
I KNOW WHAT I BELIEVE: USING THEORY TO PREPARE YOUTH WORKERS

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In May of 2019, the sixth cohort of Youth Development (YDEV) undergraduate majors graduated from Rhode Island College (RIC). Steeped in 120+ credits of coursework in education, social work, and non-profit studies, plus a content-area concentration and a 180-hour internship, these nineteen graduates stood before family and friends to celebrate the culmination of their transition from Students-of-Youth-Development to Professional-Youth-Workers. Their stories speak to their persistence and success, and they are also the stories of our program. Thomas, a twenty-something Black student, was heading to a full-time job as a residential counselor for formerly incarcerated youth. Jessie, a Latina Comicon fan had just returned from her study abroad semester in Japan with hopes of starting a language school in her community. Lisa, a white woman in her late twenties working as a site manager at a daycare center, took courses part-time for nine years to earn her degree. Our students come to Youth Development with diverse stories, motivations, and beliefs. They are also demographically diverse -- 29% are students of color, 25% LGBTQI+, and 29% are the first in their family to go to college. (We, as faculty and staff who identify as predominantly white and privileged, are less so.) These students bring life the intentional architecture of our program — including a theoretically-informed curriculum and commitment to community — that drives everything we do to prepare undergraduates to be competent, confident professionals in the field of youth development.

When it was initially conceived in 2011, the Youth Development Program at RIC was often characterized as an alternative pathway for undergraduates unable to surmount the barriers of high standardized testing cut off scores for admission to teacher education programs. While we did and still do welcome students who are exiting traditional preservice teacher programs (as well as other majors), we learned that YDEV is not merely a retention program. We attract many undergraduates with strong academic records who want to work with youth outside and sometimes alongside school structures. Our theoretically-grounded curriculum and approach grow from our belief that youth are thoughtful, creative people who deserve opportunities to practice leadership with supportive, professional adults by their side. Through a commitment to social justice, a deliberate practice of care, and a community-approach to learning, we prepare quality youth workers who are ready to, as our mission statement proclaims, 'lead with youth to make a better world.'

Like Starr and Gannett (2016), we understand the dangers and allures of credentialing youth workers. Thus we have worked hard to design a program that enhances professionalism without reducing youth work to a toolbox of games, strategies, and activities. Instead, we have developed an undergraduate degree that is processual -- carefully braiding theory with experiential practice. We start by helping students map different youth development ideologies and allow them to observe, practice, and directly

engage with these ideologies across varied contexts. In this work, students come to know themselves and by the end of the program, students come away able to situate their own beliefs about youth work in the context of both established theories and practice in the field. They know who they are as youth workers, and they can articulate their values and theories of change. In this paper, we illustrate how we use a theoretical framework across multiple courses to help students understand themselves in relation to youth and youth work contexts. We first introduce the framework and then share three "storied moments" that represent how students' use of the frame develops over time, from playful classroom contexts to community youth work settings. Ultimately, we show how this approach produces strong youth work advocates and leaders for our field.

OUR FRAMEWORK: YOUTH WORK IDEOLOGIES

What does it mean to prepare youth workers in a theoretically-informed way? Our approach begins with introducing, modeling, and critiquing four major ideological camps within the Youth Development field. Midway through their introductory course in youth development, our students take a personalized quiz that we call the "Ideology Inventory," which is based upon Schiro's (2012) Curriculum Inventory. This quiz introduces students to formal language and field-based examples of four central philosophies or ideologies of youth development: (1) Risk, Resilience, and Prevention, (2) Positive, (3) Civic, and (4) Social Justice. The ideology inventory teases out four distinct ways youth work programs build learning environments and offers students a framework for reading and analyzing theoretical texts, field experiences, and their own beliefs. Drawing on Ginwright and Cammarota (2002), McDaniel (2017), Roholt, Baizerman & Hildreth (2013), and Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber (2003), we define the four ideologies as follows:

RISK, RESILIENCE AND PREVENTION

Risk, Resilience, and Prevention focuses on identifying problems with children and adolescents and intervening with education. In this model of youth development, adults are responsible for locating problems, recognizing deficits, and leading young people to understand the importance of preventing risky behavior (Pittman, et al., 2003). This model aims to influence the development of skills and prosocial, protective behaviors for *individual* young people. In preventing negative behaviors like violence, sexual promiscuity, or drug use, youth work programs can influence positive community outcomes. Historically, Risk, Resilience and Prevention has been the primary ideology of many youth development programs and research (Barcelona & Quinn, 2011), and is still the foundation of many programs today. For some of our students, this model is attractive and familiar as it represents dominant discourses about young people needing protection and intervention by adults (Lesko, 2001).

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Positive Youth Development is a child-centered and asset-based approach to youth development (Pittman, et al., 2003), with adults acting as facilitators and coaches. Practitioners of this ideology believe that youth work programs should help children and adolescents further develop their strengths and interests (Pittman, et al., 2003). In this frame, young people are situated as individuals with emotional, physical, academic, moral, and social potential (Walker et. al, 2011). This approach resonates with many of our students because of the ways it disrupts dominant school discourses that position young people as part of the problem, rather than part of a solution.

CIVIC YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Civic Youth Development supports youth as they learn to become democratic citizens and encourages them to explore social issues that they find meaningful. Scholars and practitioners of this framework believe that young people should be empowered to work together to engage their communities in active service work (Roholt, et al., 2013). Furthermore, civic youth workers have a dual commitment to supporting youth development and influencing communities positively. Adults in this framework aim to support young people as they engage in dialogue, conversation, and action within existing democratic structures (Roholt, et al., 2013). Our students come to YDEV with a desire to make a positive impact, and this focused, action-oriented approach helps them feel like they can make a difference.

SOCIAL JUSTICE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) (Ginwright & Cammarota 2002) critiques social problems that impact youth and communities, and facilitates opportunities for young people to “contest, challenge, respond to, and negotiate the use and misuse of power in their lives” (Ginwright & James, 2002, p. 35). SJYD organizations provide spaces for young people and adults to exercise power within existing structures, and to work to disrupt and transform oppressive systems. Through investigating social issues from an intersectional perspective, young people, alongside adults, work to transform themselves and society by developing critical consciousness and engaging in social action. For many of our students this ideology offers a disciplinary framework around power, privilege, and oppression that resonates with their lived experiences and inspires avenues for collective liberation.

These ideologies are not pure or fixed — a philosophy can grow, change, and develop over time — and many youth development organizations reflect multiple ideologies across distinct programs or initiatives. While YDEV at RIC is rooted in a Social Justice Youth Development ideology, it is not our goal to convert students into this belief system. We offer these frameworks to make room for students to find their place — and sometimes change their place — in the field of youth work. We have learned that it is through the explicit teaching and modeling of ideology that our students, too, become reflective practitioners. This framework is what distinguishes our approach to preparing youth workers.

THEORY TO PRACTICE: STORIED MOMENTS

Storytelling and narrative inquiry are essential tools here--in this article, in our collaborative practice, and our pedagogical approach--because they resist the disembodied discourse of “outcomes-based” education. The process of storytelling is a humanizing, reflective practice that is applicable to both research and teaching. With greater potential than merely anecdotal “success stories” (Arnold & Cater, 2011), reflective narrative inquiry provides opportunities to understand and enhance teaching and administrative practice (Barone, 2010; Craig, 2018; Lyons, 2010).

Our team — three faculty, one field coordinator, and one graduate assistant— meets weekly for two hours. By sharing teaching stories, as we do in our weekly meetings and as we are doing now in this paper, we highlight the importance of teachers "attending regularly to the undergoings and doings of their classrooms, creating room to dwell... [and] apprehending and articulating the significances of doing so" (Latta & Kim 2010: 144). Storytelling is a critical piece of this collaborative work. We often recount narratives, dilemmas, and critical questions from our teaching and advising practices, a process that allows us to consistently align mission, vision, and ideology with curriculum, assessment, and student success. In this paper, we purposefully use the same kinds of stories to illustrate the graduated, spiraling curriculum (Bruner, 1977) that provides a framework for students to observe, analyze and reflect upon

different youth development contexts and youth worker roles. In the following sections we explore three-storied moments in the YDEV at RIC program that demonstrate our pedagogical, theoretical and practice-based approach to youth development.

MOMENT ONE: PLAYING AT PURPOSE AND VALUE

In the *Introduction to Youth Development* course, students observe and learn to analyze different youth development settings, contexts, and situations. This approach begins in the classroom, where we analyze the purpose and values underlying games and play (Flannagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). I (Corinne) invite students to play a version of musical chairs, called *Where the Wind Blows*. In the debrief, I ask students to think about the purpose and values of this activity. I ask, "why might a facilitator use this game?" Students most often say it would help a group learn each other's names or help participants find common connections with others. We then talk about embedded values in the game, including competition and exclusion. I challenge student groups to play with and tweak the purpose and/or values of this game. For instance, what rule changes might produce a value of *cooperation* instead of competition? This kind of classroom playwork helps prepare for field trips where we use the same analytical elements of looking for "purpose" and "value" to help students recognize characteristics of youth work ideologies in practice.

Each year we visit a rotating group of organizations that vary in size, age-group, youth work modality, and ideology. We visit museums, youth activist spaces, athletic programs, and more. As faculty, we structure the field visits to provide students opportunities to talk with youth workers about their experiences, observe and engage with youth in the space, and reflect upon their observations. One semester we visited a wrestling and mentoring program where we observed middle school students in action. Demetri, a BIPOC alumnus of our program who is now a professional coach at this organization, engaged the YDEV students directly. We watched as young people then worked through some fairly violent looking moves, flipping each other to the ground and pinning one another in their wrestling practice.

In the debrief, one of my students asked Demetri, "Do youth ever get hurt?" He paused. "Not often -- they have practiced moves with different people, and they have learned to watch body language to take care not to push or injure the other person. They have also learned to communicate with one another so that they speak up if something doesn't feel right." Lyndsie, an athletic white student, said, "This is amazing. I had no idea that a sports program could be like this."

"Like what?" another student asked.

"The kids are playing games -- they are *leading* games, and they are laughing and learning. Everyone knows each other's names. And I saw one coach pull a kid aside and ask how his grandmother was feeling. I was a competitive basketball player in high school. Our practices didn't look like this at all. I remember being yelled at by my coaches, and we did a lot of challenging and repetitive drills, over and over until we 'got it right.' I thought sports were for people who could grit through the pain, and come out on top. This wrestling program is so different."

In this first introductory class, students were still learning to apply analytical tools to their observations. I prompted the students to name what they were seeing. "So Lyndsie says this is

a different kind of athletic space than she expected. Can we think together about the purpose and values in this space?" The students talked about possible purposes, including learning wrestling moves and skills. They also talked about the values of relationships, community, and care. In reflecting upon their observations of the wrestling program and considering their own experiences, students recognized at least two distinct ways of constructing an athletics program. In one frame, participants develop athletic skills by engaging in rigorous and targeted training drills. For the most part, coaches direct and maintain power. In another frame, athletes develop a range of social, emotional, and physical skills through engaging in games and practice. Power is distributed, with coaches modeling and teaching the sport while also facilitating contexts where peers practice and coach each other. We talked about the ideologies inherent in each of these models and how athletics can be framed differently and sometimes in complicated ways.

The fieldwork observations and purposeful play activities in the introductory class help students recognize that there are multiple ways to construct learning spaces for youth. Students begin developing a language to discuss differences between spaces. In more advanced courses, students continue to develop tools and language to describe their own belief systems and ideologies in relation to other students and their possible internship sites.

MOMENT TWO: NAMING IDEOLOGICAL GAPS AND FIT

During their final year in the program, our students engage in a 180-hour internship experience that spans two semesters in a nonprofit organization serving young people ages 2-23. Currently, we have over 35 internship placements for students to consider, and we are supportive of alternative placements that students suggest, including work study or even their own paid work environments. Our processual approach to field placements models an authentic job search and puts students in the driver's seat of their own internship experience. This process begins when students are first admitted to the program. In the one-hour intake interview, a prospective student talks with a program advisor about their prior experiences in youth work and what interests and passions they would bring to an internship or future job. Then, in their final year, each student works with our Field Coordinator to research, apply for, interview, and accept an internship placement. Students are supported in and out of the classroom setting by the Field Coordinator and team members.

As the Field Coordinator, I (Rachael) work with students to find internship placements that are an ideological "fit" for them by helping them hone professional materials, connect with potential internship sites, and navigate challenges they face. This experience is different for each student. For example, we might role play an interview with students who need more help with communication strategies. For students who have a wide range of interests, I might help them prioritize immediate and long-term goals. This approach to internships contrasts with more traditional field placements where the Field Coordinator either "assigns" an internship or students choose for themselves from a given list. Our collaborative process ensures that students have agency. Aria's story below illustrates one among many ways that our students explore and hone their youth development values and ideologies through their internships.

Aria is a petite Black woman born in Liberia who migrated to the United States as a teenager. Her prior work with young people was at the church in her community. When Aria met with me to discuss her internship experience, she shared her desire to empower young women. Together, we researched nonprofit youth development organizations. At the top of her list was an opportunity to be an assistant

in an all girls' after school program at an independent school where most young people identified as white and female. This placement, one we would characterize as a Positive Youth Development space, seemed like a promising fit. Aria submitted her resume, was invited to interview, and was soon hired at the organization.

Over the Fall semester, as Aria deepened her knowledge of youth development ideologies and her own beliefs through coursework and experience, she became increasingly dissatisfied with her internship placement. Using the frames of Positive Youth Development and Social Justice Youth Development, Aria had the language to communicate why her internship wasn't a good fit. She was clear that she wanted to be in a Social Justice Youth Development space that supported young activists of color. The team assured her that the YDEV program views switching placements as an opportunity and not a failure. Aria met with me again to discuss new options and create a strategy to responsibly exit her first placement. By the Spring semester, Aria had accepted a new internship at an organization where young people of color organize to challenge inequitable education policies. Working in the community towards a social justice agenda featuring campaigns such as a 'Student Bill of Rights' and 'Counselors Not Cops,' Aria found her connection to youth work.

For all of our students, the YDEV internship experience is an opportunity to connect theory to practice. We view the internship as a total process — from scouting possible sites, to interviewing and reflecting on fieldwork in courses. Each element of the internship experience offers valuable lessons for self-reflection, skill-building, and ideological engagement. When Aria transitioned from one internship site to another, she practiced self-advocacy, navigating challenging conversations with supervisors, and articulating her vision and ideology of youth work. Aria's story illustrates how the internship placement process supports students in better understanding themselves as youth workers and their connections to the field.

MOMENT THREE: CONNECTING THEORY TO 'DILEMMAS OF PRACTICE'

In the second semester of fieldwork, YDEV majors enroll in an internship seminar designed to provide real-time support and critical reflection on their field experiences and help them make theory-to-practice connections. For one hour of the class each week, students engage in a roundtable discussion that we call "Play a Card." This approach was adapted from a social work field supervision format by former graduate assistant, Eva Dayon. At the beginning of the semester, each student receives a deck of cards, with each card having a specific prompt. Prompts include topics like "Dilemma of Practice," "Mentorship," "Success," and "Ideology: Goodness of fit." At the beginning of the hour, each student selects a card from their deck. The expectation is that some students will share a story or issue arising from the card they played, and members of the group will ask questions and brainstorm with the presenting student about the issue. Instructors explicitly sit within the discussion circle as a member of the community, and not as the facilitator or moderator. The Play a Card discussions invite students to think with each other about authentic dilemmas of practice (Larson & Walker 2010). Because students share ongoing dilemmas, they often have the opportunity to return to the field to "try out" a new strategy or practice. Each week, at least four of the ten students Play a Card.

One week Lisa, a white student with an easy smile, shared a dilemma about the monthly staff meetings that she facilitates in her role as a daycare center director. Lisa explained that despite her efforts to entice staff to attend the optional monthly team meetings by providing food, attendance had been stubbornly low. The meeting agenda — prescribed by the center's corporate office — focused on safety procedures and organizational policies. Lisa would read pages from the organization's manual about identifying children who might be victims of abuse, and the protocols for reporting the abuse to the site leader and government authorities. She would then move to read more general organizational policies,

like regulations around staff hours, attendance, and overtime. Lisa said meetings usually lasted an hour to an hour and a half, at the end of which she was losing her voice. She lamented that while she had hoped the staff meetings would foster a sense of community and shared purpose, they did not.

Students began asking her questions about the format of the meeting, the role of the staff, and the rigidity of the content, all of which she explained followed the model used by the previous site leader. Students noticed how the corporate policies (and Lisa's hoarse voice) took up all the space in the room and that there seemed to be no space for staff to contribute. The group noticed that the values of the meeting focused on behaviors and procedures to protect children. Still, there was little discussion about child development or learning. Through the Play a Card discussion, Lisa began realizing that the daycare's ideological framework was aligned with Risk, Resilience and Prevention because it was about introducing "protective" protocols, and instilling fear and consequences for not complying with protocols. In some ways, this framework aligned with her own values. But in other ways, she preferred to think about her staff (and the young people at the center) as individuals with agency who could participate in *thinking critically* about safety and policy beyond mere compliance. She identified the strengths that her staff bring to the work of supporting children's learning and growth (a Positive Youth Development orientation) and wanted to highlight these assets in their meetings. Lisa and the group brainstormed ways to make spaces for her staff to more meaningfully participate in the meetings. What if Lisa asked staff members to work in groups to discuss policies that had to be addressed? What if she solicited staff members to share out classroom-based dilemmas and strategies with the group as we do in the 'Play a Card' class discussions? Though nervous about breaking protocol, Lisa agreed to try something new at her next staff meeting.

A few weeks later, Lisa reported back. Because her staff had opportunities to speak and inform the agenda, she felt a bit uncomfortable that she had less control over the meeting. However, she also noticed that her colleagues seemed more engaged and invested in the meeting, and staff spent a chunk of time talking about learning and teaching moments. At the end of her experiment, Lisa seemed to be weighing the conditions and dynamics of different approaches to running her staff meetings. More than a theoretical discussion, Lisa's experiment required her to think reflectively about her practice, to make changes in her practice, and to again reflect on those changes. As important, Lisa's peers in our senior seminar classroom acted as coaches, helping her to reimagine her approach in dialogue with ideological framings and their own field experiences. This experiment offered a valuable learning experience for Lisa and the entire class.

Over time, the Play a Card discussions provided all ten students opportunities to share dilemmas and issues about their practice and brainstorm with their peers different ways to think about the issues. Throughout the semester, each student took classroom discussions and dilemmas back into the field to try out new ways of relating, leading, responding, and interacting in their sites. The theoretical architecture of youth work ideologies provided students with a structure and set of tools to collectively and individually frame and reframe practice.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we offer these three program narratives to show how our youth development curriculum and pedagogy foreground theory as a way to help students build and hone their youth work practice. In the introductory course, we ask students to play and adapt icebreaker games and to observe, analyze, and critique what they see in interactive field trips. Throughout the program, this analytical, reflective work continues to develop, as we help students seek out or transition into internship placements that are a "good fit" ideologically. In their internship seminar, students work together to discuss, analyze,

and experiment with theoretically-informed dilemmas of practice in their field-based internships. This reflective practice, rooted in theory, resists reducing youth work to a collection of behaviors and skills. It instead fosters an approach to building "practical wisdom" and expertise that attends to different youth work ideologies and diverse contexts (Walker & Walker, 2012: 40).

In his TED talk, Simon Sinek (2009) argues that knowing what you *believe* is at the center of any successful enterprise, "People don't buy *what* you do; they buy *why* you do it. And what you do simply proves what you believe." Youth development is complex, multifaceted and challenging work. The "what" of youth work -- skills and competencies — are critical to the professional training of youth workers. And the "why" — the values, culture, and theories of change that shape youth worker identities and ideologies — are equally vital. At Rhode Island College, we prepare students to think about themselves as professionals who are engaged in a continual process of reflecting on, analyzing, and honing their practice. Through theoretical analysis, ongoing and intentional self-reflection, and structured field experiences, our students graduate with confidence in their youth worker identities, core beliefs, and ideologies. As youth work leaders, they know who they are and what they believe.

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