-nine cosponsors. Its stated purpose is "to provide assistance to mobilize and support United States communities in carrying out youth

development programs that assure that all youth have access to programs and services that build the competencies and character development needed to fully prepare the youth to become adults and effective citizens.” On the Senate side, the bill is called S. 1005 and has nine cosponsors.

JANE QUINN *is assistant executive director of the Children’s Aid Society in New York City.*