

# Understanding Youth Development From the Practitioner's Point of View: A Call for Research on Effective Practice

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This article calls for research on the expertise of youth development practitioners. We argue for studies focused on understanding youth practice from practitioners' points of view—as they experience and enact it—with the aim of contributing findings and frameworks that are helpful to their work and learning. To improve youth programs, first, it is essential to better understand the challenges frontline staff face in their work. We review evidence showing that running a program and facilitating youth development is more challenging and multidimensional than is generally appreciated. Second, it is essential to understand the strategies effective practitioners employ to address these challenges. Studies indicate that the expertise of frontline staff is central to program impact; we review findings suggesting the diverse, contextually-attuned skills this expertise entails. Case studies in three domains of decision-making (designing programs, youth's motivation, and ethical dilemmas) are used to provide a vision for this research.

*The advisor of a leadership program wants to empower youth to plan upcoming program activities, but youth are resistant. (Larson & Walker, 2010)*

*A high school coach has to reprimand a player for an infraction, but wants to do it in a way that protects the player's sense of self-worth. (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007)*

*Gang members enter the building during a program session and make demands on the program leader. (L. Ross, 2013)*

As these scenarios suggest, the work of the frontline staff who run youth development programs is complex—in ways that researchers, policy makers, and funders often fail to appreciate. How do you empower youth who do not want to be empowered? How do you enforce rules in supportive ways? How can you be prepared for anyone who walks in the door of your program? Staff manage a challenging, dynamic realm of human interaction. Their professional charge is not only keeping the program running—a difficult enough task—but, at the same time, cultivating young people's development. Some youth practitioners do both of these quite effectively. Studies consistently suggest that the expertise of frontline staff is the most central factor in program impact (Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, &

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Watts, *In press*). Gaining knowledge of the complex challenges and expertise of youth practitioners is vitally important to advancing the field of youth development.

In this article we advocate the growth of a vigorous subfield of research aimed at understanding effective practice from practitioners' perspective: as they experience and enact it. The mission for this subfield is to systematically gather, organize, and make accessible information on practitioners' experience and expertise in ways that can improve training, facilitate practitioner dialogue, and contribute to strengthening the profession.

In advocating this subfield of youth development research we are responding to a growing awareness—across professions—of the importance of “use inspired” research (Trochim, Kane, Graham, & Pincus, 2011; Tseng, 2012). Researchers in the allied field of education have been moving in this direction. They are concluding that to contribute to the practice of classroom teaching, researchers need to focus on teachers' day-to-day experiences as they occur in context (Donovan, 2013; Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). An emerging research goal across professions is to develop knowledge regarding practice that is directly useful to staff in their work and decision-making.

To help envision this field we employ an elementary framework that focuses on the *challenges* that youth practitioners experience in their work and the *strategies* they use to address these challenges. This approach has been fundamental in studies of expertise across professional fields (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006). It is held that an essential first step to understanding a profession is gaining knowledge of the array of challenges, tasks, or “problems of practice” that its practitioners encounter in their work (Donovan, 2013; Simon, 1996). Expertise as a pediatrician, social worker, or educator is defined by the array of decision-making situations each is called upon to address. A second step is gaining knowledge of effective strategies for responding to these challenges. Under the domain of youth practitioner “strategies” we are interested in such things as the mental models and personal guidelines that they employ, the choices and trade-offs they navigate, their decision-making processes, and the action skills they employ in implementing strategies. We include strategies for responding to acute situations in daily practices, such as those listed at the beginning of this article; we also include strategies for the longer-term proactive components of their work, such as shaping activities and designing a curriculum or program.

In this article we use this framework to examine the expertise of practitioners in youth programs. Part I aims to provide a beginning foundation. We review preliminary knowledge (mostly from our research) on the challenges youth practitioners face in their work and the

general strategies that effective practitioners employ to address these challenges. In Part II we provide case studies that illustrate in-depth analysis of the strategic decision-making entailed in dealing with three types of challenges: designing programs to prepare youth for the “real-worlds” of adulthood, sustaining youth's motivation through ups and downs, and responding to the ethical dilemmas of youth practice. Readers who find case studies a more amendable starting place are welcome to begin with Part II.

As a prelude, we spell out several assumptions and conceptual elements of our approach and provide brief description of the data we use here to illustrate our vision for this new subfield.

## Conceptual and Methodological Preliminaries

### *Practitioners as Sources of Knowledge and Partners in Research*

We view practitioners themselves, especially experienced practitioners, as one of the best sources of data on youth practice (see also Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Research shows that in most fields, daily practice provides practitioners with valid information that helps them improve their professional knowledge and skills (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). In our experience, youth program leaders are continually experimenting, learning more about young people, and improving what they do. A problem in the youth development field is that much of this hard-earned knowledge about daily practice is not documented, systemized, or made available in centralized sources.

A critical question is who does this work of documenting and systematizing? In education efforts are being made to get teachers to do this work as members of learning communities and to employ action research approaches in which researchers and practitioners work side-by-side (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). These are valuable methods, and we hope their use will grow in the field of youth development and contribute to the subfield we envision. An obstacle in education, however, has been teachers' lack of time, training, and institutional support to engage in these processes (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). These obstacles are likely to be greater in out-of-school programs, in which funding and staff support are even more limited.

Our approach has been more researcher-driven and is subject to the associated limitations. However, it is nonetheless aimed at the goal of providing “a practice to research pathway” for user-oriented knowledge (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). In our research we developed relationships with experienced staff of diverse programs and collected data on their experiences and expertise from interviews and observations over sustained periods of time.

### *Analytic Approaches*

We advocate that research on practitioner expertise should include at least two quite different but inter-related types of analytic work, both demonstrated as follows. One entails systematically *describing* the varied array of challenges and strategies of youth practice; for example asking, what are the most frequent types of challenges that practitioners encounter in programs and how do these differ by age groups? The other involves *interpretive and theory-building analyses*. Researchers can work with practitioners to contribute empirically based training materials (e.g., cases studies) that provide reflective tools for professional development. Researchers can also use the analytic methods of their field to synthesize data obtained from practitioners across programs and to integrate knowledge and theory from the social sciences into these syntheses. We describe and illustrate these two types of analyses in the following section.

### *Studies Used Here*

To help envision this subfield of research we have drawn on the data we know: our studies of community-based programs for ethnically diverse urban and rural adolescents, in the age range 13 to 18. These were project-based leadership, arts, and technology programs in which youth organized community events, created documentary films, put on theatrical productions, and led activities for younger children. Most programs were either stand-alone programs or part of small community organizations. In nearly all cases the staff members we interviewed were full-time paid professionals who were responsible for both the design of the program and running it on a day-to-day basis. Readers should, of course, recognize that specific issues and findings may differ across populations, age groups, and types of programs.

In the following section, we also describe research that involves comparing novices and experts, a common method in research on expertise (Ericsson, 2006a). However, we want to be clear that expertise and experience are not necessarily the same thing. Novice youth practitioners may bring valuable assets to their work, including intuitive skills, expertise from a specific discipline (e.g., arts, theater, STEM fields), fresh excitement, or the benefits of being close in age to youth (along with fresh memories of powerful program experiences).

## PART I. FOUNDATIONS: PRACTITIONER CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

In this first half of the article, we use the elementary framework of practitioner challenges and strategies to

sketch out how a subfield on youth practitioner expertise might grow and contribute to practice.

### Challenges of Youth Practice

What is the array of challenges that youth practitioners face in their work? What do they need to be prepared for when they come to work each day? Under the heading of challenges we include any opportunity, problem, task, situation, or dilemma that calls for decision-making. For frontline youth development practitioners this includes challenges that are *proactive*, for example, when planning activities a program leader might ask, How do I structure activities so that youth at different skill levels will be engaged and learn? These challenges also include the more immediate opportunities, dilemmas, and decision-making situations that emerge as a program unfolds. For example, how do I respond when youth are frustrated by the activity I planned, or demonstrate abilities way above what I planned for?

A basic finding across professions is that the challenges practitioners face are diverse and multi-dimensional, and this is certainly true for youth practitioners. Their challenges involve different people (e.g., youth, parents, other staff, community members, gang members who walk in the door), each with distinct ways of thinking. These challenges also involve diverse goals (e.g., keeping youth safe, helping them develop skills, and divergent priorities of youth's parents, funders, and other stakeholders).

In many situations, youth practitioners need to consider multiple dimensions *at once*. For example, an infraction by a youth may need to be viewed from the point of view of program rules, a youth's fragile self-confidence, events happening at home, and the practitioner's own philosophy and feelings. As in other fields of practice, these situations can pit developmental, pragmatic, institutional, and ethical goals against each other (Banks, 2005; Billett, 2001; K. Ross, Shafer, & Klein, 2006). Expertise as a practitioner, as we will discuss, entails abilities to recognize, understand, and address diverse and sometimes conflicting considerations.

### *Describing Challenges*

Description is an important starting point for research, and researchers can contribute to practice by helping describe, classify, and conceptualize the array of challenges youth practitioners encounter. Given the multi-dimensionality just mentioned, this is not an easy or tidy task. An important step to getting a handle on this diversity is categorizing the types of challenges and the considerations they entail. This categorization, among other things, can help identify the domains of knowledge that need to be covered in a field's textbooks and training protocols (Ericsson, 2006b).

TABLE 1  
Domains of Challenges Experienced by Frontline Practitioners: Categories and Subcategories

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Empirically derived categories (from Larson & Walker, 2010):

- I. Supporting Youth's Participation in Program Activities
  - a. Structuring, guiding, and directing youth's work
  - b. Creating and sustaining youth's motivation
- II. Cultivating Program Norms and Enforcing Rules
  - a. Addressing youth's violations of rules and expectations
  - b. Cultivating group norms
  - c. Maintaining consistency and professionalism in leaders' interactions with youth
- III. Responding to Youth's Personalities and Relationships
  - a. Dealing with youth's personalities, personal problems, and unique limits or needs
  - b. Dealing with problematic youth-youth relationships and group dynamics
- IV. Reconciling the Organizational System and Youth Development
  - a. Adapting to top-down policies, directives, and bureaucratic requirements
  - b. Dealing with limited time and resources
  - c. Accommodating different leadership styles and philosophies among frontline staff
- V. Interfacing with External Worlds
  - a. Addressing tensions between the program and youth's outside lives
  - b. Mediating youth's relationships with community members and institutions

Additional categories:

- VI. Maintaining Ethical Principles and Conduct
- VII. Being Responsive to Issues of Culture and Diversity
- VIII. Attending to Practitioners' Own Personal Needs and Emotions

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In our research, we have identified eight major domains of challenges in practitioner work (Table 1). The first five were derived empirically from a previous study (Larson & Walker, 2010) in which two of the current authors analyzed 250 “dilemmas of practice” reported by the adult leaders of 12 programs for high-school-aged youth. Categorization was based on the primary considerations at stake in each dilemma (many dilemmas fit in more than one category). All five include several subcategories (Table 1).

These first five domains of challenges represent different types of human systems that enter into youth practice, each a distinct realm to be understood. The first is program activities. Activities are often a main vehicle through which programs foster youth's skill development, and the challenges in this domain encompass structuring these activities so they are effective, making sure youth's learning processes are on track, and sustaining youth's motivation through diverse circumstances. The second domain is the program's system of norms and rules, and the challenges include, for example, how does one cultivate norms and address violations in ways consistent with positive development? The third domain encompasses youth's personalities and their relationships with each other. A frequent set of challenges in youth work entails connecting with, adapting to, and engaging individual youth; another set involves navigating youth-youth and group system dynamics. The fourth domain includes relationships among program staff and within the youth organization (includes institutional policies and limits). The fifth domain encompasses the interface between the program and external worlds, including

youth's families, community members and organizations. Our research has begun to articulate how each of these domains present an array of dynamics, considerations, opportunities, and challenges that are central to youth practitioners doing their jobs effectively. Many of 250 dilemma situations in our database involved dealing with considerations from more than one domain.

We have proposed three additional domains of practitioner challenges that are suggested by the youth development and practitioner literature. All are likely to intersect with the aforementioned five. One is ethics, a domain of challenges that has been examined in-depth by Banks (2005, 2010) and that we discuss as one of our case studies in the following sections. Another broad category is culture, race, and challenges related to discrimination and difference (Kennedy, Bronte-Tinkew, & Matthews, 2007). A final domain, which is important across fields of human services, entails personal considerations that can influence a practitioner's work, such as his or her emotions and personal needs (Sercombe, 2010).

Of course, this list of domains is open to revisions and additions.<sup>1</sup> However, we think these eight are useful in beginning to suggest areas of knowledge and skills important to youth practitioners' expertise.

### *Interpretive and Theory-Building Analyses*

Next we consider a deeper context. A practitioner's process of understanding a challenging situation

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<sup>1</sup>We did not include the processes of development as a separate domain because they cut across all eight.

involves more than categorization and grasping the facts at hand. Practice is reflective and *deliberative* (Schön, 1983). It requires asking probing questions: What might be going on *behind* the facts? Where is this situation headed? What values are at stake? What underlying assumptions are being made? Often practitioners must address these questions with incomplete and ambiguous information. To be effective they must be able to detect meaningful cues, draw connections, and develop hypotheses about the dynamics of the situation. Experts have mental models that help them predict how situations might unfold (Kahneman & Klein, 2009; K. Ross et al., 2006). Researchers can contribute by bringing these deliberative, diagnostic skills to light.

Across fields of practice, *examination of case examples* is a valuable means for novice and experienced practitioners to learn to think about the dynamics of complex situations and practice deliberative skills (Banks & Nohr, 2003; Levin, 1994). Researchers can work with skilled practitioners to write up case examples that stimulate analysis and learning. A valuable example from the field of education is a book by Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, and Chatman (2005) that presents case examples of dilemmas faced by teachers representing different domains of challenges (e.g., student motivation, culture, parents). Each is accompanied by background readings and discussion questions aimed at facilitating this deliberative learning process. Some universities offer professional development courses that use dilemma-based cases to foster reflective practice among youth workers (L. Ross, 2013; J. Walker & Walker, 2012).

Researchers can also contribute through grounded *theory-building analyses* of the patterns associated with

specific types of decision-making situations. Such analyses can lead to insights and theory about the recurrent challenging dynamics that practitioners encounter. Camino (2005) provided this kind of contribution by analyzing data from many groups' work to form youth-adult partnerships. She identified a set of hidden challenges, or "pitfalls," associated with creating these partnerships. Griffith and Larson (2014) conducted similar analyses to examine the dilemmas practitioners face that involve youth's families. Both studies began with empirical data and brought in other social science research and theory (e.g., on adolescents, adults, and family dynamics) to help frame and interpret the dynamics at work in these decision-making situations.

A third contribution of researchers is to *study how skilled youth practitioners appraise challenging situations*, as compared to novices. What do they perceive in situations that novices do not? In a preliminary mixed methods study (K. C. Walker & Larson, 2012), we compared how youth practitioners who had been nominated as "experts" appraised a set of dilemma situations from each of the five domains of challenges from our prior study. We found that, compared to novices, the *experts identified a greater number and wider range of considerations*, including more that went beyond the immediate moment and across multiple domains (Table 2). This is congruent with findings in other fields of practice that experts see more dimensions of situations and see situations from multiple viewpoints (Endsley, 2006; Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 2000). These findings affirm the importance of training aimed at helping practitioners understand practice from multiple perspectives.

TABLE 2  
Characteristics of Experts' Reasoning About Dilemmas That Differentiated Them From Novices

Task	Characteristics of Experts' Reasoning	
	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings
Appraising dilemmas	Identified a greater number of considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identified considerations that covered a wider range of socio-ecological domains.</li> <li>Identified more considerations that went beyond immediate concerns in the situation, including the root causes and future impacts of the situation.</li> </ul>
Formulating responses for dilemmas	Generated more possible responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generated a broader range of responses.</li> <li>Described more contingencies that would influence their actions (i.e., if-then conditions).</li> </ul>
	Responses were youth centered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Described courses of action with multiple steps.</li> <li>Converted the dilemmas into opportunities for youth to learn (e.g., engaging youth in solving the dilemma, making it a teachable moment).</li> </ul>
	Responses addressed multiple considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generated responses that balanced concerns that were in conflict.</li> </ul>

*Note.* The sample for these data included 81 adult program leaders nominated as experts and novices from within the same organizations (Walker and Larson, 2012). Each nominee read vignettes of two dilemmas (randomly assigned from a set of five). They were asked to identify the important considerations in each situation and describe strategies they would consider and use for responding to it. We first used multilevel regression models to test four hypothesized differences between the experts and novices; all four were significant. Second, we conducted grounded theory analysis to identify underlying structural and thematic patterns related to these four significant differences.

## Strategies of Effective Practitioners

Just as the challenges youth practitioners face are varied and complex, so are the strategies they employ to address them. They must make decisions about courses of action in dynamic, ambiguous and multi-dimensional situations. As Kahneman and Klein (2009) describe for other professional fields: “experts are expected to successfully attain vaguely defined goals in the face of uncertainty, time pressures, high stakes, team and organizational constraints, [and] shifting conditions” (p. 516). We believe much can be learned by studying the strategies that expert youth practitioners employ in addressing challenging situations within each of the domains we just described.

To be clear, we cannot expect research to identify a “correct” strategy for every situation. Even in well-researched fields, studies often do not yield a single “best practice” for a given context. Experts in a field often hold different viewpoints on preferred courses of action (Billett, 2001; Dörner & Scholkopf, 1991). Practice is partly an art, and different practitioners often come up with differing, creative ways to address the considerations in a given situation. Nonetheless, much can be learned by looking for patterns across expert practitioners.

### *Describing the General Strategies of Experts*

Our aforementioned study of expert and novice youth practitioners began to identify some of the general characteristics of experts’ strategic reasoning (K. C. Walker & Larson, 2012). First, the practitioners nominated as experts *identified significantly more possible responses* to the dilemma situations they were asked to think about (Table 2). Like experts in other fields (K. Ross et al., 2006), they appeared to have a wider repertoire of strategies to draw upon. Our qualitative analyses found that the responses generated by the experts were more elaborate and tailored to the dynamics of the situation. For example, there were more “if-then” elements in the strategies they developed for the dilemmas. Some described elaborate decision trees involving multiple branching steps, each contingent on how the situation unfolded. In contrast, the novices had less detailed strategies that often involved following rote, context-free rules. Research finds that experts across fields of practice are more likely to adapt responses to the particularities of situations and more likely to forecast how a situation might play (Fook et al., 2000; Levin, 1994).

Second, the responses of the “experts” were much more likely to be *youth-centered*. They found creative ways to convert problematic situations into learning opportunities for youth. For example, in response to a dilemma involving a girl’s conflict with her parents, novices’ strategies often involved the leader talking

directly to the parents, whereas the experts’ strategies were more likely to entail helping the girl learn to resolve the issue with her parents. The goal of the expert practitioners’ responses was not to insulate youth from challenges, but rather to equip them to deal with them. Effective practitioners help youth translate experiences into knowledge and skills (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006).

Third, the experts were significantly more likely to formulate strategies that responded to *multiple considerations* in the dilemmas situations. At the same time they were youth-centered, these experts’ responses also addressed other dimensions of the situation. Research in diverse fields indicates that experts are more able to address, adjudicate, or “balance” conflicting considerations (Sternberg, 1998).

In sum, across challenging situations, the strategies of expert practitioners were more tailored to multiple dimensions of situations, including to different people, human dynamics, values, and goals, with a high priority on the professional goal of facilitating youth’s development. As in other fields, the experts took a more pluralistic perspective and balanced competing concerns, while keeping focused on the primary objective of their job (Fook et al., 2000; White, 2007).

What is missing from the K. C. Walker and Larson finding, however, is a study of how experts (vs. novices) respond to specific domains of decision-making. It is one thing to learn that experts have more detailed and contingent responses. It is another to understand what strategies they bring to bear within specific domains of challenges (e.g., youth-youth conflict).

### *Interpretive and Theory-Building Analyses*

We think it is vitally important that this next step not be done superficially. As we said, there may often not be a single right response to a given class of situations. We think researchers can best contribute by working with practitioners to help the youth development field discuss this nuance and complexity. Again, the study of case examples is one useful means of doing this. Good case examples can be used to help apprentice program leaders practice identifying value choices, applying decision rules, and generating creative responses to the nuanced real-time dynamic, real-world situations (Harrington, 1995; Zhang, Lundeberg, & Eberhardt, 2011).

Researchers may also play a role by formulating grounded theory regarding strategies that appear to be effective for specific situations across programs. Such analyses may also be useful in identifying tradeoffs that practitioners face in making decisions (Collins, 1996). They might also help identify the frameworks and decision rules that expert practitioners use in different types of situations. What follows are preliminary

attempts to demonstrate research questions that might be addressed in this way.

## PART II: CASE STUDIES: A CLOSER LOOK AT PRACTITIONER EXPERTISE IN THREE AREAS OF DECISION-MAKING

Research on expertise consistently shows that context matters (Endsley, 2006; Ericsson et al., 2006). We thus feel it essential that this “call for research” engage at this level. We examine the question of how skilled youth practitioners respond to each of three distinct challenges. The first involves the *long-term challenge* of designing and creating a program. The second focuses on the *short-term challenge* of responding to downturns in youth’s motivation. The third examines how ethical challenges involve not just short-term but long-term issues.

### Structuring Programs to Prepare Youth for the “Real Worlds” of Adulthood

Designing and creating a program can involve difficult tradeoffs, and researchers can help identify these tradeoffs. An important goal of many programs for older adolescents is preparing them for participation in adult worlds, including real-world work environments. These programs aim to provide a structure of opportunities that helps develop youth’s skills to function in demanding, high-stakes adult environments. Yet, at the same time, research suggests that an important feature of effective programs is that they create a safe space for youth that allows them the security to take risks, learn from mistakes, develop confidence, and experience trusting relationships with adults (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Herein lies the challenge. Program leaders want to create a program that prepares youth for participation in adult worlds. However, there are attributes of those worlds that youth can easily experience as threatening and aversive (e.g., rigid expectations, high consequences for failure, adult complexities). Furthermore, most American youth have little experience with adults and adult worlds outside the family and many have ambivalent attitudes toward adults (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). How do practitioners structure programs to help youth feel protected and safe from adverse risks while preparing them for participation in adult worlds?

#### *What Can Be Learned From Skilled Practitioners?*

Two programs designed by expert practitioners illustrate tradeoffs entailed in navigating this challenge. Hopeworks<sup>2</sup> is a program that serves youth in a

neighborhood with a 30% high school graduation rate, 90% poverty rate, extreme community violence, and high unemployment. The goal of Jeff, who founded and oversees Hopeworks, is for youth to develop basic workforce skills and to prepare them for higher education. Over 15 years, he created a structure for the program that engages youth in a progression of roles that teach them responsibility and lead to a real-world apprenticeship serving business clients. All participants start as a “Trainee” and complete a scripted series of activities designed to teach basic web design. This culminates in each youth designing a webpage, a task that tests his or her knowledge of the curriculum. If successful, the youth earns college credit for the learning completed, and becomes a “Staff Member” who receives payment for work on contracted web design projects alongside peers and adult staff.

To prepare them for work environments, all youth at Hopeworks are held to strict real-world expectations. They must punch a time clock, and showing up late more than three times gets them fired. As Trainees, their work at each step must meet high standards. When they become Staff Members, their web designs must meet the needs and priorities of the businesses and other clients who have contracted for them. Youth who make it through the program develop marketable skills, as well as punctuality, responsibility, and an ability to work collaboratively with diverse clientele. Some accommodations are made that mediate the demands on youth and help them feel protected. As Trainees they have no fixed time length for completing each step; they may go at their own pace and learn from mistakes. As Staff Members preparing a web-page, youth rehearse before presenting their work to clients; this allows them to build confidence, as well as revise their presentation (and the web page) in line with the feedback they receive (Thompson & Diaz, 2012). Yet despite these accommodations, the strict demands at Hopeworks lead to some youth dropping out or being kicked out. The tradeoff is that the program prepares youth to engage in adult worlds of work and higher education but provides only limited protection from the sometimes rigid and harsh demands of those contexts.

A second program, The Station, is designed to make a different tradeoff. Dylan, who founded and oversees the program, places higher priority on creating a protected environment, because his goal is to help youth who attend (diverse in ethnicity, religion, and sexuality) develop a strong identity, cross-group understanding among peers, and leadership skills. Like Hopeworks, it also has a progression of roles (from members to volunteers to paid staff) in which youth assume increasing responsibility. Some youth provide peer counseling or homework help for other youth; others plan and execute music concerts attended by hundreds of young people. These activities

<sup>2</sup>Hopeworks is the actual name of a program; all other names of programs and leaders in this article are pseudonyms.

are “real world” in that they mirror aspects of adult worlds (accountability to others, managing budgets, planning events that can fail). However, the program activities rarely bring youth into interactions with community adults and the kind of strict, adult-world demands that youth experience at Hopeworks. In sum, youth emulate adult roles and practices within a more protected space, a process youth say gives them self-confidence and a changed world view that prepares them for later interactions in the adult world. But direct experience with the demands of adult worlds is deferred. Dylan reports that some youth experience a “reality shock” when they encounter work or college environments that are less protected.

### *Research Directions: Preparing Youth for Adult Roles*

Like many of the tradeoffs involved in structuring a learning environment (Collins, 1996), those associated with preparing youth for adult worlds can be challenging. Our quick synopsis of these two programs does not do them justice, but it illustrates how the tradeoffs practitioners make in designing a program are shaped by their goals and the needs of the youth they are serving. Further research can help identify ways that practitioners can help youth transition to work and community roles:

- How does the tradeoff between exposing youth to adult worlds versus helping them feel safe apply for: different populations of youth, different program structures, and attempts to engage youth with different adult worlds (e.g., professional clients, businesses, affinity groups, community activist groups)?
- What are the long-term outcomes associated with different program structures for real world engagement? What is the ultimate payoff from direct contact with adult worlds (e.g., Hopeworks) versus more protected emulation of adult-like interaction (e.g., The Station)?
- What “real world” experiences best prepare youth for successful participation in adult worlds, especially for youth outside the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988)?

A worthy goal for research is identifying win-win strategies for engaging youth in adult worlds. For example, what are the characteristics of programs that effectively connect youth to adult worlds (cf. Camino, 2005; Cooper, 2011; Sullivan & Larson, 2010)? Also, although we believe that structures for engaging youth in adult worlds involve tradeoffs, all strategies for mediating those tradeoffs are not likely to be equal. What supports do practitioners provide that help mediate and optimize those tradeoffs?

### *Sustaining Youth’s Motivation Through Ups and Downs*

Another challenge that youth practitioners face is how to support young people’s motivation. Declining or low youth motivation is a frequent challenge encountered by program leaders, even in high-quality programs (Larson & Walker, 2010). It comes in many shapes and forms. Youth can start out excited about a project, but then encounter tasks that are harder, more tedious, or less interesting. In some cases leaders introduce a project they think will benefit youth, but the youth are not interested.

For example, at a program called United Youth, teens were initially excited to be asked to prepare a presentation on violence prevention for the students at their high school. This outreach effort was instigated by a funding agency, which had provided them a slideshow filled with facts and figures. However, as the youth began preparing, they became concerned that their audience would be alienated by a traditional lecture format, which reduced their motivation for working on the presentation.

It is not surprising that youth’s motivation in programs can be unstable. For one thing, they are often progressing up a sequence of new and more difficult responsibilities (as discussed in the prior section). This is how they learn. But as predicted by most theories of motivation, when work is harder than people think they can handle, they are more prone to discouragement, anxiety, and declining motivation (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Skilled youth practitioners, we find, stay attuned to emotional and motivational cues from youth (e.g., to their frustration, anxiety, how they are reacting to the work), so they can respond if needed (Rusk et al., 2013). But knowing when and how to respond across different types of situations can be hard. Researchers can play a role in describing and understanding the ways that skilled practitioners do this effectively.

### *What Can Be Learned From Skilled Practitioners?*

At Unified Youth, the leaders, Tyler and Juanita, responded to the youth’s concerns by asking them what they thought would make the presentation more interesting to their audience. Deborah, a youth who seldom spoke up, said it would need to be more “alive” and “action-oriented” than the funding agency’s slideshow. The value of adhering to the funder’s recommended format was an important consideration for Tyler and Juanita, but they decided to follow the youth’s lead. They provided encouragement and support for the youth to develop alternative ideas for engaging the audience, while still conveying the essential facts. This



was a turning point for the youth's motivation. Deborah was energized to take on a new leadership role, and the group of youth developed a new presentation that conveyed the key ideas with skits, audience interactions, and fewer, simpler charts.

The different supports that Tyler and Juanita provided for youth to think outside the box helped reframe the work in ways that facilitated youth's motivation. As we have seen with other effective practitioners, Tyler and Juanita reinforced youth's sense of efficacy by reminding them of their prior achievements and the skills they had already developed and demonstrated in the program. They helped youth identify intermediate steps in the work (e.g., creating new slides, choosing music), which provided short-term, tangible goals. They also provided perspective by acknowledging that specific steps were indeed difficult (e.g., coordinating planning with the school) and by helping the youth see the difficulties as learning opportunities.

Helping youth reframe their work can be seen as one of several types of scaffolding that practitioners use to help keep youth engaged in learning. In an analysis of accounts from youth and program leaders, Dawes (2008) identified additional types of motivational scaffolding provided by leaders, including cultivating youth's ownership of their work, facilitating their camaraderie, and balancing serious work with fun. Each of these strategies requires the leader to balance different short-term tradeoffs (e.g., providing guidance vs. supporting youth's ownership).

Theories of motivation, such as self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2008) and goal orientation theory (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007), have identified core factors that influence youth's motivation, for example, their sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Yet, few studies have investigated how practitioners can influence these factors in context (Kaplan, Katz, & Flum, 2012). Skilled practitioners report that they tailor strategies to meet the demands of a unique situation and the needs of individual youth. Their strategies entail situation-contingent decisions that require dealing with multiple considerations (Kaplan et al.; Turner, Bogner Warzon, & Christensen, 2010). Research needs to investigate how practitioners make these decisions within actual program contexts.

### *Research Directions: Sustaining Youth's Motivation*

A critical point is that motivation is not something practitioners have to *do to* youth: there is much evidence that humans have an intrinsic disposition to be motivated; that is, to become engaged in challenging activities (Larson & Rusk, 2011; Shernoff, 2013). We suggest that the different situational scenarios in which youth's motivation declines (e.g., frustration, lack of confidence,

performance anxiety) each provide a useful focus for productive research on strategies for scaffolding youth's short-term motivation. We have found that skilled practitioners have action language for these situations, such as explaining to youth how an obstacle in their work can become an opportunity; or shifting to a playful voice to suggest that youth take a short break from tedious work to do something fun. We have also found that skilled practitioners anticipate motivational ups and downs that youth commonly experience when working on projects, and have developed strategies for handling these situations (e.g., Larson & Brown, 2007; Rusk et al., 2013).

In addition to the short-term situational factors we have discussed, motivation is influenced by longer-term individual factors, such as how a person perceives the social and task environment and what he or she brings to the environment (e.g., beliefs, life goals) (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Larson & Rusk, 2011). We need to understand how expert practitioners think about these different factors over time. Hidi and Renninger (2006) theorize that the type of scaffolding provided to young people needs to change as their interest in an activity grows. There is much that researchers can learn about how expert practitioners not only support youth's motivation but help them learn to regulate it on their own.

### Ethical Challenges of Youth Practice

Ethical dilemmas can be among the hardest challenges faced by practitioners. Imagine yourself in the following situations:

- Witnessing a theft by a young person with whom you have just begun developing a trusting relationship (Banks, 2010).
- Suspecting a program participant of illicit drug use and weighing your obligations to the youth and the law (L. Ross, 2013).
- Deciding which of your own adolescent experiences, including transgressions, to share with youth who see you as a mentor (K. Walker & Larson, 2006).

These are short-term situations requiring expeditious decision-making about issues of right and wrong. Ethical challenges, according to Banks (2010), "encompass matters of rights, duties, needs, interests, relationships, motives and the maintenance or transgression of prevailing norms" (p. 12). Researchers have a role in documenting and illuminating the array of ethical situations that arise in youth practice.

In studying these short-term challenges, a second, long-term level of practitioner challenges should also be considered and studied: How to create a program culture that provides a normative context for addressing

these situations? We refer here to the overall principles, practices, and expectations that guide youth and adults' behavior in the program. These include not just the admonitions voiced by program leaders, but the living principles and expectations that guide youths' and leaders' behavior in a program.

The challenges at these short and long-term levels need to be considered in tandem. Not much is gained if practitioners cultivate ethical principles that cannot be applied to the diverse complex situations they will encounter in practice.

### *What Can Be Learned From Skilled Practitioners?*

Let us start with an example of an acute dilemma and how a skilled practitioner responded to it. In a meeting with a city alderman, several of the youth in an activism program accused her of acting in a racist way and shouted curses at her (Larson & Walker, 2010). The summer interns who accompanied the teens were upset by this behavior but too overwhelmed to respond in the moment. They reported back to the program director, Mike, that many of the youth should be disciplined. This response is typical of novices: they are more likely to see dilemma situations solely as disciplinary issues (K. C. Walker & Larson, 2012). Mike, however, recognized the situation to have multiple layers. It was an activism program and a goal was youth learning to speak up against injustice. He decided to discipline the youth whose actions were most egregious. However, he also made the situation into an opportunity for reflective learning. He held a debriefing session in which the group discussed the ethics of activism (a topic he regretted not raising earlier). Later they held a session on how to work effectively with community partners. Mike had found ways to convert a dilemma situation into an opportunity for youth's development, including their ethical development.

The Station, mentioned earlier, is an example of a program in which principles and procedures for youth's infractions are part of the program design. Dylan had worked with successive cohorts of program members to articulate principles that were recognized and accepted by most if not all youth. Mutual respect was a foundational value. The program's posted guidelines included a commitment to "respect yourself and the people who work so hard to keep The Station open." Another read, "The Station respects the rights and abilities of young people to create their own space and enforce their own rules."

The program also had procedures for applying these principles in response to transgressions. The youth and staff had instituted a "choices and consequences" system: When a young person violated a guideline, the staff pulled the youth aside and together they filled out a worksheet. As described by a staff member:

[It] walks them through the decision they made... and they choose their own consequences. So when they do it again, we can just pull out this sheet and say, 'This is what you chose to do next time this happens, and now you have to go home and you can't be mad at us because this is your choice.' They are learning that they need to be held responsible for their actions.

This procedure helped operationalize The Station's principle of mutual respect. It was part of the program culture.

Through this procedure, youth took responsibility for the consequences of their infractions. Rather than being a dilemma *for staff* to deal with, infractions became a challenge *for youth* to deliberate on and learn from. Youth at The Station described how their experiences with these procedures—or just thinking about them—had helped them learn. This culture created opportunities for reflective learning about ethical issues.

It is important to reiterate that this culture worked only because the staff had devoted a great deal of time over years to cultivating it: making sure it represented living principles accepted by youth. They modeled the principles, ensured that youth had input, and worked to ensure that the procedures were applied consistently. This devotion of staff time represented a tradeoff: time not devoted to other goals.

It is also important to recognize that practitioners may cultivate different approaches to addressing ethical challenges. We have observed programs that are more adult-driven than The Station in which adults set the rules but were consistent and respectful in how they apply them and when they make exceptions (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). These deserve to be studied.

### *Research Directions: Supporting Ethical Development*

These examples illustrate how the overriding goal in dealing with ethical dilemmas should be facilitating youth's ethical development (Roberts, 2009). Mike achieved this by converting a debacle into a learning opportunity. The Station did this by providing principles and procedures that helped youth be agents of their own moral development.

Researchers can contribute to this goal in numerous ways. They can help identify and probe the range of ethical situations that practitioners face. Our two case examples have focused on dilemmas entailing youth infractions, but there are many other ethical issues for researchers to examine (Banks, 2010). Researchers can also study how effective practitioners respond to different types of dilemmas in ways that facilitate youth's ethical development. Furthermore, researchers can investigate how leaders are effective in cultivating a

shared culture of principles, practices, and expectations for ethical decision-making and learning. Given the multi-dimensional nature of ethical issues, it can sometimes be hard for youth to understand adults' decision-making. An important research issue is how practitioners are effective in communicating their reasoning processes and the values behind their actions.

### CONCLUSION: RESEARCH THAT CONTRIBUTES TO PRACTICE

A concern in the field of youth development is that many frontline staff, begin with little training, and develop their professional skills in isolation. They have limited opportunity to reflect, read research, or learn from peers or expert practitioners (J. Walker & Walker, 2012). Evidence shows that professional development is most effective when it occurs in ongoing learning communities (Cuban, 1992), when it is based on an empowerment rather than a transmission model, and when it is deliberative; when it helps practitioners apply knowledge to the complexities of diverse situations (J. Walker & Walker, 2012). Practitioners learn from participating in reflective spaces in which they are invited to articulate, discuss and examine the experiences and thinking they do every day, a process that helps them become more explicit regarding the underlying assumptions and theory of practice that guide their actions (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). In the field of education, this intentional, collaborative "sensemaking" activity is identified as critical to efforts to change teaching practice (Coburn, 2005).

Research on youth practice should be designed to contribute to this mode of active collaborative learning. It should focus on practice in context, as it is experienced and enacted by youth practitioners. The field of youth development research needs rigorous efforts, in partnership with practitioners, to understand the long- and short-term dynamics of their work of facilitating youth's development. In this article we have suggested different types of research aimed at this goal:

- Documenting the range and nature of the challenges faced by practitioners. What are the different systems, dynamic processes, underlying tradeoffs, and other considerations these challenges entail? What are practitioners' processes in assessing these challenges?
- Identifying the strategies used by expert youth practitioners to address these different types of challenges. What action language, decision-rules, frameworks, decision-making processes, and implementation strategies do effective leaders use?
- Generating case examples that provide thick description of these challenges and strategies in

context. Models for use of case examples in deliberative training are abundant in the field of education and business, and are being developed in the field of youth development (L. Ross, 2013; K. Walker & Gran, 2008).

- Articulating empirically-derived, user-friendly concepts and frameworks that help organize knowledge and facilitate communications within the youth development field (e.g., among practitioners, administrators, funders). Examples include frameworks for preparing youth for the real world, sustaining youth's motivation, and cultivating program environments that facilitate youth's ethical development.
- Evaluating how practitioners use knowledge from this research, in order to refine the focus and effectiveness of future studies. Practitioners interpret research for their use (Tseng, 2012), so it is critical to understand this feedback process.

Contributions are needed from different quarters. We are university-based researchers, but organization-based researchers can do this research as well, and may be better positioned to identify specific challenges and effective strategies pertinent to their organization (Bialeschki & Conn, 2011). Practitioner-driven action research also has a vital role to play (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; M. A. Hamilton & Hamilton, this issue). Most of the research we discussed was qualitative, but mixed method and quantitative research may contribute as research builds. Many researchers have already contributed work of different kinds to this collective mission, and we regret that we have not given all due credit.

Our long-term vision is a rich subfield of research on the experience and expertise of youth development practitioners that is constructed in collaboration with practitioners and serves their needs: a subfield that grows our collective knowledge and wisdom on youth development practice.

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