

Ben Kirshner ([00:03](#)):

Out-of-school-time programs, called OST programs for short, offer spaces for young people to develop interests, skills, and social connections beyond the classroom, such as during the summer or after school. Despite years of research on the benefits of OST programs and experiences, recent studies have raised concerns about access to quality programming for youth from low-income families and youth from marginalized communities. To explore barriers to participation in programs and the experiences of young people who participate in them, The Wallace Foundation commissioned a team of education scholars to conduct a literature review and interview OST experts. I'm Ben Kirschner, one of the members of that team and a professor of learning sciences and human development at the University of Colorado Boulder. Our team interviewed 58 experts in OST research, policy, and practice, and we conducted seven focus groups with an additional sample of 35 OST professionals devoted to specific topics and youth populations.

Ben Kirshner ([01:01](#)):

You can read the findings in a brief on Wallace's website at www.wallacefoundation.org. The brief is called "From Access to Equity: Making Out-of-School-Time Spaces Meaningful for Teens from Marginalized Communities." The researchers use the term "marginalized" as an umbrella term to acknowledge how systems of oppression impact minoritized children and youth, young people from low-income households and high-poverty neighborhoods, youth who identify as LGBTQIA+, youth who experience housing instability and homelessness, systems-involved youth, and the intersections of these identities and lived experiences of youth populations. Members of the research team are here today to

discuss these topics alongside two OST youth development professionals. This is the third episode in a three-part podcast series. The first episode discussed redefining the OST field and mapping access, and the second episode focused on programs and practices that foster dignity and belonging. Today's topic is professionalism and precarity of the workforce. I'll ask my colleagues to introduce themselves.

Bianca Baldrige ([02:07](#)):

Hi, I'm Bianca Baldrige. I'm an associate professor of education at Harvard University and a former youth worker.

Deepa Vasudevan ([02:14](#)):

Hi everyone. I'm Deepa Vasudevan. I'm a lecturer in education at Wellesley College.

Sarai Hertz-Velázquez ([02:18](#)):

Hi everyone. My name is Sarai Hertz-Velázquez. I'm a student at Wellesley College, and I'm also a youth worker and a future teacher.

Vanessa Roberts ([02:28](#)):

Hello, hello. My name is Vanessa Roberts. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I'm the executive director of Project VOYCE in Denver, Colorado. Our acronym [means] Voices of Youth Creating Equity.

Ben Kirshner ([02:38](#)):

Deepa, today's topic is really to delve into the field of youth work. Can you provide us with a succinct definition of what it means to be a youth worker and who we're talking about when we use that term?

Deepa Vasudevan ([02:50](#)):

Sure. So, a youth worker is an educator, a mentor, or someone who cares for young people and supports their development. And I see it as an umbrella term and a catchall for people who are working in a variety of community-based settings. Whether that be in schools or after-school programs, out-of-school time. And it's a term that is not used as much actually in the U.S., but it's gained traction in cities in particular. But the reason why many of us like to use the term "youth work" is because it shifts us away from thinking about building relationships with young people beyond the idea of it just being a time-based thing, just out-of-school time or after school. And [it] also shifts the relationship about just thinking about it in relationship to school as well. And so it centers the relationship between a professional educator and a young person.

Ben Kirshner ([03:45](#)):

Thank you. Bianca. How can the OST field create professional environments in which marginalized practitioners feel welcomed and valued?

Bianca Baldrige ([03:54](#)):

Thanks, Ben. First, I just want to acknowledge that I think the deficit framing is really rampant in youth work, as you mentioned. And part of that is because communities have always taken care of young people, in particular marginalized communities. And so I think with that there's often a dismissal of youth workers, in particular, in their occupational experiences and livelihoods. And so I think part of that is not recognizing their knowledge and their expertise as educators, as care workers. And I think there's such a critical urgency to not only study the experiences of youth workers to ensure that they are professionally taken care of so that they have livable wages, they have benefits and healthcare. But also recognizing that they have amazing expertise, right, in working with young people in communities, and they always have. And so there's, I think there's just, we as a field, we have to be mindful of not just supporting young people, but also supporting those who care for them.

Bianca Baldrige ([04:55](#)):

And also just want to acknowledge too that the range of youth work experience and thinking about the kinds of jobs and connections that youth workers have. So you have youth workers who might be on call 24/7 working with young people. You have youth workers who engage with young people before school, after school, during school summers. Again, thinking about just the level of expertise and knowledge base that they have has to be respected. And then the last piece that I'll say in thinking about the professional environments that could and should be created for marginalized practitioners. In our report, one of the things that kept coming up is the career ladders for youth workers, particularly youth workers who were Black and indigenous, Latinx, is that there were ceilings, right? So, you know, there are youth workers who reported sort of not being able to move to positions of power and positions of leadership within their organizations. In particular, organizations that were run predominantly by white people in the community. You know, I think it's important to provide professional opportunities, professional development opportunities, experiences where youth workers can receive the credentials that they might need in organizations, but not at a cost.

Deepa Vasudevan ([06:29](#)):

A lot of the youth workers that we talked to were in our focus groups, but we also talked to program directors who talked about their early years as youth workers. And you know, as Bianca mentioned, a lot of youth workers are people who come from the same backgrounds racially, culturally, as the young people that they work with. But at the same time, several of them talked about feeling tokenized by their own directors in doing the work, feeling like they had to be representative of a whole racial group in their experiences. Youth workers also talked about being student-facing, directly working with young people, oftentimes put them in a position in which they didn't have the seat at the table in leadership conversations. They didn't feel like they had the power to make decisions within the organization, but

oftentimes felt like they had a more intimate and just a closer understanding of what young people were experiencing in the programs as well. And so there was that dissonance about feeling valued and feeling legitimized in your role when you're doing the core work of out-of-school-time programs. And at the same time, feeling like you don't always have a voice around leadership decisions or funding decisions that are happening at the organization.

Vanessa Roberts ([07:47](#)):

So, the additional contribution I'll offer is also considering what is the emotional labor of these workers that goes unnoticed. Especially thinking about the multiple forms of trauma and what it means to absorb the stories, the experiences, the concerns, the worries, and oftentimes feeling unable to adequately address them as someone in an organization with limited resources. Or the concerns of mission drift if you try to shift from educational programming to direct services support. So that can be incredibly frustrating and incredibly draining on youth workers, in addition to navigating what Deepa and Bianca already named. So there is also a necessity I feel, for caring for the mental health and well-being of youth workers from a holistic perspective in supporting them doing this work.

Ben Kirshner ([08:45](#)):

That's so important. And I hope we continue to speak to that as we continue our conversation. I want to speak now to this issue of low wages and job instability that youth workers often experience, and they certainly report it in our study. Deepa, can you talk to us about the supports that are needed to address both of these issues in order to attract and retain skilled youth work practitioners?

Deepa Vasudevan ([09:10](#)):

Sure. Thanks, Ben. So, we know that youth workers and youth organizers, they're showing up in this work. They want to be in these out-of-school-time programs, they want to work in them. And at the

same time, there's oftentimes very low wages and job insecurity. Oftentimes, these workers don't have healthcare or retirement benefits that allow them to stay in the field. And at the same time, they're drawn to these programs because of the sense of possibility for creativity to work with young people in a different way related to education that's very different than school-day learning. There's lots of youth workers who are really passionate about the kind of work that they do with young people, but there's not enough right now, respect or funding right now, that is provided to frontline youth workers. And so one of the most important solutions, I think, is really providing a living wage for youth workers in the field and supporting them. And so oftentimes youth workers, they might be paid less than people who are working in the fast food industry right now. They might be paid less than lots of different forms of service industry. And so I think that there's some really exciting local campaigns that are happening around providing a livable wage for youth workers. I know Kalamazoo Youth Development Network is doing some really important advocacy work for youth workers to make sure that there's a higher minimum wage for youth development professionals.

Ben Kirshner ([10:46](#)):

I've noticed some disagreement in the field at large, or different perspectives on the issue of formal education and in as a form of kind of credentialing or certification. And so to be very specific, can you share, you know, what you've seen from your research or your professional experience around either the pros or cons of linking professional trajectories to a college degree or a community college degree or a master's degree?

Deepa Vasudevan ([11:13](#)):

That's a really big tension and debate that's been ongoing in the field of youth work. And oftentimes because I would say that community-based programs, youth programs, these are places that really draw on a diversity of knowledge. And so that means that we might have a really impactful violence

prevention program that is completely run by leaders who have experiences in the community that have nothing to do with a formal professional degree. So yeah, there's concerns that if we create one professional track, one type of professional degree for youth workers, we're actually going to lose out on all kinds of forms of knowledge that are not always valued in a university setting or in a college setting. And that it's also going to create this stratification and gentrification of the field, basically, right, where we have white and upper middle class or wealthy people who are able to rise up to leadership positions through more traditional professional degrees and master's programs.

Deepa Vasudevan ([12:24](#)):

And then there's arguments for a baseline foundation for professional ethics and understanding of some of the really serious issues that we're working with in youth programs. Understanding trauma, understanding systems, and how they impact young people. I think that this came up quite a bit, this sort of tension around, sort of, how do we still inform and prepare youth workers, but also not push out youth workers who have really valuable community knowledge and cultural knowledge that is so important to young people's experiences?

Bianca Baldrige ([13:03](#)):

I mean, I think Deepa said it all, especially the piece about stratification and these hierarchies of knowledge. And I think sometimes we have this obsession with formal education as though you know everything, right, based on the amount of formal degrees you have. And I think Deepa's point about violence prevention programs, for example, where you have youth workers who are deeply connected to neighborhoods and communities who know the communities, who know young people, and therefore have closer relationships with young people based on the fact that they come from the same neighborhoods. I always say that some of the best youth workers I know did not have formal degrees, did not go to college. And at the same time, as was reflected in our research and then some of my own

research, I found that in particular, Black youth workers will end up being told that they can't move to higher positions because they don't have a college degree or they don't have an advanced degree. And at the same time, they are denied those positions of leadership, but they are expected still to share their knowledge and expertise and care for young people without the benefits, without even being paid sometimes. And so they often feel as though they're being exploited for their knowledge without positions of leadership.

Ben Kirshner ([14:22](#)):

Yeah. Thank you. I want to invite you into the conversation, Sarai, and ask how these findings align with your experience working in an after-school program.

Sarai Hertz-Velázquez ([14:31](#)):

Yeah. So just to give some context, my most recent after-school experience and youth work experience took place at the Mission Hill Afterschool program, which is the largest and oldest student-run after-school program in Boston. And it's run through Harvard University's Philip Brooks House Association and led by Harvard and Wellesley undergraduates. So, [it] definitely falls in line with that narrative of youth workers being "formally educated." And Mission Hill Afterschool program itself works with students in grades K through 12 from the Mission Main and Alice Taylor neighborhoods, which are located in Boston. And as far as thinking about how these findings connect to my experiences as a youth worker, I think I entered the youth work field, if you will, and viewed it as purely a part-time volunteer program, unaware of the potential of youth work as a future occupation.

Sarai Hertz-Velázquez ([15:39](#)):

And in that, I want to name my positionality as a youth worker who was able to voluntarily enter the out-of-school-time space, and I had the privilege and resources to do so unpaid. So my perspective as a

youth worker is limited in that. But I definitely struggled with viewing my classmates, peers, fellow youth workers who I could see hadn't been really interrogating their own intentions working with youth. And I tried to, for myself at least, constantly reassess my intention and my impact in the space. But I think having that, the tension between having folks there who really want to be there, but also paying people and perhaps attracting people for the wrong reasons is hard. And I will also say that a program like the one I worked with took place miles from all of our homes. So we were never part of the community, aside from the couple days of the week that we volunteered there. And I think that holding these institutions accountable that create out-of-school-time programs—especially colleges and universities, which do that a lot—is important. And thinking about how the students and communities that we're entering are being affected by and impacted by our presence, or lack thereof.

Ben Kirshner ([17:05](#)):

Thank you. That's great. I appreciate you putting that tension out there for us to think about. I want to suggest, as well, this is a really wonderful conversation. And it's also, again, raising tensions for which there's not an obvious resolution or answer. But it could be helpful to think in terms of an ecosystem of youth work. And we're starting to bring up some of the variations there. So, there's volunteer and there's paid, there's student, college student youth workers, and then there's youth workers for whom this is a form of employment and a really important part of livelihood that we're making an argument for. And I want to say something as a faculty member at a university, which is just to say on one hand, I think it's really important that as that universities are contributing to the surrounding areas that they're part of and being a good neighbor, and part of being a good neighbor might be ethical forms of service learning or volunteer opportunities for their students. Vanessa, we've had some terrific conversations about your perspectives on universities' involvement in the youth work space and kind of how

universities can be value added as opposed to kind of just create challenges. Do you mind speaking to that a little bit?

Vanessa Roberts ([18:12](#)):

Happy to. Thank you for that question, Ben. I feel really fortunate to have been educated as part of my graduate training in community-based research perspectives. And I will shout out, Ben was my professor for that. So just the small world that we're in, Ben is in no small way really responsible for the career I fell into as the leader of a nonprofit organization. But I have really thought a lot about how do we shift the dynamic of exploitation and extraction coming from the university. The amount of requests I field as an executive director of a nonprofit that serves marginalized youth in Denver, we're a popular demographic, right? We have folks that researchers want contact with, they want stories, they want data. And I really try to frame it using my experience as a scholar, as a community-based researcher, to ask, "What is the reciprocity here?"

Vanessa Roberts ([19:24](#)):

And to really ask, "Why should we trust you? Why should we even take the risk?" And if the answer is, "Oh, you might contribute to the field," or, "Oh, you might, you know, benefit from your org being named in a publication, that's brilliant for you, right?" But what is the actual impact immediately on the young folks or on my team that is going to be of benefit? But I wonder if that fine line between volunteerism, between passion-motivated work, is a part of the reason why youth work gets devalued. So, this understanding that, oh, if you care about it, there's some sort of emotional payoff social emotional payoff in terms of, I get value from my work. There's a benefit to me mentally or physically or spiritually in some way. Therefore, it's all right if I get paid a poverty wage. It's all right if I am a salaried worker, but my normal work week is 60 to 70 hours, it's fine because my work is meaningful. So, I

wonder if that idea or that assumption that because the work is meaningful translates itself to, we don't have to economically value it.

Deepa Vasudevan ([20:50](#)):

I'm getting excited here, Vanessa, because that's a big part of my research is seeing how colleagues, basically how the field relies on youth workers' passions, and then that can become an exploitative relationship, right? And then it sort of ends up fueling the work as people who are going to stay in the work no matter what, at what cost? And then we see youth workers who are driving for Uber and Lyft and who maybe have three or four other jobs just to stay in youth work. And so it's, it's almost like, oftentimes you're not seeing that within the program or within the organization, but it's deeply impacting people's livelihoods. But we also need to think about at what cost does this come when youth workers have to work three other jobs? What does it mean for us to really rely on youth workers' sort of love for the work as that form of compensation?

Vanessa Roberts ([21:54](#)):

You're so right, Deepa. And I think the other part of it is also looking at how many of those roles are part-time and come with no benefits. One of the first "big moves" I made when I became executive director of Project VOYCE in 2019 was to go ahead and establish that part-time employees at Project VOYCE receive paid time off and sick time. Because why should you not have access to that type of benefit just as a part-time employee? I didn't know that I could set that policy. As soon as I found that out, I was like, "OK, let's do this." This is one small move. And we also set our full-time work week starting at 30 hours a week, so that if you work 30 hours a week, you can then access our medical, dental, vision benefits, which we also pay 90% of, because it's one of those things where there shouldn't be an assumption, right, that you have to sacrifice all of these basic necessities in order to do work that's meaningful. It should be the opposite, if anything.

Ben Kirshner ([23:06](#)):

I think we often assume youth organizations or nonprofit organizations are a lot more flexible than schools. They tend not to be in the same kind of bureaucracy, but we still get embedded in our own routines and practices and organizational cultures that could be hard to change. So I appreciate hearing this example of internal development and change that you gave us. So this last question is for all of you, what advice do you have for funders, policymakers, and other decision makers to improve OST programs for all youth and youth workers? Bianca, let's start with you.

Bianca Baldrige ([23:37](#)):

It's a big question. And I'll start with what funders can do. Something that came up repeatedly in our study was that funders often will give money that is attached to all kinds of strings. And organizations, youth workers found it really sometimes impossible to do what they actually wanted to do and to meet the needs of the young people that they are engaged with because of an overload of paperwork. And measuring success in the ways that funders want them to measure success, instead of sort of thinking about, or having to measure success by their own mission and values and standards that they've set for themselves. And so, I think that funders can really sort of help the situation by trusting that communities and youth workers and organizations know what's best for their young people. The other thing for funders I would say one of the things that I've been excited about in terms of our report, in our study, is that there are more and more conversations about the livelihoods of youth workers and the importance of taking care of them, right? Not just financially and professionally, but also thinking about mental health and emotional health. And so I think a greater investment in the profession is really essential.

Ben Kirshner ([25:00](#)):

Thank you. Sarai, what advice do you have?

Sarai Hertz-Velázquez ([25:03](#)):

The future of youth work? That is a really big question. And I'd like to talk about a few of the points that Bianca made. The first being the greater investment in the profession of youth work and how essential that is in determining what the future of youth workers look like. And I think that's true. I think people don't really know what youth workers even are, and that that profession is something that's feasible, whether or not it's, it's whether it's paid or volunteer. And I think also part of investing in this profession is looking at accountability, right? And asking, "How can we create accountability in, within youth workers that have a variety of different backgrounds and come from all walks of life?" And I also think that another solution or a step in the right direction is acknowledging that youth workers don't exist in silos, right? So situating youth work within a larger historical context of radical community-based education within minoritized communities.

Ben Kirshner ([26:14](#)):

Thank you for framing some of those issues. Deepa, can you share your thoughts on ways, key advice you want to share at this stage?

Deepa Vasudevan ([26:20](#)):

Yeah, I think that this is maybe at the heart of all of our recommendations is really about investing in people who are working in these programs. And oftentimes, foundation money is going to programming and project ideas and to the latest theory or buzzword that's circulating in education. And those can be great things to inform the field and the profession, but if we know from all the research that the relationships between young people and youth workers are what make these programs impactful, we really do need to have funds that are for people working in the field. And then I also think that a big recommendation that came out from the voices of youth workers, executive directors and youth work scholars from our research was really about rethinking funding so that it's more of a collegial process

with different programs collaborating to work towards a grant and really sort of rethinking how that funding happens so that it's not always a competition.

Deepa Vasudevan ([27:31](#)):

And I don't wanna be too redundant with other people's suggestions, but I really do think it comes back to this idea of trusting and investing in youth workers. And that also goes around the types of professional development that's funded as well. Something that was really beautiful that came up in the different focus groups that we were organizing is that youth workers and youth organizers were so excited to be in community with one another and to talk about their challenges, to talk about the creative solutions that they were finding. And so if there's ways that funders can invest in those networks, in those communities of practice that center practitioners' experiences and ideas, I think that that is incredibly valuable.

Ben Kirshner ([28:18](#)):

Wonderful. Vanessa, can you share your thoughts on where you wanna see the field moving?

Vanessa Roberts ([28:24](#)):

So, this question of, "Where's the field moving? What advice might I give?" I live in this really interesting space where I wear a lot of hats, having come from academia to joining Project VOYCE as a graduate student research assistant and designing curriculum and facilitating program and being in that programming space, and then getting called to leadership, rejecting that call and getting called stronger and saying yes. There's a lot of things I have learned recently, and one of the things that really came up during the pandemic was the way in which money doesn't have to move in such complicated ways. I'll say it again. What nonprofits learned during the pandemic was that a lot of these rules, limitations and restrictions that philanthropy, philanthropists, donors set out were entirely constructed and entirely

dissolvable in the light of a global crisis in a pandemic. All of a sudden there were these light bulbs going off for myself and my peers, especially my fellow executive directors of color, which was, “Hold up, wait a minute, why all of a sudden now can things move so quickly?” And that’s something I would ask funders. I would ask board of trustees. I would ask individual philanthropists to consider if during this pandemic the significance of our work, the significance of out-of-school-time programming and the workers who make that possible was revealed or highlighted, or made extremely evident in such a way that it moved you to invest in trust-based ways, Why not maintain that momentum? Just a question. If all of a sudden in crisis you trusted us, why not continue to trust us to do the work we need to do?

Ben Kirshner ([30:31](#)):

Wow. This has been a really terrific conversation in general and a powerful closing from each of you. I appreciate how provocative and generative you’re being around these ideas for how we think about how the field moves forward. I’m just really impressed by the ideas that you’re sharing. So, Vanessa, Sarai, Deepa, Bianca, thank you so much for participating in this conversation and again, sharing some of these really pressing issues around youth work and also your ideas for how we kind of improve this broader ecosystem or field that creates conditions for youth workers and youth organizations and young people themselves to thrive. Thank you.