

**Overworked Heroes:**  
**Unpacking the Occupational Identities of Library and Afterschool Workers in the Context**  
**of the Learning Ecosystem**

by

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Youth workers, or adults who work with youth, serve a crucial role in the learning ecosystem. This dissertation focuses on specific groups of youth workers in two contexts: afterschool programs and youth services in public libraries. In order to understand their wellbeing and their connection to the larger learning ecosystem, I developed an interview tool that elicits conversation about external and internal perceptions of occupational identity. This tool allows participants to describe, through drawings and conversation, how they believe they are perceived by stakeholders at the community, institution and program level as well as their own aspirations and daily work.

Using this tool, I present two empirical studies and a theoretical chapter that builds a conceptual model of the complex layers of youth worker occupational identity. The first empirical study is a comparative case study of afterschool and youth services library workers. The results show that both groups of youth workers engage in relational practices with youth. The findings point to strong commonalities in the work that these youth workers engage in with youth and establishes library workers as youth workers. The second is a large survey study of youth services public library workers. This study showed that library workers engage in three different types of learning-related work: providing resources, facilitating learning activities and providing spaces for

learning. Both studies illuminate deep friction between the way youth workers think they are perceived by outsiders (largely informed by stereotypes) and their internal understanding of their work. The theoretical chapter combines these findings with other youth worker research and probes some of the emergent themes such as youth workers being disrespected, overworked and/or depicted as super human. I present suggestions for future research on the cognitive dissonance between being overworked and disrespected and being heroic. Implications include a need for professionalization of the field, attention to social justice in youth work, and increased connection with the learning ecosystem. Overall, this dissertation introduces library workers to educational research and highlights the harm that stereotypes could be playing in the legitimization of youth work.

## Table of Contents

<b>1.0 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Youth Workers .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.2 Occupational Identity.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.3 Novel Interview Method.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.4 Pressures Specific to Afterschool and Library Workers .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.5 Studies.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.0 Paper One: What Do You Think Youth Workers Do? A Comparative Case Study of Library and Afterschool Workers .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.1 Abstract .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.2 Relational Practices and Youth Work.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.3 Youth Workers .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.3.1 Youth Services Library Workers .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.3.2 Afterschool Workers.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>2.4 Occupational Identity.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.5 Comparative Case Study .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2.6 Conceptual Frame .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>2.7 Research Questions .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2.8 Method.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2.9 Positionality.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>2.10 Sample .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2.10.1 Setting.....</b>	<b>25</b>

2.10.2 Library Sample .....	25
2.10.3 Afterschool Sample .....	26
2.10.4 Overall Sample .....	27
2.11 Interviews .....	28
2.12 Analysis.....	29
2.13 Findings .....	32
2.13.1 RQ1: To What Extent Do These Two Groups (Library and Afterschool Staff) Think of Their Work as Relational in Nature? .....	32
2.13.1.1 Relational (Two-Way) Interactions.....	33
2.13.1.2 Library Responses .....	34
2.13.1.3 Afterschool Responses .....	36
2.13.1.4 Transactional (One-Way) Interactions.....	36
2.13.1.5 Library Responses .....	37
2.13.1.6 Afterschool Responses .....	37
2.13.1.7 Organizational Work.....	38
2.13.2 RQ2: To What Extent Do These Two Groups (Library and Afterschool Staff) Feel That Outside Stakeholders Think of Their Work as Relational in Nature?.....	39
2.13.2.1 Outside Stakeholders and Relational Interactions .....	40
2.13.2.2 Outside Stakeholders and Transactional Interactions.....	40
2.13.2.2.1 Library Responses .....	41
2.13.2.2.2 Afterschool Responses .....	43
2.13.3 RQ3: To What Extent Do Youth Workers Feel Misunderstood? .....	44

2.13.3.1 Misconceptions .....	44
2.13.3.2 Library Responses .....	45
2.13.3.3 Afterschool Responses .....	46
2.13.3.4 Emergent Themes .....	47
2.14 Discussion .....	47
2.14.1 Similarities .....	48
2.14.2 Differences .....	49
2.15 Summary and Future Research .....	50
2.16 Implications.....	51
<b>3.0 Paper Two: Learning in the Library: A National Study of Youth Services Public</b>	
Library Staff.....	53
3.1 Introduction .....	53
3.2 History of Public Libraries .....	54
3.3 Learning in Public Libraries .....	55
3.3.1 Providing Resources for Learning.....	56
3.3.2 Providing Activities for Learning.....	56
3.3.3 Providing Spaces for Learning .....	57
3.4 Youth Services .....	58
3.5 Occupational Identity.....	59
3.6 The Current Study .....	60
3.7 Method.....	62
3.7.1 Survey.....	62
3.7.2 Sample .....	63



3.7.3 Analysis .....	64
3.8 Findings .....	65
3.8.1 Learning-Related Work .....	65
3.8.2 Providing Resources for Learning.....	68
3.8.3 Facilitating Learning Activities .....	70
3.8.4 Creating a Space for Learning.....	71
3.8.4.1 No Learning.....	72
3.9 Emergent Themes.....	73
3.9.1 Heroes in Distress.....	74
3.10 Discussion .....	75
3.11 Implications and Future Research.....	78
3.12 Conclusion .....	79
4.0 Paper Three: Who Are the Adults Who Work With Youth? Understanding the Occupational Identities of Library and Afterschool Workers in the Context of Learning and Developmental Ecosystems .....	81
4.1 The Learning & Development Ecosystem.....	81
4.2 Youth Workers as Keystone Species.....	82
4.3 Wellbeing of Youth Workers.....	84
4.4 A Model of Youth Worker Occupational Identity .....	85
4.4.1 Occupational Identity .....	85
4.4.1.1 Values and Aspirations.....	86
4.4.1.2 Professional/Organization Standards .....	88
4.4.1.2.1 Libraries .....	89

4.4.1.2.2	Afterschool.....	90
4.4.1.3	Actual Work Experience.....	90
4.4.2	The Occupational Identity Model.....	91
4.5	Investigating Youth Worker Occupational Identity .....	92
4.5.1	Measuring Identity.....	92
4.5.2	Values, Aspirations, and Stereotypes .....	94
4.5.3	Professional/Organizational Standards and the Allied Youth Field .....	97
4.5.4	Actual Work Experience & Stress.....	99
4.6	Conclusions & Takeaways .....	101
4.6.1	Social Justice in Youth Work.....	101
4.6.2	Disrespect .....	103
4.6.3	Implications for the Learning and Development Ecosystem .....	104
4.6.4	Next Steps.....	104
5.0	Conclusions and Future Research.....	106
5.1	Bringing Libraries Into the Learning Ecosystem.....	106
5.2	The Reality of Youth Work .....	107
5.3	Pushing the Meme Method Forward .....	111
5.4	Final Thoughts .....	113
	Bibliography .....	115

## **List of Tables**

<b>Table 2.1. Participant Demographic Information by Sample.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Table 2.2. Umbrella Codes for Participant Responses .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Table 2.3. Relational (Two-way) Subcodes for Library Responses.....</b>	<b>33</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1.1. Three Papers and How They Relate to Each Other .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Figure 1.2. Conceptual Model.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Figure 1.3. Internet Meme Example Used in Interviews.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Figure 1.4. Prompts for Identity Interviews .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Figure 1.5. Applied Conceptual Model .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Figure 2.1. Overlapping Aspects of Library and Afterschool Work .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Figure 2.2. Youth Worker Occupational Identity.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Figure 2.3. What Do They Think I Do Activity: Prompts for Participants to Draw/Write.</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Figure 2.4. Responses for Building Relationships With Youth .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Figure 2.5. Drawing by a Library Participant in Response to What I Think I Do.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Figure 2.6. Drawing by a Library Participant in Response to What I Actually Do .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Figure 2.7. Drawing by a Library Participant in Response to What the Community Thinks I Do .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Figure 2.8. Drawing by an Afterschool Participant in Response to What the Community Thinks I Do .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Figure 2.9. Outside Stakeholders Who Think Staff Does Nothing Important .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Figure 2.10. Drawing by a library participant in response to What the Community Thinks I Do.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Figure 3.1. Conceptual Model of Youth Library Worker Occupational Identity .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Figure 3.2. Example Meme Shown to Participants.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Figure 3.3. Geographic Distribution of Participants .....</b>	<b>64</b>

<b>Figure 3.4. Percentage of Text Responses That Are Learning and Non-Learning Related</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Figure 3.5. Percentage of Text Responses That Are Learning And Non-Learning Related</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Figure 3.6. Learning-Related Responses .....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Figure 3.7. A Sample Response to the Adult Prompt .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Figure 3.8. Drawings That Included Books and Computers .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Figure 3.9. A Drawing Response to the Adult Prompt.....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Figure 3.10. Drawings with 2 or More People in Response to Each Prompt .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Figure 3.11. A Response to the Youth Prompt.....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Figure 3.12. Non-Learning Activities in Outside Stakeholder Prompts .....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Figure 3.13. Response to the Community Prompt (left) and the Adult Prompt (right) .....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Figure 3.14. Emergent Themes in Think and Actually Prompts.....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Figure 3.15. Responses to the Aspirational Prompt (left) and the Actual Work Prompt (right)</b> <b>.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Figure 4.1. Occupational Identity Model.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Figure 4.2. Internet Meme Example Used in Interviews.....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Figure 4.3. Prompts for Identity Interviews .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Figure 4.4. What Do You Want for Kids? .....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Figure 4.5. What the Community Thinks I Do .....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Figure 4.6. What Do You Think You Do? .....</b>	<b>102</b>

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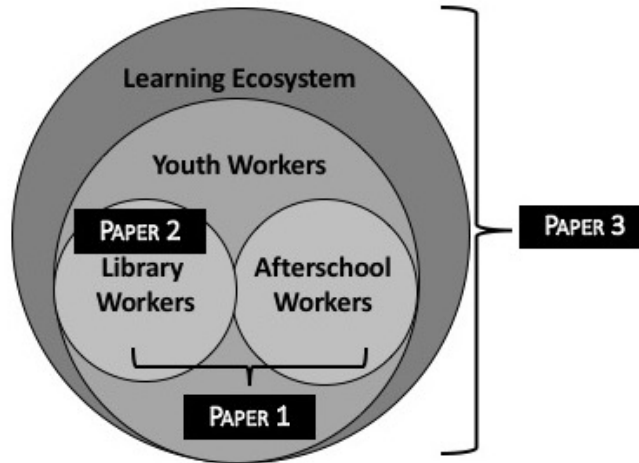
I want to recognize all of the librarians I have worked with and for- you do amazing work every day!

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*This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Anacleto M. Gallegos. My education was as much his dream as mine.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Youth workers, or adults who work with youth, are an important part of the learning ecosystem—a point that is often left out of discussions about education and human development. Adults work with youth in a variety of contexts including camps, afterschool programs, libraries, recreation programs, and cultural centers. Traditional models place the learner at the center of a system of educators and influences while the learning ecosystem model has no center at all (Hecht & Crowley, 2019). This model emphasizes the importance and connections between all actors in the system, especially youth workers. The health of youth workers has a deep effect on the health of the entire system. This dissertation focuses on understanding and assessing the wellbeing of youth workers through their occupational identities. I have created a novel identity tool that allows me and my fellow researchers to understand the external and internal perspectives, as understood by youth workers, and the friction between the two. This friction plays a large part in the overall wellbeing of youth workers. Figure 1.1 illustrates the three papers and how they relate to each other. The first paper describes a comparative case study of youth library and afterschool workers in one city. The second paper provides a broader look into a national sample of youth services library workers. The third and final paper brings the conceptual frame together with theories of learning ecosystems, occupational identity and data from several studies.



**Figure 1.1. Three Papers and How They Relate to Each Other**

## **1.1 Youth Workers**

Youth interact with many types of adults outside of school including youth program leaders, afterschool educators, public library staff, and camp counselors. Yohalem, Pittman, and Moore (2006) explained that the term “youth worker” should include all individuals who “facilitate [youth] personal, social and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence” (p. 6). Youth are typically defined locally by their age and, for youth workers, are limited to those who attend programs, camps, groups or hang out in the designated space. The term ‘youth worker’ is used internationally to define the community of adults who work with youth, but the term is used less consistently in the United States (Baldrige, 2019; Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012; Heathfield & Fusco, 2016). No matter the goal of the specific program or activity, the relationship that staff have with youth is key to supporting learning and development (J. N. Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Larson, Walker, Rusk, & Diaz, 2015; Rhodes, 2004; Walker, 2011). There is an



emphasis on supporting development into adulthood through learning and connection. In this sense, youth workers can be considered educators.

Youth workers, as educators, are a key element of a learning ecosystem which means that their wellbeing drives the health of the entire ecosystem (Hecht & Crowley, 2019). In fact, youth workers are described as a *keystone species* which means that their health has a strong cascading effect on the system. The idea of an ecosystem comes from biological systems where the relationship between each actor are essential to the health of the system - from predator all the way down to microbes in the soil (Hecht & Crowley, 2019). As a keystone species, youth workers have a strong effect on the entire system from organizations to children. Their health is paramount to ensuring that the learning ecosystem is functioning effectively.

Assessing the wellbeing of youth workers is a new idea in the field of education. Previous research examining youth workers often focuses on measures such as job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and stress, which have been used with formal and informal educators to highlight individual motivation and agency (Guidetti, Viotti, Bruno, & Converso, 2018; Wheatley, 2005; White, DeMand, McGovern, & Akiva, 2020; Zee & Koomen, 2016). The learning ecosystem perspective, which emphasizes the deep connections between learners, educators and organizations without a center, however, highlights the importance of the system over the individual (Hecht & Crowley, 2019). When considering the learning ecosystem, we are interested in more than a one-dimensional measure; we are interested in learning about how the educator fits into the context of the ecosystem and how their work affects the whole system. One way to understand this is by looking at how youth workers understand their own work and identities. Youth worker identity may give us an insight into their health and how connected they feel to the entire ecosystem.

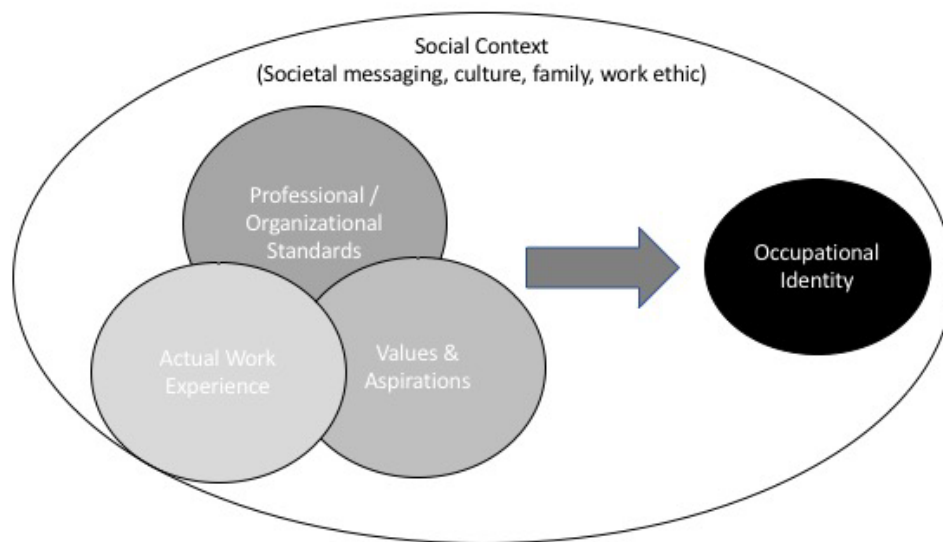
## 1.2 Occupational Identity

Identity is comprised of many different facets such as gender, race and political affiliation; but, identity related to work and occupation is typically one of the most significant for adults (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Here, I will address three main approaches to studying occupational identity: individual development, socially contextualized identity and institutionally organized identity. I will bring them together in a model of youth worker identity that incorporates all approaches.

An individual identity perspective tends to focus on the development, selection, and solidification of identity (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Social contextualized identity challenges the individualistic approach and instead focuses on the context in which people develop identities and their experiences that help create their identities over time including social expectations and internal and external validation (Côté, 1996; Côté & Levine, 2002, 2014; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011; Unruh, 2004). Institutions of employment also play a part in defining occupational identity (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). The organization for which people work as well as their associated profession ties people to social expectations and culture. Organizations provide valuable feedback in terms of how the employee can fit in and be valuable (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Billett, 2011). This feedback can be motivational and supportive, but it can also be demoralizing.

When considering the layers of youth worker occupational identity, we need to consider the entire learning ecosystem including the organization for which they work as well as the community at large and the people with whom they work closely (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). Youth worker occupational identity is shaped by a range of experiences and messages, from daily practice all the way to societal expectations. Figure 1.2 shows a conceptual model I developed

alongside my third dissertation paper about the various contributors to youth worker occupational identity. On the left is internal values and aspirations, actual work experience and the standards of the organization. These aspects shape what work people are able to do as well as how much they value these experiences. The social context in which the person is situated influences the entire process. Work ethic, culture, family expectations, societal expectations and social messaging all play into how youth workers understand and experience their occupational identity.



**Figure 1.2. Conceptual Model**

### **1.3 Novel Interview Method**

In order to explore the occupational identity of youth workers, I have been developing a tool to stimulate interview conversations and this tool is present in every one of my dissertation studies. The idea for this tool came from a popular internet meme that circulated a few years ago and illustrated (sometimes humorously or ironically) “what my friends think I do”, “What my

parents think I do” and “what other people think I do”. The last two cells are always the same: “What I think I do” and “What I really/actually do.” I used the Public School Teacher meme (Figure 1.3) as an example during the interviews. I then gave participants a blank grid with their own prompts. The meme tool, when used in interviews or surveys, hopefully gives participants a fun way to engage in the research and may evoke ideas that would be otherwise inaccessible with direct questions. Figure 1.4 shows the external and internal perspectives that participants were asked to consider. Cells were left open so that participants could write or draw in response to each prompt. I then analyzed the verbal and written responses.

The concept of eliciting non-verbal responses to complex questions like identity is not new – photo voice and drawing techniques have been used with many populations (Adegoke & Steyn, 2017; Ahuja, Dhillon, Akalamkam, & Papneja, 2016; Cook & Quigley, 2013; Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2008; Weber & Mitchell, 1996). The current method allows for drawing, but does not rely on it. Many participants were uncomfortable drawing and instead talked through the prompts or wrote words in response. In fact, most participants who drew pictures narrated their thoughts while they completed their image. This method might evolve into a non-verbal tool like photovoice, but for now it is more of a prompt or ice-breaker for a challenging topic. Simple questions would not have garnered the same rich data that this tool elicited.

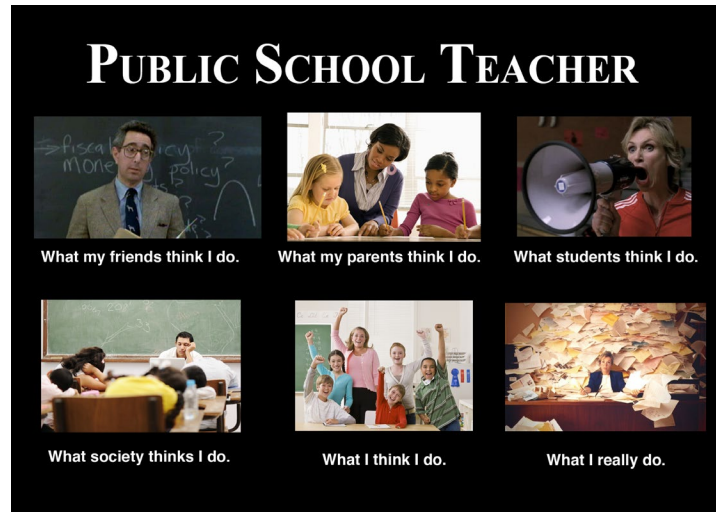


Figure 1.3. Internet Meme Example Used in Interviews

<b>External Perceptions</b>	<b>What the community thinks I do.</b>	<b>What (adult) library patrons think I do.</b> (library staff only) <b>What parents think I do.</b> (afterschool staff only)	<b>What the kids think I do.</b>
	<b>What I think I do.</b>	<b>What I actually do.</b>	
<b>Internal Expectations / Perceptions</b>			

Figure 1.4. Prompts for Identity Interviews

The prompts in Figure 1.4 show the evolution of the identity tool over several research projects. For library participants, I included a prompt, “What do library patrons think you do?” but several people split the cell for adults and children. The next study separated the youth patrons from the adult patrons. For afterschool workers, we asked about parents. Though parents are a very different type of stakeholder than library patrons, I felt that they were similarly removed from the actual work.

This method rests entirely on the perceptions of the youth workers. As an identity tool, it is appropriate to explore their perspective deeply. However, internal perspectives do not

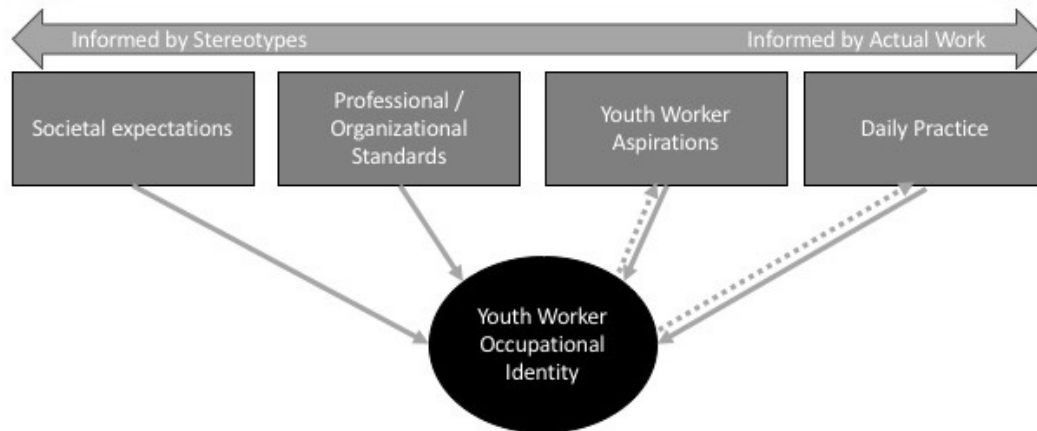
necessarily lead to external validity. As I move forward with this research, data collection from the community, parents, library patrons and the youth will be done to increase validity and to understand the competing realities of youth work.

#### **1.4 Pressures Specific to Afterschool and Library Workers**

In this dissertation, I focus on two specific groups of adults who work with youth: afterschool workers and youth services library workers. Afterschool workers are not well-represented in the educational literature and public library workers are left out altogether. However, both groups have significant impact on youth and we have found strong evidence that both engage in learning-related work (Colvin, White, Akiva, & Wardrip, 2020).

In order to merge the conceptual model (Figure 1.2) with the interview method, we created an applied conceptual model that roughly explains how the prompts flow on a stereotype scale for the youth workers. The arrow across the top shows that the boxes to the left tend to be informed by stereotypes while the boxes on the right tend to be informed more by actual, everyday experiences of work (i.e., reality). Social expectations tend to come from outsiders while daily practice is the actual work being done. One of the big differences between these two groups of youth workers is the professional expectations and support. Public libraries are publicly funded and typically supported by a board of trustees (Brady & Abbott, 2015) whereas afterschool programs are often run as independent nonprofit organizations. While libraries are beholden to the taxpayers, they are supported by a large and longstanding professional organization (American Library Association, 2020a). Afterschool programs tend to be independent without an overarching professional organization (Yohalem, Pittman, & Lovick Edwards, 2010). Both groups are held to

social expectations, some of which are rooted in stereotypes and misinformation. Note that the broken lines going from occupational identity to aspirations and daily practice emphasize that there is a two-way relationship between these entities. Societal expectations and professional standards cannot be changed by the individual, so there is a one-way relationship only.



**Figure 1.5. Applied Conceptual Model**

## 1.5 Studies

The three studies in this dissertation investigate the occupational identities of afterschool and public library workers. The first two are empirically based and the third paper presents a theoretical exploration of the occupational identity model (Figure 1.2) and how it fits with the learning ecosystem frame.

The first paper presents a comparative case study of two groups of youth workers in one city: afterschool workers and youth services public library workers (Colvin et al., 2020). In this paper, we looked specifically at the relational interactions that youth workers had with youth and

how this defined their work. We found that although they thought of their work as relational in nature, they perceived a strikingly different narrative than that held by outside stakeholders. They felt pressure from outside stakeholders to deliver information and services but they also felt that outsiders disrespected their work. This was the case for both library and afterschool workers. These findings are interesting because library work has not been explored in educational literature and because we found their work and experience to be so similar. Both groups of youth workers, at least in this one city, are part of a larger group of adults who work with youth and could benefit from professionalization and support.

The second paper describes a study of a national sample of youth services public library workers. In order to reach a wider sample, I adapted the identity tool to an online survey format that allowed participants to draw with a mouse or touchscreen. The sample of 304 library workers included participants from more than 15 states. Library work has not been studied in academic literature so this relatively large sample provides glimpses into trends across the profession. We found that these library workers engaged in a significant amount of learning related work, specifically connecting people with learning resources, engaging in learning activities and creating space for learning. This confirms our claim that library workers, like other youth workers, are deeply connected to learning and to education. While participants perceived that library patrons thought of their work as learning-related, they thought that the community at large did not. Similarly to Paper 1, library workers felt a great deal of disrespect from outside stakeholders. They explained that these outsiders saw them as stereotypical librarians from the media – stern, unapproachable women who want absolute silence in the library. We also found that a large number of library workers felt overwhelmed by and underprepared for the amount of work they had. Some represented themselves as burned out or as superheroes with books.



The third paper provides an overview of the occupational identity model (Figure 1.2) in a practice-oriented chapter. I review the literature on youth workers, the learning ecosystem, and occupational identity and bring all of that literature together to form the model. Then, I looked closely at research that my colleagues and I have done with afterschool and library workers and apply the data to the model. My coauthor and I examined the organizational and management aspects of the work as well as their personal aspirations. Overall, the themes of friction and disrespect were consistent. We problematized the narrative of youth workers as “heroes” as a reflection of this friction and of a field that has encouraged personal aspirations to become unrealistic and reminiscent of the “white savior” paradigm. We end this paper with applied takeaways for social justice, disrespect and implications for the learning ecosystem.

## **2.0 Paper One: What Do You Think Youth Workers Do? A Comparative Case Study of Library and Afterschool Workers<sup>1</sup>**

### **2.1 Abstract**

This study investigates stereotypes and occupational identity of two groups of youth workers in one city: youth services public library workers and afterschool workers. Library staff are tied to outdated stereotypes of libraries as warehouses of books and afterschool staff are tied to a longstanding idea of afterschool as an extension of school. However, this study reveals that these external expectations are different from what library and afterschool staff actually do. We interviewed 34 participants using a protocol to prompt discussion of expectations from outside stakeholders and occupational identity. We found that both groups think relational interactions are important aspects of their job and engage in very similar relational work with youth. Both groups also experienced friction between what outside stakeholders expect and what they actually do. They felt pressure from outside stakeholders to engage in delivery of information and curriculum as well as a significant level of disrespect. The learning ecosystem includes many youth workers including library and afterschool staff, but afterschool programs have been defined in service of formal education and public libraries have been excluded altogether. Redefining youth work to include library workers and to emphasize the relational work that both library and afterschool

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<sup>1</sup> Colvin, S., White, A.M., Akiva, T. & Wardrip, P.S. (2020). What Do You Think Youth Workers Do? A Comparative Case Study of Library and Afterschool Workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 119.

workers do could help create supportive communities of practice and alleviate the perceived friction.

Keywords: out of school time; public library; afterschool; occupational identity

## **2.2 Relational Practices and Youth Work**

Relational practices are integral to youth work (J. N. Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Li & Julian, 2012; Rhodes, 2004) and youth development (Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2020). Youth workers—that is, adults who work with young people—can act as non-parental support for youth, roles which can support youth development and stability (Arbeit, Johnson, Grabowska, Mauer, & Deutsch, 2019; J. N. Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Osher et al., 2020). The co-creation of a relationship as a safe space for development provides a stable setting for skill development and learning through reciprocity and mutuality (J. N. Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008). Specifically, reciprocity refers to a balanced interaction; a serve-and-return or back-and-forth of conversational control (Li & Julian, 2012) and mutuality refers to “shared relational excitement and experiential empathy” or shared “buy in” to the relationship and the experiences (Lester, Deutsch, Goodloe, & Johnson, 2019, p. 157). Both of these terms describe a relationship that involves substantive participation from both the adult and the young person.

Youth have relational interactions with many types of adults including youth program leaders, afterschool educators, public library staff, and camp counselors. Yohalem, Pittman, and Moore (2006) explained that youth workers should include all individuals who “facilitate [youth] personal, social and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence” (p. 6). No matter the goal

of the specific program or activity, the relationship that staff have with youth is key to supporting learning and development (J. N. Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Larson et al., 2015; Rhodes, 2004; Walker, 2011). Li and Julian (2012) called these “developmental relationships”, argued that they are the ‘active ingredient’ of youth programming, and defined them as characterized by “attachment, reciprocity, progressive complexity, and balance of power” (p. 158).

In this paper, we interrogate the occupational identities of two groups of youth workers in order to understand the work they do and how they believe they are perceived by stakeholders. Within this research we situate the work done by two specific types of adults who work with youth: youth workers who work in afterschool programs and those who work in public libraries. We call both ‘youth workers’ because they facilitate programs that support learning and development. These groups are very different in mission, training, and funding but we argue that they engage in similar and fundamentally relational work. In addition to engaging in relational interactions with youth, these two groups also struggle with friction between the social expectations and stereotypes and the actual work that they do. This kind of tension can lead to disrespect, misunderstanding, and stress (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). We argue that when relational practice, a fundamental aspect of their work, is undervalued, youth workers can experience internal and external friction which can be harmful to their occupational identity, wellbeing, and ability to engage with youth in their jobs.

## **2.3 Youth Workers**

### **2.3.1 Youth Services Library Workers**

American public libraries have been cultural fixtures since Benjamin Franklin opened the first one in 1833 (Brady & Abbott, 2015). Though rarely considered part of the educational system, they have evolved from membership-based, privately-funded reading rooms for rich, white landowners (Brady & Abbott, 2015) to dynamic spaces for lifelong learning (Willett, 2016), advocacy, and social justice (American Library Association, 2020a). Supported by the oldest and largest professional association in the U.S., library services have evolved into some of the best, most responsive spaces for out-of-school learning.

Public libraries, in general, are moving away from an old model of information gatekeeper to a new model of education, community engagement, and facilitation (Lankes, 2011). Public libraries are defined as spaces for the entire community, but its history is deeply rooted in prescriptive education for immigrants and nonwhite populations (Baldrige, 2014; Brady & Abbott, 2015; DuMont, 1986; Honma, 2005). By 2011, makerspaces, spaces for hands-on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) exploration, were a common topic in public library publications (Willett, 2016). In response to more expansive services, the job of most library workers, especially youth services library workers, has changed from information organization and retrieval to informal education and facilitation. Not only that, but public libraries provide many features associated with positive developmental settings including psychological safety, structure, supportive adults, opportunities for belonging, vocational and life skills, and community engagement (Eccles & Gootman, 2019; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005). The public

libraries of today strive to support all youth in formal and informal programming. Like other youth workers, they create safe spaces for young people to learn, socialize and connect with each other.

State and national agencies regularly publish competencies for youth services library staff. *The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action* outlines a new direction for teen services (Braun, Hartman, Hughes-Hassell, Kumasi, & Yoke, 2014). This policy document was written on behalf of the Young Adult Library Services Association, one of the 11 divisions of the American Library association, and calls for teen services staff to be facilitators, educators, connectors, and partners. One of the goals is explained as, “to change the lives of teens and provide them with a brighter future” (Braun et al., 2014, p. 31). This document very clearly encourages library staff to connect with teens and help facilitate their learning. They describe the historical audience as “teens who use the library for homework and leisure reading” (Braun et al., 2014, p. 15) which reflects the view that the library is about the physical collection of materials. This description calls to mind an image of a library that provides a quiet space and books, but not much more. In contrast, the vision for the future audience is more relationally focused: “teens who view the school or public library as a community space” (Braun et al., 2014, p. 15). This is a very different vision for the space than the historically book-centric focus. Community spaces rely heavily on staff to create an open and inviting space.

Though libraries have been around for much longer, The American Library Association (ALA) professionalized libraries in 1876 with the mission “to provide leadership for the development, promotion and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all” (American Library Association, 2020a). ALA sets the guidelines for formal librarian education across the country. Any university offering a Masters in Library/Information Science has to follow ALA’s

standards to be certified. Almost all professional library jobs require a MLS degree from an ALA accredited university so librarianship is tightly controlled (Meyer & Rowan, 1978) which can create a barrier for youth workers who want to enter the field. Interestingly, the American Library Association requirements for formal library education have not evolved as quickly as the services (American Library Association, 2015). Public library staff are neither trained nor recognized as youth workers but their jobs are similar in many ways. Youth services staff face all of the same issues as youth workers: low pay, part time hours, isolated training and lack of legitimization (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006).

### **2.3.2 Afterschool Workers**

Afterschool programs grew out of changes in society including the end of child labor, the rise of formalized schooling, the prevalence of mothers in the workforce and increased free time for children (Halpern, 2003; Mahoney, Parente, & Zigler, 2009). These changes left children, especially poor and immigrant children, playing on the streets (Halpern, 2003). This legacy of serving children who are “at risk” persists today in the deficit mindset that defines which youth are “in need” (Baldrige, 2019, p. 10). Black and Latinx youth are seen as “culturally deprived” the same way as immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Baldrige, 2019; Halpern, 2003). Along those same lines, afterschool programming has been historically funded in order to improve academic achievement and decrease juvenile crime among underprivileged youth (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Gayl, 2004). The idea that minoritized black and brown youth need to be “fixed” is deeply problematic and, unfortunately, pervasive in the field of education (Baldrige, 2014, 2020).

In 1994, the United States Congress authorized the creation of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers (21<sup>st</sup> CCLC) which defined programs as academic enrichment (James-Burdumy

et al., 2005). When it was reauthorized in 2002, it was as part of No Child Left Behind which emphasized academic enrichment and accountability especially for children in low-performing schools (Gayl, 2004). 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC is the only federal funding specifically for OST, so communities that lack private funding must rely on this academically-focused funding which further supports the deficit mindset around under-resourced youth (Balldridge, 2019, 2020).

Afterschool learning has been described as part of the larger learning ecosystem but in slightly different positions: a continuation of learning from formal school, as less important or legitimate than formal school, or as having a completely different set of goals as formal school (Akiva, Delale-O'Connor, & Pittman, 2020; Balldridge, 2019). The *America After 3PM* reports have detailed the activities of children between the hours of 3 and 6pm in order to capture the needs of young people and of caregivers (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Gayl, 2004). The 2014 report found that 11.3 million children are unsupervised after school while demand for affordable programming continues to rise (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). The response to these reports has been to focus on addition academic support and to problematize free time for youth (Hammer & White, 2014). Afterschool programs have had to work within the 21<sup>st</sup> CCLC funding system and adhere to these deficit-focused views of learning in order to find and maintain funding (Hammer & White, 2014). Under-resourced communities are forced to follow the testing mentality of the education system which leaves very little room for other types of learning such as cultural support, social justice and social-emotional learning (Balldridge, 2020; Nygreen, 2017).

Narrow views of what counts as learning tend to be common in the U.S. (Akiva, Delale-O'Connor, & Pittman, 2020). However, afterschool programming can provide a supportive space for youth development and preparation for adulthood (Mahoney et al., 2005). Afterschool programming can promote academic achievement, but can also provide opportunities for



belonging and increased psychosocial skills (Mahoney et al., 2005; Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). Funding and research in the U.S. have focused mainly on the academic outcomes of afterschool programs, but afterschool is an important place for social skill development, interest based learning and the development of social capital (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Philp & Gill, 2020; Pozzoboni & Kirshner, 2016).

The adult practitioners who provide these learning environments tend to be part time and underpaid (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006; Yohalem et al., 2006). There is a lack of cohesion in the field coupled with a lack of legitimacy and recognition that can be found in other more professionalized fields (Pozzoboni & Kirshner, 2016). In 2011, the National Afterschool Association (NAA) published core competencies for youth workers (National AfterSchool Association, 2011) that included curriculum, assessment, interactions, relationships and more. NAA continues to update these competencies and support the work of afterschool workers but they do not have largescale leverage to mandate or formalize training for youth workers (Starr & Gannett, 2016). The work of afterschool employees and their training is therefore most likely defined by the organization that employs them rather than by an overarching profession (Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012). Credentialing youth workers is debated in the field because formal requirements might limit access and would not guarantee increased compensation and may be a barrier to entry in a field rife with turnover(Starr & Gannett, 2016).

## **2.4 Occupational Identity**

Professional organizations provide inconsistent support for the work done in libraries and afterschool programs, and this inconsistency may affect the occupational identity of the workers

in these organizations. Adults have many identities including race, gender and group memberships (Vignoles & Schwartz, 2011). Occupational identity is one such facet of identity that provides validity both to the self (vocation) and to others (validation) (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Billett, 2011). Thus, having a strong occupational identity can support growth and motivation while a weak or negative identity could lead to distress (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

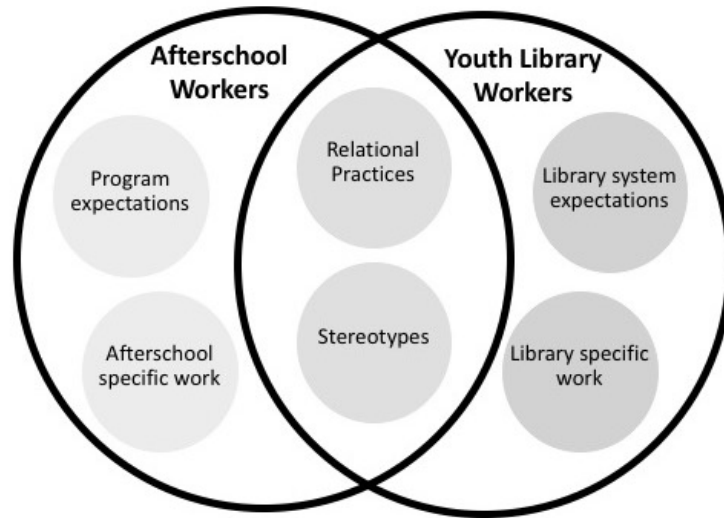
Occupational identity is made up of many layers including an association with a job, organization, team and vocation. Not all people have jobs that align with internal identities, but instead have a separate occupational identity (Billett, 2011). Identity construction is deeply tied to social validation, which provides incentives to conform and commit to expected behaviors and emotions expected by valued people (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). A key part of occupational identity is tied to the organization and professional in which a person works. Here we are interested in the public library and afterschool organization where people work and the supporting professional organizations (ALA and NAA). Organizations are defined at different levels and within society, and therefore an organizational identity has a strong social component (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). The organization and the associated profession ties people to social expectations and culture. The organization provides valuable feedback in terms of how the employee can fit in and be valuable. People tend to gravitate toward jobs and organizations that perpetuate their own self views and may feel uncomfortable in those that go against those views (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011; Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009). This feedback loop is key to self-validation and success in a job.

Occupational identities associated with specific fields are subject to stereotypes when there are ingrained social expectations for the job or profession (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). According to self-categorization theory, people attribute stereotypical features to themselves and to others as

a way to define the self (Spears, 2011). In this way, people opt into certain identities and out of others through categorization. These stereotypes can affect occupational identity both positively and negatively. For example, teachers struggle with stereotypes about controlling students, being subject specialists, and not having a personal identity (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Smith, 2015; Weber & Mitchell, 1996) and library workers tend to be stereotyped as quiet, conservative rule-followers (Walter, 2008). Contending with stereotypes complicates a contextual occupational identity.

## **2.5 Comparative Case Study**

This paper compares and contrasts two groups of youth workers in one city: youth services library workers and workers in afterschool programs (See Figure 2.1). There are many other types of youth workers in this city, but we chose two groups that are set in very different professions and organizations. Although these two groups are not often compared, we assert that they do similar work and face similar tension from external expectations and stereotypes. Youth services library workers are supported by a large professional organization that emphasizes books and resources and not the essential relationship-building with youth. Afterschool workers lack a strong professional organization and instead tend to rely on individual program structures. Both the afterschool and library fields have a long history of supporting homework completion and academic achievement as well as keeping youth “out of trouble”(Brady & Abbott, 2015; Mahoney et al., 2009), rather than building relationships with youth that could support critical learning and development (Li & Julian, 2012).

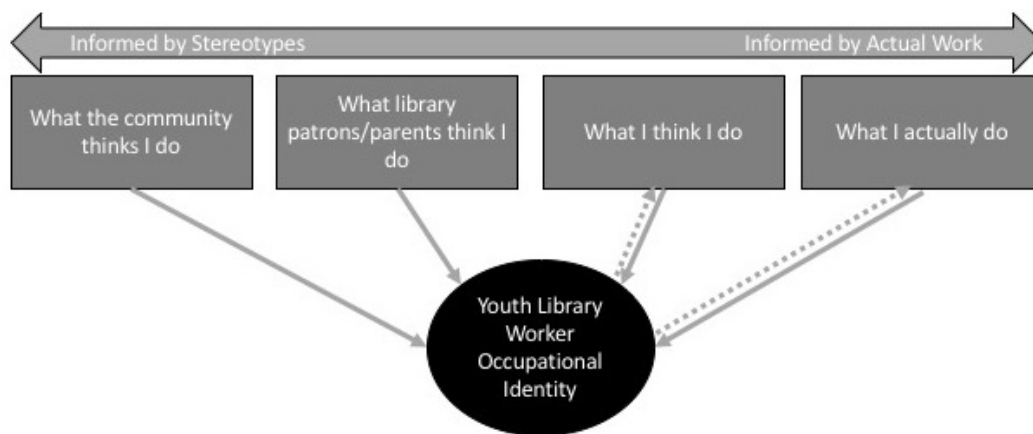


**Figure 2.1. Overlapping Aspects of Library and Afterschool Work**

Our assumption is that relationships need to develop between adults and youth in order for deep connection and learning to occur (Li & Julian, 2012). Therefore, relationships need to be supported for even the most basic learning to occur. For youth workers to move beyond simple book recommendations and homework help, deep connection is essential. This fundamental relational practice is something they have in common and for which they are unlikely to be consistently trained (Akiva et al., 2020; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Lovick Edwards, 2010). In addition, both groups experience friction from outsiders in the form of societal expectations and stereotypes. History places libraries in a book-delivery role and afterschool programs in a daycare role. Funding and legitimacy pressures have added pressure to support formal academic measures such as STEM and homework help (Baldrige, 2019). These pressures pull youth workers in different direction and create friction that we hypothesize will appear in their understanding of their own occupational identity.

## 2.6 Conceptual Frame

The conceptual frame of this paper focuses on the occupational identity of youth workers. Figure 2.2 illustrates the way that we conceptualize their occupational identities. Starting on the left of Figure 2.2, we suggest that outside perceptions are framed most strongly by stereotypes. Moving closer to the actual work, perceptions are framed most strongly by the reality. All of these perspectives feed into the occupational identity of the youth worker. Occupational identity is situated in the societal context and so the perceptions of outsiders is important (Christiansen, 1999; Côté, 2014; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). In this case, the opinions of outside stakeholders are especially important because they pay taxes that pay for the services (libraries), sit on boards, and donate money and time to their organizations. These perceptions, coupled with the perceptions of people more directly related to the work and the youth worker's own aspirations and reality, creates a more complete identity. Our model examines occupational identity from outside in. We can then identify potential friction and disagreement between the perceptions as experienced by youth workers.



**Figure 2.2. Youth Worker Occupational Identity**

## **2.7 Research Questions**

RQ1: To what extent do library and afterschool staff think of their work as relational in nature?

RQ2: To what extent do library and afterschool staff believe that outside stakeholders think of their work as relational in nature?

RQ3: To what extent do youth workers feel misunderstood?

## **2.8 Method**

In order to understand the similarities and differences between the library and afterschool setting, we used a comparative case study method. We interviewed 17 library staff and 17 afterschool staff. These interviews took place in separate projects; however, a large part of the interview protocol was the same for both groups and the first author was present for all 34 interviews. The two datasets were merged for this project. We analyzed the two samples separately and together to create case studies and comparisons. We felt comfortable comparing the datasets because they were asked the same questions and all of the participants work in the same city.

## **2.9 Positionality**

We are conscious of the dangers of not adequately considering our identities alongside those of our participants (Milner, 2007). The first author was a youth services public librarian for 12 years before re-entering academia to pursue doctoral studies. She has been part of regional and

national conversations about librarian training and support. She conducted all of the library interviews and introduced herself as a former librarian during the interviews. The second author was an afterschool provider for several years before earning her doctorate. The first and second authors interviewed the afterschool workers together. The other two authors are experts in out-of-school time programs and in program facilitation. All four authors are white.

## **2.10 Sample**

### **2.10.1 Setting**

The adult practitioners in this study all work in a medium-sized rust belt city. According to the U.S. Census, the city population was about 300,000 in 2019 in a metro region of about 2.3 million people. Approximately 15% of the city's population is under the age of 18, 67% is white and 23% is Black or African American (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Approximately 43% of adults in the city had a bachelor's degree or higher and the median household income was \$45,831 in 2018 with about 21.4% of the population under the poverty threshold.

### **2.10.2 Library Sample**

The library sample came from a library system with 17 branch locations in one city. The library system was established in 1881 and is a stronghold in the community, welcoming approximately 2.9 million visitors each year. The mission statement of the library system is, "To Engage our Community in Literacy and Learning."

The library sample was purposefully selected in order to include as many branches as possible and to understand the organization (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Seidman, 2013). The positions recruited included Library Assistants who, as defined by the library system, must have a Bachelor's Degree and Library workers, who are required to have a Masters in Library Science. These professionals worked in Children's Services (approximately birth to age 10), Teen Services (approximately age 10-18), or, at smaller branches, both (birth to age 18). Staff sizes varied by branch, ranging from 5 to >50. Recruitment took place through the library system's Teen and Youth Services Coordinators. For the purposes of this paper, we will refer to these participants as public library youth services staff.

We engaged 17 youth services staff (7 Teen Services, 6 Children's Services, and 4 both) from 13 branches in this library system. Ten of the participants held a Masters in Library Science degree. Two of the participants had outreach responsibilities that required them to travel to organizations within the community. The newest member of the staff had only been there 1 year and the most senior staff member had been working for the library system for 17 years. Interviews took about an hour and occurred between fall 2017 and fall 2018. They were audio recorded and took place in private library spaces (office, meeting room, etc.) while the library was open. Each participant was given a \$20 gift card as thanks for their participation.

### **2.10.3 Afterschool Sample**

Afterschool participants were all from The Boys and Girls Club of America (BGCA) and The Y, two national organization that serve a combined 13 million young people. BGCA and The Y have similar missions - they aim to help children "learn, grow, and thrive" (The Y) and to "reach



their full potential” (BGCA) regardless of background (The Y) and especially for those in need (BGCA).

The research team recruited the sample through a local out-of-school time intermediary organization and by reaching out to afterschool program directors. Participants worked across five sites in BGCA and The Y. BGCA programs included one that was run by a central office that oversaw additional programs and one stand-alone program. Both programs sought funding largely through grants as well as through some donations and membership dues. The Y programs were run by a central office that oversaw eight Y branches and 40 afterschool programs that took place at local schools.

Interviews took place between October 2018 and February 2019. Interviews occurred in person at the site where the interviewee worked or in a neutral space such as a nearby café. Each participant was given a \$20 gift card as thanks for their participation.

#### **2.10.4 Overall Sample**

As seen in Table 2.1, both samples were majority Female and White. This reflects the demographic of both the library and afterschool workforce (Lance, 2005; Yohalem et al., 2006), but not necessarily the demographics of the city. This dynamic of mostly white women teaching non-white students can also be seen in formal education settings (Goldenberg, 2014). Both groups had similar number of years working at the program. All but one of the library participants were full-time employees; whereas less than half of the afterschool sample worked full time. The education levels also reflect the ways that these participants were recruited. The library assistant job requires a bachelor’s degree (as defined by the library system) at minimum whereas afterschool positions vary widely in their educational requirements.

**Table 2.1. Participant Demographic Information by Sample**

	<b>Library Staff (N=17)</b>	<b>Afterschool Staff (N=17)</b>
<b>Organization</b>	17 Library System	10 BGCA 7 YMCA
<b>Gender</b>	13 Female (77%) 4 Male (24%)	14 Female (82%) 3 Male (18%)
<b>Race</b>	16 White (94%) 1 Black (6%)	13 White (77%) 4 Black (24%)
<b>Average Years at Program</b>	4.88 (Range: 1-17)	4.56 (Range: 1-14)
<b>Work Hours</b>	16 Full Time (94%) 1 Part Time (6%)	7 Full Time (42%) 10 Part Time (59%)
<b>Education</b>	10 Masters (59%) 7 Bachelors (41%)	6 Masters (35%) 7 Bachelors (41%) 3 Associates (18%) 1 High School (6%)

## 2.11 Interviews

We used a semi-structured protocol that allowed for flexibility (Seidman, 2013). In addition, the use of interviews as the instrumentation device allowed us to gather information based on participants' perceptions and in their own words (Miles et al., 2014).

Each interview included questions about the participant's job, experience, and training. Then each participant was asked to do an activity called "What Do They Think I Do?" to prompt reflection about participants' jobs. This exercise, modeled after a popular Internet meme, served as an elicitation device for the interview and also produced an artifact to analyze. After seeing an example from another field (teaching in a public school), participants were encouraged to draw or write their responses to the prompts (see prompts below in Figure 2.3). We asked them to talk through their thoughts as they drew/wrote. We also asked questions to clarify the meaning of their drawings. The activity afforded contrasting perspectives to emerge in the library staff's description of their work as informal educators. We hoped to elicit sensemaking around their professional

identity and the pressures from external stakeholders (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). In order to do that, we used a protocol that would allow drawing to express different facets of identity (Weber & Mitchell, 1996).

<b>What the community thinks I do.</b>	<b>What library patrons think I do.</b> (library staff only) <b>What parents think I do.</b> (afterschool staff only)
<b>What I think I do.</b>	<b>What I actually do.</b>

**Figure 2.3. What Do They Think I Do Activity: Prompts for Participants to Draw/Write**

The library study was conducted first and the protocol was adjusted slightly to fit the afterschool participants. In order to mirror the stakeholders in the library protocol, we changed “library patrons” to “parents”. Unlike library staff, afterschool staff have regular contact with parents so they are similar to the patrons who frequent the library and use services. We thought it was important to understand how the afterschool staff related to the youth so we added a question to that effect. We will compare the responses across *What Library Patrons Think I Do* and *What Parents Think I Do* because they are similarly invested in the work, but these groups are clearly very different. Audio recordings were transcribed for analysis and notes from interviews were also used to supplement transcripts during data analysis.

## **2.12 Analysis**

The first and second authors coded and analyzed all transcribed interviews using the online qualitative software package, Dedoose, and Microsoft Excel. Coding was done iteratively in cycles (Saldaña, 2015) and the research team met frequently to check understanding and discuss emergent

codes. We began with deductive codes related to the specific prompts in the What Do They Think I Do? activity: *What the community thinks I do*, *What parents / library patrons think I do*, *What I think I do* and *What I actually do*. We chose these prompts because they provided contrasting perspectives of stakeholders outside the work and the participants' understanding of their own work. It is important to note that this is the participant's perception of the stakeholder's perspective.

One important aspect of relational practices is reciprocity. Usually described as a back-and-forth of conversational control, reciprocity refers to a balanced interaction (Li & Julian, 2012). In our analysis, we used deductive codes to differentiate between different modes of interaction: one-way interactions where information is delivered or where one person listens to another person speak and two-way interactions where balanced communication occurs and both people speak and listen. In the context of youth work, one-way interactions are typically transactional while two-way interactions tend to be relational. The latter helps build a relationship between the two parties while the former is centered around content or information delivery. The final codebook included four umbrella codes: One-way communication, Two-way communication, Misconceptions, and Organization (See Appendix A).

In order to address RQ1, we created deductive umbrella codes using the Simple Interactions tool which is a training tool for relational practice (Akiva, Li, Martin, Horner, & McNamara, 2016). From that tool, we applied the Reciprocity dimension to the data. In contrast to that, we coded interactions that involved delivering information or instructing youth on what to do as one-way interactions. These interactions do not meet the definition of reciprocity because only one person (usually the adult) is communicating and one person (usually the youth) is receiving in the instruction/information. The two overarching categories we created for this

analysis were Two Way Interactions (Relational) and a One-Way Interactions (Transactional). See Appendix A for the complete codebook.

Inductive codes came out of the data and included two main categories: organizational work and misconceptions. These umbrella codes came from many rounds of iterative coding, expanding and collapsing categories until we had two main themes that made sense.

Organizational work was a common theme and included paperwork, reports and meetings required by the organization or employer. This type of work was usually mentioned as something that was required in addition to work with youth. This came up frequently in response to the *What I Actually Do* prompt which may be a reflection of the example showed during the interviews. The image showed a picture of a teacher behind a pile of paperwork under *What I Actually Do*.

Misconceptions was another emergent umbrella code that was defined by stereotypes and historical notions of youth services library workers as quiet book brokers and of afterschool workers as babysitters. In addition, these codes included the idea that these workers don't do anything important at all. The overall feeling behind this category was a deep lack of understanding and (at times) disrespect for the work.

A revised coding scheme included more detailed definitions and examples of the a priori codes. The research team finalized and agreed upon the final codebook. This process of collaborative coding was intended to increase reliability (Saldaña, 2013). The first two are mainly deductive in nature while the latter two are mainly inductive. Drawings and words from the identity activity were used to illustrate the themes of the responses.

## 2.13 Findings

### 2.13.1 RQ1: To What Extent Do These Two Groups (Library and Afterschool Staff) Think of Their Work as Relational in Nature?

In order to explore how individuals in each group conceptualized their professional identity as it relates to relational practice, we analyzed two parts of the What Do They Think I Do? activity. One prompt asked *What I Think I Do* and one asked *What I actually do*. Responses were in the form of drawings and/or words and many reflected multiple themes. Table 2.2 illustrates that relational interactions were strongly reflected in the staff's responses to *What I think I do*. This pattern was not as strong for *What I actually do* where participants included more transactional interactions. Patterns are similar for library and afterschool staff.

**Table 2.2. Umbrella Codes for Participant Responses**

	<b>What the Community Thinks I Do</b>		<b>What Parents/ Library Patrons Think I Do</b>		<b>What I Think I Do</b>		<b>What I Actually Do</b>	
	Library	After-school	Library	After-school	Library	After-school	Library	After-school
One-way interaction (Transactional)	9 (53%)	14 (82%)	14 (82%)	13 (76%)	10 (59%)	9 (53%)	12 (71%)	11 (65%)
Two-way interactions (Relational)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (6%)	4 (24%)	12 (71%)	12 (71%)	6 (35%)	6 (35%)
Misconceptions	14 (82%)	4 (24%)	8 (47%)	5 (29%)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Organizational Work	1 (6%)	5 (29%)	1 (6%)	2 (12%)	8 (47%)	8 (47%)	12 (71%)	9 (53%)

\*Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents (N=17) in each group that mentioned the specific code in their response.

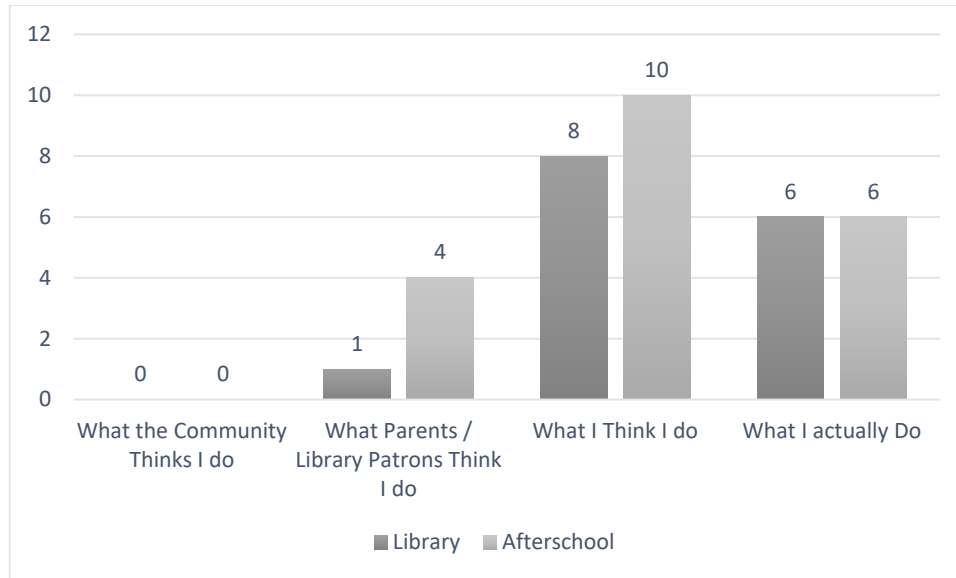
### 2.13.1.1 Relational (Two-Way) Interactions

In order to explore two-way interactions further, we broke down the responses into the corresponding thematic subcodes. For the Relational (Two-way) interactions, the three subcodes include a) providing Interest-based programming, b) relationship with youth and c) creating a welcoming space (See Appendix A). Table 2.3 shows that participants mentioned having a relationship with youth more often than the other codes. Both groups mentioned relational codes more in *What I think I do* than in *What I actually do* (See Figure 2.4).

**Table 2.3. Relational (Two-way) Subcodes for Library Responses**

	What the Community Thinks I Do		What Parents / Library Patrons Think I Do		What I Think I Do		What I Actually Do	
	Library	After-school	Library	After-school	Library	After-school	Library	After-school
Interest-based programming	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (24%)	2 (12%)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Relationship with youth	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (6%)	4 (24%)	8 (47%)	10 (59%)	6 (35%)	6 (35%)
Welcoming	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (6%)	3 (18%)	2 (12%)	1 (6%)	0 (0)

\*Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents (N=17) in each group that mentioned the specific code in their response.



**Figure 2.4. Responses for Building Relationships With Youth**

### 2.13.1.2 Library Responses

Library staff spoke passionately about their relational interactions with youth. Specifically, several noted that they wished to create a supportive space within the public library. One library participant described the process of operating programs for youth and “hopefully doing things that interest them that could allow them to fill that agency and interest and just passion for trying stuff out...” She worked hard to ensure that the activities interested and engaged youth. Another library participant described her role as an advocate:

I think I'm an advocate. I think that every teen specialist is an advocate for the teenagers that use their space, whether it's amongst the adult patrons, or other staff members, or even other teens. I think that's the most important work that we do.

Ensuring that teens have a space within the larger library was key for these professionals.

Figure 2.5 shows a drawing that was completed by a library participant who felt that what he did



was amplify the voices of youth within the library. Note that the adult is much smaller than the youth in the image.

When responding to *What I Actually Do*, library staff were specific about their interactions. One participant explained that she ensured that the teen space was safe for youth to come in each day. “I like to think that when they come in they’ve always got a fresh slate and that I’m automatically operating in a way that is judgement free.” It was important to her that youth were welcome every day regardless of what happened the day before. Another staff person explained that although he is in the branch only a few days a week, youth came to expect him and to look forward to their time together.

“It’s almost like everyone had their secret appointments. It was like one game, and then the next game, and the next game. and it’s like two hours of games.” He was excited to know that although he was unable to be there everyday, the teens really looked forward to connecting with him.

Library participants seemed to value their relationships with youth, especially as advocates for them and as creators of spaces that are safe for youth.



**Figure 2.5. Drawing by a Library Participant in Response to What I Think I Do**

### **2.13.1.3 Afterschool Responses**

Afterschool participants also frequently mentioned relational interactions with youth. One participant described how he engaged with youth on a personal level even while playing games. From the outside perspective, he seemed to be just playing a game, but he was actually connecting with kids on a deep, personal level.

“What they don't see is that if I am playing ping pong, I'm also probably talking to the kid about how their day was, and how was school, or why are they tired... I'm having that informal relationship, building that relationship with that kid at that point.”

Other participants described helping youth with their interpersonal problems. “They're having breakdowns about friendship so I'm like, "Okay. Let's talk about it. Let's work it out.” Responses for *What I Actually do* were similar. For example, one participant explained that she “joke[d] with the kids. Help them through issues with other kids at school.” Another staff participant described “being deliberate about spending one-on-one time with kids, and getting to know them better.”

Afterschool participants also seemed to value their relationships with youth. They described conversations with youth that reflected ongoing connections.

### **2.13.1.4 Transactional (One-Way) Interactions**

Though transactional responses were less common in response to *What I Think I Do* and *What I Actually Do*, they were still present. Appendix B shows that library staff were likely to discuss delivering resources such as books, technology and information to youth while afterschool providers tended to be more focused on delivering curriculum, managing behavior and keeping kids on task.

### **2.13.1.5 Library Responses**

Library staff talked frequently about connecting youth with books. One staff member summed up her work as, “searching for books, answering questions and picking up toys.” Much of the work centered around books and connecting youth and parents with those books. “First, I love to help children discover books, how fun books can be... I show support for families whether that's through story time, information resources.” In this way, even programs are delivered in a transactional manner that connects people with books rather than developing relationships. “I’m reading children’s books and getting ready to share those books with kids and thinking about kinds of lessons that’ll teach them and what that will expose them to.” This literacy focus is not surprising in a library, but the library staff also talked about the lessons and curriculum that they felt they needed to deliver. One participant explained that he struggled to teach specific lessons in the maker space. “We're gonna learn Photoshop today, say, and one person's like, oh great, I'm gonna be here all day, and another person's like, I can only be here for 50 minutes. And then other person shows up 15 minutes before the end ...” The combination of structured lessons in the drop-in atmosphere of the library was a challenge for some staff. Some of this framing may be due to the badging process implemented by the library. The library system allows youth to learn specific skills in order to gain privileges like checking out cameras and other equipment.

### **2.13.1.6 Afterschool Responses**

Afterschool participants spoke frequently about managing the behavior of youth in their programs in response to the prompt *What I Actually Do*. As mentioned previously, some of these interactions are deeply personal and relational. For example, one participant said, “What I actually do is I solve mini-meltdowns. I solve big meltdowns” which requires connecting with the youth. On the other hand, staff talked about having to uphold rules and correct behavior in a very one-

sided way. Staff mentioned that they “do a lot of yelling at the unruly kids; a lot of peace-making,” “correct[ing] kids on the ‘bad boy bench’” and “supervise the environment.” The “bad boy bench” actually came up a few times in one program. While the program also had a “friendship bench” where kids could work out their differences, the “bad boy bench” was used as punishment for kids who were acting out or breaking rules. The bench was located by the program administrator, near the front door. This program was not alone. “Bad” behavior was often framed as a disruption that got in the way of the plans for the day. “So a lot of times I plan all sorts of things but we only get to indulge in it for a short amount of time.” Unfortunately, staff felt pressured to have kids finish their homework and engage in grant-based academic work (STEM, digital literacy, etc.) and behavior management was seen as something that got in the way. “We’ve had to remove students from the program just because they won’t-- or are refusing to do the academic part.” Some staff mentioned that they had kids with severe behavioral issues and disabilities in their programs – something for which they had neither the training nor the staff to handle.

#### **2.13.1.7 Organizational Work**

Another theme that emerged about the relational nature of participants’ work was about organizational tasks they were required to do. We coded organizational work as administrative duties, meetings, committee work, outreach, computer work (See Appendix A for a complete list). Organizational responsibilities were frequently mentioned in the responses across all youth workers.

One library participant described her work as getting in the way of her connecting with teens. “The committee work just sort of piles up and then after a while it’s like enough of spending all this time in the office doing committee work when I should be out on the floor helping teens with whatever they’re doing.” Similarly, an afterschool participant described the administrative

work as necessary but getting in the way of how she wants to interact with youth. “Sometimes I do feel like it's very much focused on the behind the scenes stuff, which is fine because that's necessary to have this run. But I want to do more of just the hanging out with kids part. So sometimes I feel the emphasis and the importance is placed on have the employees be perfect, have these programs be perfect, let's spread yourself as thin as you can doing all these programs instead of just let's go hang out with kids. Let's play a game. Let's play cards.” Figure 2.6 shows a library participant’s response to *What I Actually Do*. She saw herself on the computer the bulk of the time answering emails rather than interacting with youth.



**Figure 2.6. Drawing by a Library Participant in Response to What I Actually Do**

### **2.13.2 RQ2: To What Extent Do These Two Groups (Library and Afterschool Staff) Feel That Outside Stakeholders Think of Their Work as Relational in Nature?**

In order to explore how staff thought outside stakeholders perceive their work, we analyzed two sections of the What Do They Think I Do? activity prompt: *What the Community Thinks I do* and *What Library Patrons/Parents think I do*. The striking pattern in Table 2.2 is that none of the participants thought that the community would describe their work as relational. Similarly, only 1 library participant felt that library patrons considered their work relational and only 4 afterschool

participants felt that parents considered their work to be relational. For the most part, these outside stakeholder perspectives were described to be transactional or a reflection of a misconception about the work.

#### **2.13.2.1 Outside Stakeholders and Relational Interactions**

A few of the afterschool participants responded that parents thought they had relational interactions with youth. “It's great. What the parents think I do-- teach everything they don't learn in school... So that's the things in the life skills group especially. That's wonderful.” Another staff member described the sustained relationships she had with youth and that parents recognized those connections. “I've gotten to know really well because their kids have been coming here for five years or something. So I think some of them think I know their kids pretty well, and I'm like another family member.” Only one library participants responded that library patrons thought she engaged in relational interactions. She said, “I think that they trust us and know that we care about them and if they ever did need anything, if there was ever an emergency or, you know, they needed more from us than just the day to day that they could come to us.”

#### **2.13.2.2 Outside Stakeholders and Transactional Interactions**

Looking more closely at the transactional interactions (See Appendix B) described in response to *What the Community Thinks I Do* and *What library Patrons/Parents Think I do*, there are different patterns for library and afterschool staff. Similar to *What I think I do/ What I actually do*, library responses tended to be about connecting youth to resources. Though, there were a few responses saying that library patrons think they engage in behavior management. For the afterschool participants, responses centered around curriculum and behavior management. For What Parents Think I do, productivity was a common theme.

#### **2.13.2.2.1 Library Responses**

Library participants described the library patrons as being focused on the delivery of resources such as books, electronics and information. “They overall vibe being they seem to think that only teens who are like, book nerds would come to the library and that we just spend all of our time researching and doing homework.” Some staff members thought that the library patrons saw them as general helpers: “Sometimes I think someone that they can go to for help, whether it’s with homework or doing something with one of our labs equipment.” In addition to providing resources, staff felt that they were expected to control the youth who came into the library. “Adults just come in and they see all the kids running around and they just assume that we’re just there to watch their kids, or that we’re not doing enough to make sure that the kids are calmed down, or we’re not putting enough effort. It’s like we need to be keeping them quiet.”

In terms of what the community thinks they do, library staff describe themselves as being strongly tied to books and resources. “I think a lot of some of the community still thinks that we’re just in the library, and we’re just doing books. Talking to people about the internet, helping them create email account, stuff like that.” Figure 2.7 shows one participant’s response. She explained that the community saw her as “Putting books away, putting books in their spots. Doing book stuff. Talking about books.” The relationship to books also took a disrespectful tone at times. Some library staff explained that the community thought, “It must be so nice to read all day.” Reading all day was a common response to this prompt. In addition, there was a theme of behavior management in the library. “Oh, the library is a daycare. I didn’t know there were going to be so many kids here after three o’clock.”



**Figure 2.7. Drawing by a Library Participant in Response to What the Community Thinks I Do**



#### 2.13.2.2.2 Afterschool Responses

Afterschool participants frequently responded that the community thought of them as babysitters or daycare (see Figure 2.8). We coded that as behavior management along with keeping youth busy or out of trouble. Some participants responded that “Actually, everybody thinks that the enrichment programs are babysitting services, which there's nothing wrong with being a babysitter. But we have to have lesson plans.” This is interesting because both babysitting (behavior management) and lessons are a transactional interaction in our framework. Another response was the idea that working with youth was a burden of some kind. One afterschool staff member described community members who thought of her as a savior for working with youth. “Oh. Wow. That's amazing that you do that. And I couldn't do that. I don't know how you handle 100 students every night.” That's often what I hear a lot. But, yeah. Really, I guess what I'm more impressed really thinking-- savior is just for-- kind of just thinking I get this vibe they think we're putting up with kids or something. But I don't think it's that hard since I do enjoy being with the kids.” The lesson planning and delivery of curriculum was a frequent response for afterschool participants. “We market ourselves as a program that provides a great deal of enrichment as well as homework help, happily engaged in one STEAM activity after another.”

When describing What parents think I do, there was an emphasis on homework and behavior management. “I think a lot of them really just want homework help.” Several explained that if youth did not finish their homework during the afterschool program, she would get angry phone calls from parents. In addition to homework, participants described parents as expecting supervision for their child. “They probably think we do a good job supervising.” This concept of managing the behavior of youth is consistent across all prompts.



**Figure 2.8. Drawing by an Afterschool Participant in Response to What the Community Thinks I Do**

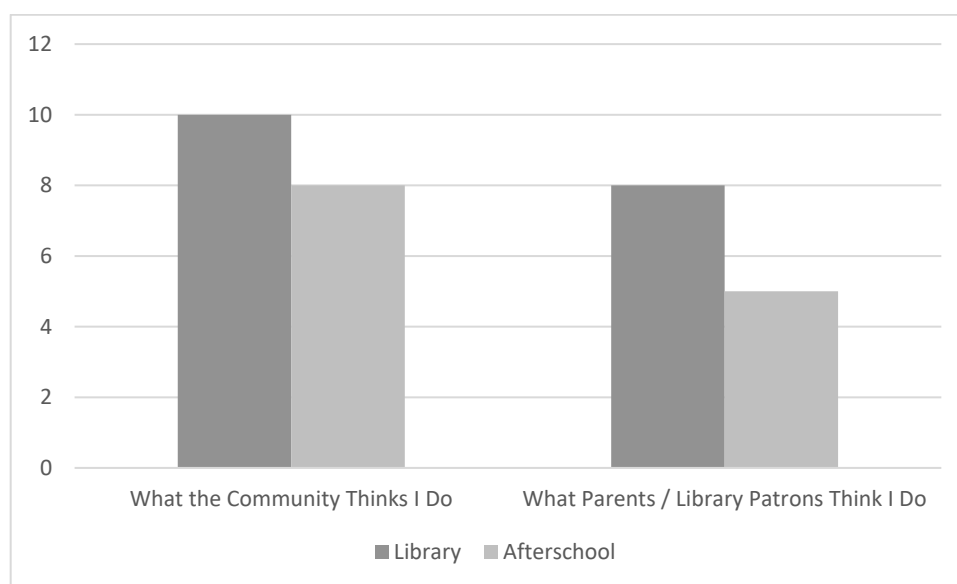
### **2.13.3 RQ3: To What Extent Do Youth Workers Feel Misunderstood?**

Looking at Table 2.2, there is a distinct pattern that contrasts the findings from RQ1 (participants' own professional identity) to RQ2 (how participants' thought they were viewed by outsiders). None of the respondents felt that the community thought they engaged in relational interactions. Both library and afterschool staff responded that they thought outside stakeholders perceived them as engaging in mostly transactional interactions. In contrast, participants from both groups described their own work as split between transactional and relational interactions. When responding to *What I Actually Do*, the relational interactions were fewer, but still substantial.

#### **2.13.3.1 Misconceptions**

An emergent theme in the responses was misconceptions. This included stereotypes and other disrespectful views that participants attributed to stakeholders. A strong misconception was around the old-fashioned idea of the library. This included a quiet space full of books or an

outdated building being overtaken by the internet. While this only applied to the library respondents, the idea that staff “did nothing important” applied to both (See Figure 2.9). This included the general ignorance of their existence as well as the idea that their jobs are easy or fun.



**Figure 2.9. Outside Stakeholders Who Think Staff Does Nothing Important**

### **2.13.3.2 Library Responses**

The library stereotype came up frequently in terms of What the Community Thinks You do. “I’ve actually had conversation with people like I don’t need the library because I’ve got my Kindle and Netflix. I don’t need the library.” This idea that the library is antiquated or even extinct came up several times. In addition, several participants described the idea of keeping a silent space. “Oh, you must be really good at shushing.” Figure 2.10 is one of several similar drawings of What the Community Thinks You Do. In addition, some participants described the community as discounting their job completely. One library staff responded that people told her, “Well, looks like you have a lot of time on your hands” as though she did very little in her job. Another library staff member described the community as thinking “Like you just sit at your desk and it’s just chill.

You don't have to worry about anything, or do anything, you can just sit back and relax and when it's 5 o'clock you're good.”



**Figure 2.10. Drawing by a library participant in response to What the Community Thinks I Do**

### **2.13.3.3 Afterschool Responses**

The stereotypes around afterschool staff were less specific, but there was a common idea that the job was easy. One staff member responded that the community thought that, “they think we just kind of play with the kids and hang out with them,” when, they are actually deeply engaged with youth. In fact, one staff member said that “If you're not in the Boys and Girls club business. I'm jumping around.” He felt that people inside the organization knew that he was doing more than playing but that outsiders simply saw him “jumping around” with the kids. Several participants said that community members had assumed that they were volunteers or not serious employees. They made comments such as "Oh, that's so nice. So what do you do during the day?" or "Oh, you're going to get such a great job one day." One participant described an interaction with a parent where they told her, "You're not qualified for this job.” In direct contrast, several

participants felt completely unseen by the community. “You'd be surprised how many people have no idea about this program. They really don't.”

#### **2.13.3.4 Emergent Themes**

We flagged two emergent codes as rare but notable. Some of the participants responses to *What I actually do* were coded as Burn Out because the emotional content seemed to indicate that participants were overwhelmed or at a breaking point. In addition, a few participants described themselves as “heroes” when responding to *What I think I do*. This code was also rare, but notable for future research.

### **2.14 Discussion**

Youth services library workers and afterschool workers may seem to engage in very different work with young people. Library staff feel tied to an old fashioned view of libraries as warehouses of books and information (Wilson, 1982). Although the types of media have evolved from paper to digital forms, the ask-and-answer transactional expectation remains. In contrast, afterschool staff feel tied to a longstanding idea of afterschool as an extension of school, academic enrichment, and a way to keep youth in under-resourced areas busy. However, this study reveals that not only do these two groups engage in very similar relational work with youth, they both experience significant friction between what outside stakeholders expect and what they actually do.

### 2.14.1 Similarities

The common patterns of the responses to our meme-based professional identity questions were striking across both the library and afterschool staff. The way that library staff and afterschool described their work was similar in terms of the types of interactions they thought they had with youth. Relational interactions were a common response when staff described how they conceptualized their own work, but relational interactions were nearly absent from their conceptualizations of how outside stakeholders perceived their work. Relational interactions are clearly a key part of their work with youth. This confirms the conjecture that youth workers across these two sectors are engaging in work for which they are unlikely trained (American Library Association, 2015; Eccles & Gootman, 2019). Whereas both groups in this sample think that their work is strongly rooted in connecting with youth, they feel strong friction between that and how they feel they are perceived by outsiders. Both groups feel deeply misunderstood and even disrespected. Interestingly, the misunderstandings stem from the historical stereotypes of the respective fields. Those historical stereotypes frame youth work as strongly deficit-minded and as a way to “fix” youth, keep them busy or to send them on a prescriptive path (Mahoney et al., 2009).

Perceptions for both groups were noticeably different between *What I Think I Do* and *What I Actually Do*. Whereas the former seems to reflect an aspirational aspect of their job, the latter tends to be clouded by administrative and organizational work. Some of the administrative work participants described is required by grants and other funders including collecting statistics, and reporting attendance, lesson plans and adherence to requirements. There is a sense of disappointment and stress in the reality of the work. This could be a reflection of the fact that they are trying to do deeply relational work in a field that is still rooted in an oppressive system (Baldridge, 2020).

### 2.14.2 Differences

We found striking differences between the groups as well. Much of the library administrative duties also include marketing of programs and of the library space itself. Library staff are expected to draw new and regularly attending youth into the building and into programs whereas afterschool staff are expected to meet the expectations of membership-paying guardians and national program developers.

In addition, how afterschool and library staff actually spend their time is complicated by different expectations of curriculum, behavior management and organizational responsibilities. Libraries are expected to provide resources to the entire community in addition to services for young people (American Library Association, 2020b). Afterschool programs on the other hand, are expected to fulfill the academic and curriculum requirements of funders and policies (Paluta, Lower, Anderson-Butcher, Gibson, & Iachini, 2016). This focus on productivity and achievement is clear in the responses of the afterschool workers. Whereas youth services library workers cater to youth who, for the most part, come into the library voluntarily, afterschool workers feel that they are expected to keep youth busy for the structured time period of the program. This is seen in the behavior management and discipline descriptions of the participants. In order for the youth to complete their homework or other work required to fulfill grant requirements (literacy, STEM, etc.), they must adhere to the rules or suffer consequences such as the “bad boy bench.” There are certainly behavioral expectations in public libraries, but youth can be asked to leave the building if their infraction is severe. The library system in our study had security guards in each branch who were there to enforce rules for all patrons. In this way, youth library staff may not have to attend to “bad behavior” in the same way that afterschool staff does. However, behavioral expectations are present in both samples.

## **2.15 Summary and Future Research**

In many ways, public libraries and afterschool programs are different; however, the two contexts overlap in many ways. Libraries are not often included in educational research while afterschool programs are. To date, very little empirical work has been done with public library staff. A 2014 analysis of literature included only articles from professional journals which provides insight into the opinions of the field but does not include research on the profession (Nelson & Irwin, 2014). A more recent study of professionalism studied a diverse group of librarians including only 5 public librarians (Garcia & Barbour, 2018). On the other hand, afterschool programs have been the site of many studies including those on positive youth development (Deutsch, 2017) and social and emotional learning (White, Akiva, Colvin, & Li, Under Review). Both libraries and afterschool organizations try to remain legitimate by incorporating curriculum, homework help, and other academic pursuits, but relationships are at the heart of their work. The emphasis on delivery of information and curricular support seems to overshadow the deep relational work that is necessary for deep learning.

Future research should continue to explore youth services library workers as part of the youth worker field and should encourage support and training for the relational interactions that anchor their work (Akiva et al., 2016; Akiva, White, Colvin, Li, & Wardrip, Under Review). Observations and stakeholder interviews could triangulate the perceptions of the youth workers and the notion of “burn out” and “heroes” should be investigated. Studies should especially take note of the behavioral expectations of youth workers and how it is shaped by societal and educational systems and pressures. In addition, observational studies should take note of race as a factor in these kinds of behavioral expectations. With so many white youth workers serving



racially diverse populations, it is worth exploring whether this dynamic informs expectations and behavior.

These youth workers engage in meaningful interactions with youth on a regular basis, even in the face of disrespect and stress. It will be important to understand how they conceptualize their work in the face of this social pressure and if their work suffers in response. This is especially important in light of identity research that indicates that friction in occupational identity leads to psychological distress (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

## **2.16 Implications**

Libraries and afterschool programs are part of a larger learning ecosystem that supports youth learning and development. The learning ecosystem includes many youth workers including library and afterschool staff as well as many others, but afterschool programs have been defined in service of formal education and public libraries have been excluded altogether (Akiva, Delale-O'Connor, et al., 2020; Hecht & Crowley, 2019). This paper illustrates the nuanced work of the public library and afterschool staff in one city and the ways in which these youth workers feel misunderstood.

First, library and afterschool workers in this sample clearly think that relational interactions are an important part of their work. However, both groups feel misunderstood because this relational work is neither recognized nor rewarded. This is problematic for the identity of the adults as well as for the youth in their care. Fractured occupational identity can lead to distress and burn out (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011) which could affect relational interactions with youth. Without

support from organizations and a community of practice, these youth workers may continue to feel pulled in many directions, misunderstood and disrespected.

Second, the educational ecosystem should be expanded both in membership and in mission. Public libraries are not usually discussed in educational research beyond journals specifically geared to the library community. This is a large oversight because youth spend a great deal of time in public libraries – in 2015 Americans visited public libraries more than a billion times (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2018). Presumably, a significant number of those visitors were youth. The learning that happens in libraries should not be overlooked. Afterschool programs are generally considered to be part of the educational ecosystem, but their goals are often framed as academic in nature (Philp & Gill, 2020). While academics are an important part of afterschool programs, there are other important areas of learning such as social and emotional learning (Durlak et al., 2010; Mahoney et al., 2005; White et al., Under Review). Relational interactions can support all of these types of learning. This is an important arena for youth development.

Library and afterschool program staff are just two groups in a larger group of adults who support youth learning and development. Bringing the library and afterschool fields together as part of an allied youth field would help them seek support as they do similar work in different contexts and validate their work with youth (Yohalem et al., 2010). Considering the diverse contexts of learning and the expectations of the stakeholders will be important when creating professional development and learning communities to support this work.

### **3.0 Paper Two: Learning in the Library: A National Study of Youth Services Public Library Staff<sup>2</sup>**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Public libraries are an integral part of American life (Brady & Abbott, 2015). Library staff provide resources and services to people across the lifespan from pregnancy to the end of life (American Library Association, 2020a), including childhood and adolescence. However, youth services library staff are not typically included in scholarly discussions about learning and education. In fact, very little research exists about the work of youth services public library staff. A 2014 analysis of literature included only articles from professional journals, providing insight into the opinions of the field but the review did not include research on the profession (Nelson & Irwin, 2014). A more recent study of professionalism included a sample of only 5 public librarians (Garcia & Barbour, 2018). As of Summer 2020, we could not find any academic research on the evolving work of public library staff or youth services staff.

This study aims to address this gap by interrogating the complex occupational identity of youth services public library staff across the United States. Public libraries, by definition, serve the entire community (American Library Association, 2020b), so library patrons and the community at large are key stakeholders in their work. Considering the professional identities of library workers, the perceptions of these stakeholders are important. Long defined by stereotypes

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<sup>2</sup> Colvin, S., White, A.M., Akiva, T. (2021). Learning in the Library: A National Study of Youth Services Public Library Staff. *Journal of Community Psychology*.

(Wilson, 1982), library staff are subjected to the expectations and assumptions of tax payers, community members, library patrons and themselves. All of those perspectives play into their own understanding of the work they do. Public libraries and the communities they serve have changed a great deal over time. It is our position that current library work is deeply connected to learning. We explore the occupational identities of library staff in order to understand their relationship to learning and to the community.

### **3.2 History of Public Libraries**

The American Library Association is the largest and oldest professional organization in the country and has 11 divisions including the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), Public Library Association (PLA) and Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA; American Library Association, 2017). These divisions reflect many of the types of libraries in the United States, each with its own mission and purpose. Some libraries are associated with universities, some with businesses, hospitals or government offices. The current paper focuses on public libraries and more specifically, library services to youth.

Public libraries have been cultural fixtures in the United States since Benjamin Franklin opened the first one in 1833 (Brady & Abbott, 2015). Though rarely considered part of the educational system, libraries have evolved from membership-based, privately-funded reading rooms (Brady & Abbott, 2015) to dynamic spaces for lifelong learning (Willett, 2016), advocacy and social justice (American Library Association, 2020a). If you walk into a library today you may see cultural performances, makerspaces and resources specifically for newcomers. This is very different from the old-fashioned prescriptive library that required memberships and silence

(Wiegand, 2015). The combination of steady cultural support and flexible services make public libraries some of the most responsive spaces for out-of-school learning.

Public libraries, in general, are moving away from an old model of information gatekeeper to a new model of education, community engagement, and facilitation (Lankes, 2011). This is illustrated by the introduction of library learning centers and makerspaces, which are spaces for hands-on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) exploration (Braun et al., 2014). In turn, the job of librarians, especially youth services librarians, have changed from information organization and retrieval to informal education and active engagement. Relationships are essential to learning (Li & Julian, 2012; Osher et al., 2020) and so would be key to the success of libraries as spaces for learning.

### **3.3 Learning in Public Libraries**

State and national agencies regularly publish competencies for youth services library staff. *The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action* outlines a new direction for teen services (Braun et al., 2014). This policy document calls for teen services staff to be facilitators, educators, connectors and partners. One of the goals is explained as, “to change the lives of teens and provide them with a brighter future” (Braun et al., 2014, p. 31). This document very clearly encourages library staff to connect with teens and help facilitate their learning. Here we will outline three distinct ways in which public libraries support learning.

### **3.3.1 Providing Resources for Learning**

Traditionally, libraries are associated with books. As libraries have evolved, so have their resources for learning. According to the Association for Library Service to Children (2019), “Library staff’s expertise in media evaluation is needed now more than ever to help families choose apps and digital games, as well as books, films, and other kinds of media, to support their children’s learning and entertainment and to offer additional ways to play” (page 9). With the advent of maker spaces and STEM programming, libraries have embraced the need for a wider range of tools (Bilandzic, 2016; Vossoughi & Bevan, 2014; Willett, 2016). In addition to training youth to use new tools and technology, libraries are also empowering youth to follow their own interests (Braun et al., 2014). Libraries, therefore, continue to provide information resources, but have also started to provide additional resources for learning as the world has evolved.

### **3.3.2 Providing Activities for Learning**

Programming and collections for children began as early as 1901 (Brady & Abbott, 2015) and age was added to the Library Bill of Rights in 1967 in order to protect access to information to people of all ages (American Library Association, 2020b). The Library Bill of Rights is a document adopted by the American Library Association in 1939 and amended over time to affirm the rights of all people to access uncensored information and public space (American Library Association, 2020b). Public library leaders have always had a strong democratic view on access which aligns with the history of youth development programs as accessible spaces for marginalized youth (S. T. Russell & Van Campen, 2011). Traditional library programming such as story time, book clubs and other gatherings are learning activities, whether focused on literacy, social-

emotional learning or other skills (Danifo & Valdez, 2019; Mills, Campana, & Clarke, 2016; Subramaniam, Scaff, Kawas, Hoffman, & Davis, 2018). Public libraries are known for their summer reading programs but there has been a push recently to make summer a time for learning and not just reading. Library reports encourage staff to actively expand learning opportunities. For example, Braun et al. (2018) state, “Learning opportunities in libraries, including those that are carried out throughout the summer months, need to expand beyond just reading, because today’s young people learn from a variety of ways other than reading text... Literacy is no longer viewed as a mechanical process, but is understood as the construction of meaning” ( p. 4).

### **3.3.3 Providing Spaces for Learning**

Libraries offer physical settings in which learning can occur; spaces for “teens [and children] who are readers and users of the physical school or public library space, especially teens who use the library for homework and leisure reading” (Braun et al., 2014, p. 15). In addition to being settings for academic or STEM learning, public libraries are also safe spaces for excluded and minoritized groups, climate controlled spaces with free internet access and spaces to gather both formally and informally (Aptekar, 2019; Aycock, 2018; Derr & Rhodes, 2010; Valdivia & Subramaniam, 2014). One of the main tenets of the Library Bill of Rights is that everyone is welcome to enter and use the space (American Library Association, 2020b) which makes it an ideal space for learning and interacting with others.

### 3.4 Youth Services

Public library staff are neither trained nor recognized as youth workers but they are similar in many ways (Colvin, White, Akiva, & Wardrip, Under Review). Like other youth workers, they co-create safe spaces for young people to learn, socialize and connect with each other. Youth services staff also face many of the same issues as youth workers: low pay, part time hours, isolated training and lack of legitimization (Garcia & Barbour, 2018; Pozzoboni & Kirshner, 2016; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Not only that, but public libraries provide many features of positive development including psychological safety, structure, supportive adults, opportunities for belonging, skill building, and community engagement (Mahoney et al., 2005). The public libraries of today support all youth through formal and informal programming.

The American Library Association requirements for formal library education have not evolved as quickly as the services (American Library Association, 2015). Youth service public library workers tend to be trained as resource-providers – they connect youth with information, people, organizations or other resources. This is especially true in formal Library Science programs (American Library Association, 2015). Recently, the vision of youth librarians has changed: “Libraries used to be grocery stores. Now we need to be kitchens” (Braun et al., 2014, p. 4). Policy documents and trainings have encouraged librarians to learn to use and connect people with tools that they can leverage to pursue their own interests (Braun et al., 2018). This kind of interest-based programming and relationship-based learning requires that library staff get to know youth and communities very well. However, facilitation and teaching are missing from the expectations and competencies. We are interested in whether they are a part of the occupational identities of library workers.



### **3.5 Occupational Identity**

Occupational identity is an important component of an employee's identity. Some people may identify strongly with their occupation and/or organization and some may not. Professional identity is affected by social structures, economic opportunities, expectations, relationships and salience of the work (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). If an organization meshes with the other facets of an individual's identity, the organization can provide valuable motivational factors. If, however, the organization clashes with the identity of the employee, this can create stress and lack of loyalty (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). Identification with the organization can indicate that the employee sees it as a key element of their identity and something for which they want to put in time and effort. When people are in a place to make occupational choices, their occupational identity can affect the way that they see their work. Those who closely identify with the mission or goal of the organization may see the job as a calling or a career while those who are not connected to the organization or work might see their work as a set of tasks or as a way to move up in society (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). It is likely that libraries attract people with both types of motivations. Those who identify strongly with the mission of the library might look beyond the traditionally low library salaries and see their work as a way to help society at large while those who are less interested in the library's mission may see their work as a means to a paycheck or to gain skills for future employment.

Gee (2000) created a framework that looks at the facets of identity nature, positions we occupy within society, recognized by others through individual accomplishments and membership in affinity groups. Here, aspects of identity are assigned by nature, organizations, social groups and by self-selection. In the context of occupation, jobs themselves have certain positions and values within society and therefore play into the identity of the workers (Gee, 2000; Phelan &

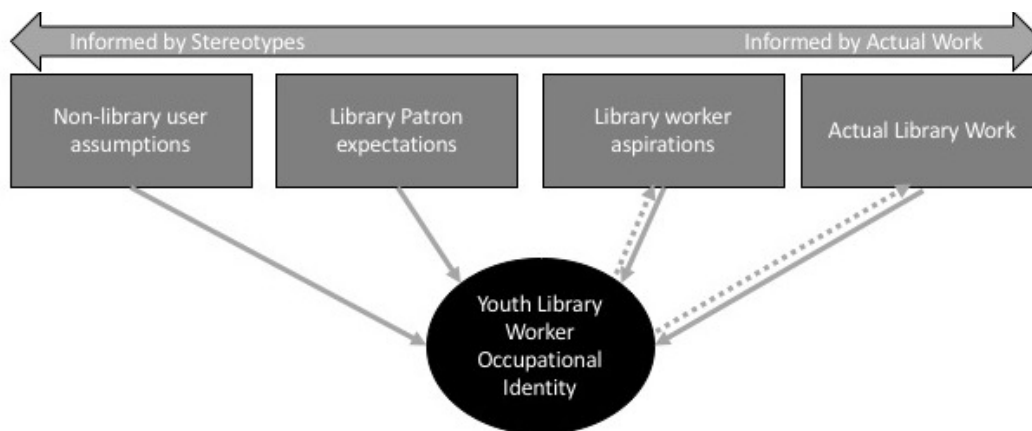
Kinsella, 2009). In line with that, society recognizes certain achievements of people and of organizations depending on the value and expectations they place on the work. Workers may also have the opportunity to choose to be members of certain groups within their jobs or professions.

Identity is deeply contextual and is tied to perceptions of outsiders as well as internal expectations (Côté & Levine, 2014). A key part of occupational identity is tied to the organization and professional in which a person works; i.e., in this case, the public library organizations where people work and the supporting professional organizations. Organizations at different levels and within society affect people. People are defined by their associations with everything from national professional organizations to local unions and organizational identity has a strong social component (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). The organization and the associated profession connects people to social expectations and culture. The organization provides valuable feedback in terms of how the employee can fit in and be valuable. People tend to gravitate toward jobs and organizations that perpetuate their own self views and may feel uncomfortable in those that go against those views (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011; Swann et al., 2009). For example, someone who views his/herself as a caregiver may feel uncomfortable in a position that emphasizes profits over the wellbeing of those in their care. This feedback loop can be important for self-validation and success in a job.

### **3.6 The Current Study**

In this study, we investigate the professional identity of 307 public library workers and their roles as part of the learning landscape both as reflections of outside expectations and internal understandings. As the work of libraries has evolved, it has veered farther from the stereotype of

a quiet room full of books (Brady & Abbott, 2015) and more toward a space for active learning and relationship-building (Bilandzic, 2016; Colvin et al., Under Review). However, people less familiar with libraries likely hold on to the older views of libraries. That is, as shown in Figure 3.1, people who are farthest from the actual work would likely fall back on social stereotypes; whereas those who witness the work of youth library workers are more familiar with what actually happens. We consider the spectrum shown in Figure 3.1 from stereotype-informed views to work-informed views and how all of these perceptions feed into occupational identity. Public libraries are meant to serve the entire community and not just those who actively use its services. We therefore hypothesize that library staff internalize the perceptions of outsiders alongside those of the library patrons.



**Figure 3.1. Conceptual Model of Youth Library Worker Occupational Identity**

Using the model depicted in Figure 3.1, we will investigate four sources of youth library worker occupational identity: non-library user assumptions, library patron expectations, library worker aspirations and actual library work. The boxes on the left are furthest from the actual work and those on the right are closest. By interrogating the perceptions of library workers, we can begin to understand how they think their job is perceived. Our main research question is: to what

extent do library staff think that outside stakeholders consider the library a place of learning? And secondly, how does this perception compare to the way that library staff think about their work?

### 3.7 Method

#### 3.7.1 Survey

In order to investigate the identity of youth services public library workers, we adapted an identity tool developed for use in in-person interviews (Colvin et al., 2021) and incorporated it into a short online survey. This tool, modeled after a popular Internet meme, serves as an elicitation device and produces both text and a drawing to analyze.

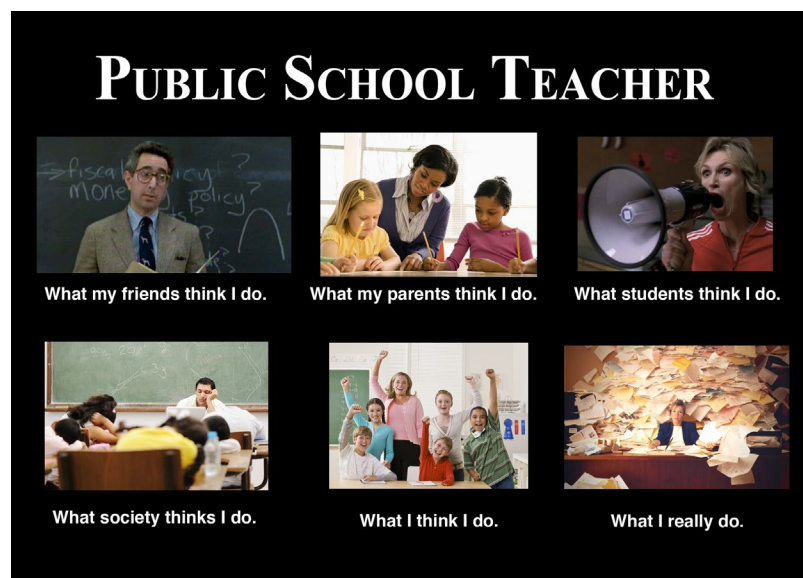


Figure 3.2. Example Meme Shown to Participants

After seeing an example from another field (see Figure 3.2) participants were encouraged to respond with both words and drawings (using a touch screen or mouse) to each of the following prompts:

- Community Prompt: What does the community (non library-users) think you do?
- Adult Prompt: What do adult library patrons think you do?
- Youth Prompt: What do youth library patrons think you do?
- Aspirational Prompt: What do you think you do?
- Actual Work Prompt: What do you actually do?

This activity afforded contrasting perspectives to emerge in the library staff's description of their work as informal educators. We hoped to elicit sensemaking around their professional identity and the pressures from external stakeholders (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). In order to do that, we used a protocol that would allow drawing to express different facets of identity (Weber & Mitchell, 1996) in a way that simple questions might not capture. We sent the survey through email, email listservs, and social media to state and regional library leaders, with a concentration in New England. The sample was collected via snowball sampling through these networks.

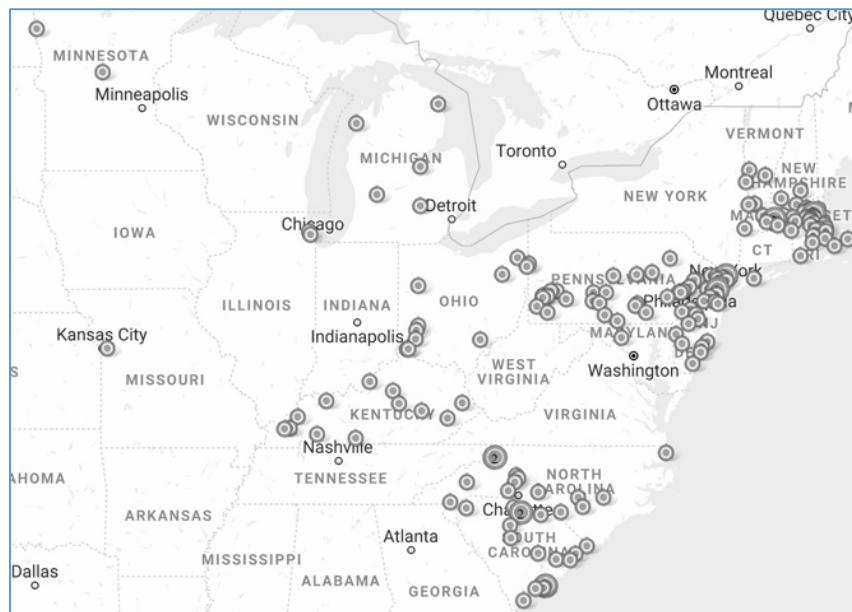
### **3.7.2 Sample**

The sample includes 306 public library staff who work with youth/children/teens.<sup>3</sup> We collected demographic information and zip codes from 172 participants. Of those, 154 were full time public library employees and 23 were part time. Participants reported their educational

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<sup>3</sup> The survey was designed with demographic questions at the end, after a page break and only about half of participants clicked to the final pages. In addition, several participants commented that they were concerned about anonymity and declined to offer demographic information. Demographic data did not include gender, age, or years of experience.

attainment as well: 112 participants held Master's degrees in Library Science, 6 are working toward their Masters in Library Science, 16 have a Master's in another field, and 43 had bachelor's degrees, two-year degrees or high school diplomas. Figure 3.3 shows the geographic distribution of participants who provided zip codes. Participants are clustered in a way that reflects the first author's network connections. (There was one participant from Washington State, not pictured on the map.)



**Figure 3.3. Geographic Distribution of Participants**

### 3.7.3 Analysis

We analyzed text responses and the drawings separately. For the text responses, we used Dedoose mixed-methods analysis software to identify inductive and deductive codes. Two authors reviewed and agreed on all codes before proceeding. We began with the assumption that the work of libraries is related to learning. From there we created the three learning-related deductive codes: Creating a Space for Learning, Providing Resources for Learning, and Facilitating Learning

Activities. The two researchers then identified emergent codes. Three of those codes were related to non-learning activities: Organizational Work, Behavior Management and Nothing Important (See Appendix A for complete codebook). A few emergent codes stood out for further investigation. The two coders discussed these codes at length and created two additional categories: Being a Hero/Inspiring people and Doing Everything/ Being in Distress. In order to maintain consistency, we tested the final codebook. Using a random number generator, we selected 20 cases for double-coding and discussion and came to an agreement on all codes before moving on to final reporting.

A single researcher analyzed and coded the drawings based on simple inductive categories related to what was present in the drawings such as: number of people in the image, presence of a book/computer/young person, smiling face, distress (frowns, tornado, etc.) , and shushing. Drawings ranged in quality and level of detail so we did not want to draw too many inferences from them. These analyses were supplementary to the text analysis and the images are used to support and illustrate the findings from the text analysis rather than to provide independent findings.

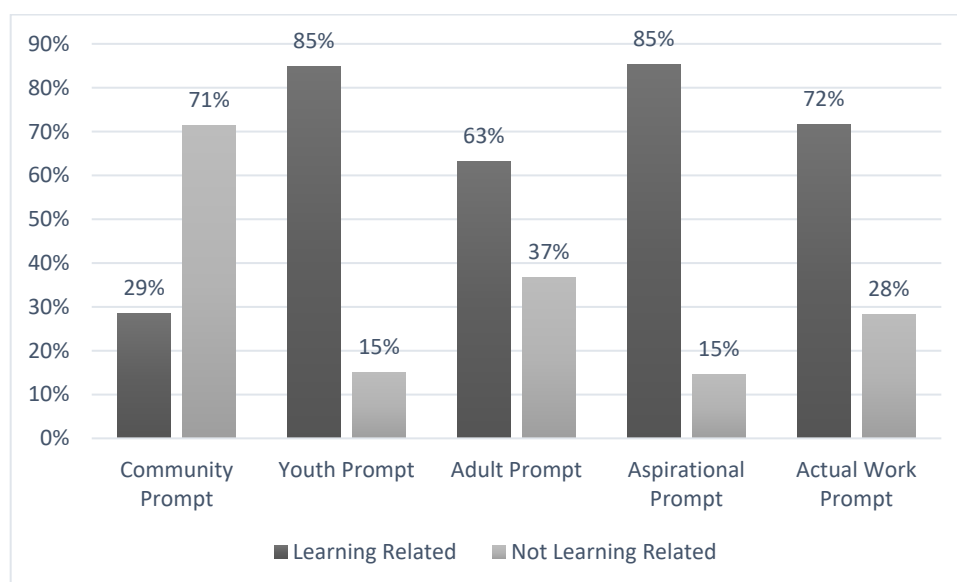
## **3.8 Findings**

### **3.8.1 Learning-Related Work**

Our research question is: to what extent do library staff think that outside stakeholders consider the library a place of learning and how does that compare to the way that library staff think about their work? We addressed this question by examining how library workers perceive

their work and how they think others perceive their work in relation to learning. Figure 3.4 breaks down all responses coded broadly as learning related or not learning related. As with our theoretical model in Figure 3.1, perspectives on the left are farthest from the actual work and those on the right are closest. The community prompt elicited the most non-learning related responses proportionally. The remaining categories elicited higher percentages of learning related responses. Since many library workers serve multiple populations, many mentioned them in their responses. Each population seems to have a different perspective on the work. One participant explained that,

I think it depends on their age, as different age groups see me doing different things. The little kids think I just read stories, sing, and play with toys all day, the older kids think I just spend all day recommending books, and (sadly) I suspect the tweens think I just spend all my time asking them to stop fooling around.

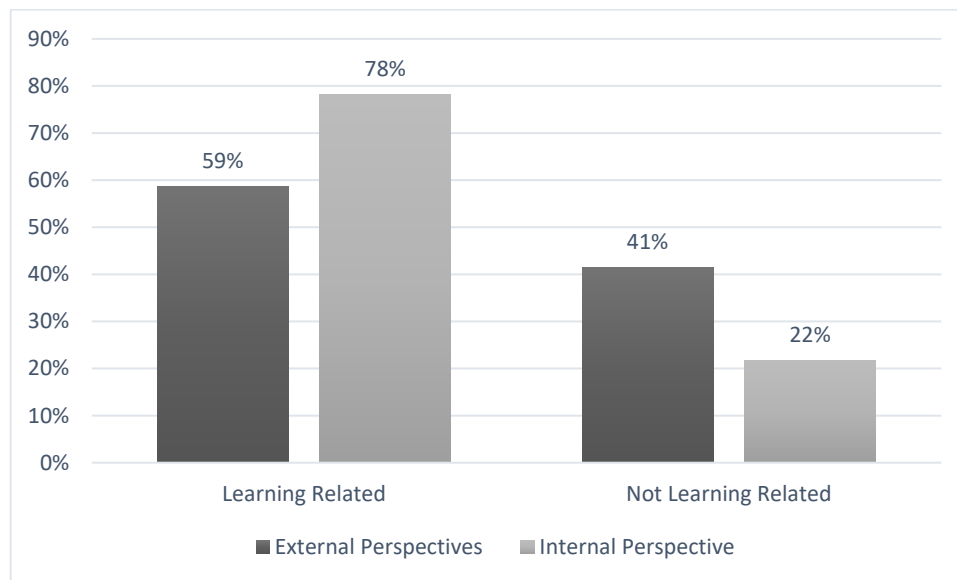


**Figure 3.4. Percentage of Text Responses That Are Learning and Non-Learning Related**

Collapsing these categories into outside perspectives and internal perspectives produces a more general view of these responses. The Community, Youth and Adult prompts (external perspectives) all ask participants to describe how other people perceive their work; whereas, the

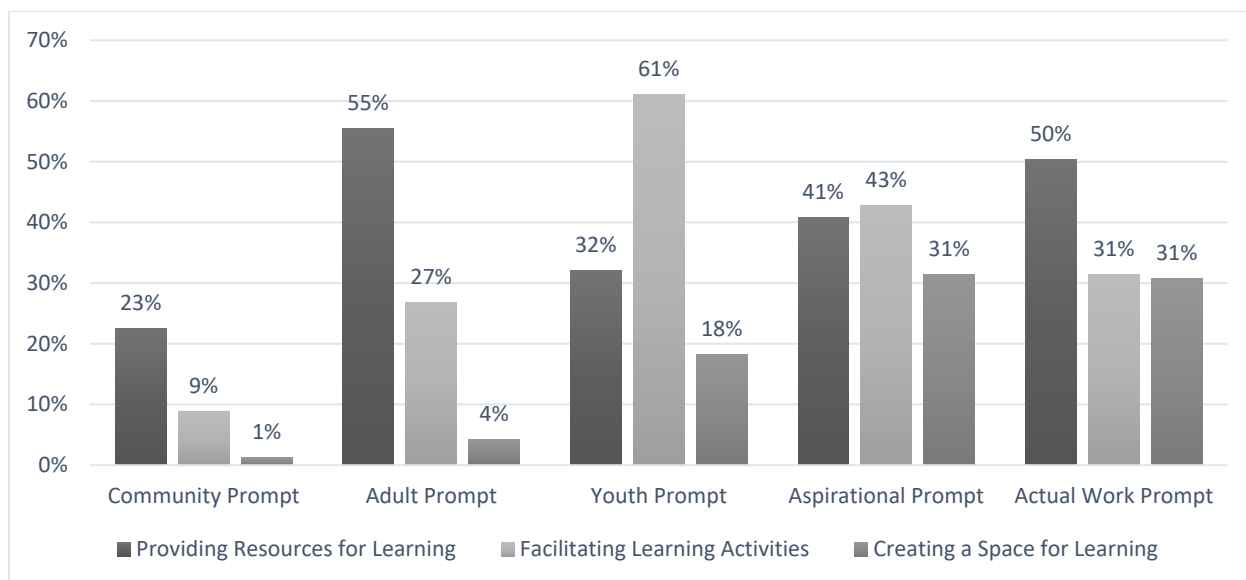


Think and Actually prompts (internal perspective) are asking specifically for the participant's own view of their work. Figure 3.5 illustrates how participants perceive that external perspectives see learning considerably less than internal perspectives (59% vs 78%). So, library workers in this sample perceive their job to be more learning related than those who are on the receiving end of those services. Overall, though, learning related responses are more frequent than non-learning related responses.



**Figure 3.5. Percentage of Text Responses That Are Learning And Non-Learning Related**

In order to examine learning related work more closely, we examined the specific types of learning related work. We found three categories of learning related work: providing resources for learning, facilitating learning activities and creating a space for learning. Figure 3.6 illustrates the breakdown in the sub-types of learning activities by prompt. We will examine each type of learning in turn, but Figure 3.6 shows the overall trends. Providing resources for learning was highest for the Adult prompt (55%) and the Actual Work Prompt (50%) while Facilitating Learning Activities was highest in the Youth prompt (61%).



**Figure 3.6. Learning-Related Responses**

### 3.8.2 Providing Resources for Learning

Resources for learning includes checking out and recommending books as well as answering questions and providing information. When examining responses to *What You Think You Do*, we found many responses related to resources, including: “I purchase a fabulous collection,” “Bring reading and books to families and children” and “match kids up with the perfect book!” Responses to *What I Actually Do* contained similar references to collection development and readers advisory but also included less library-specific duties such as, “tell people where the bathroom is and how to use a computer,” “answer questions all day,” and “assist in faxing items and printing items.”

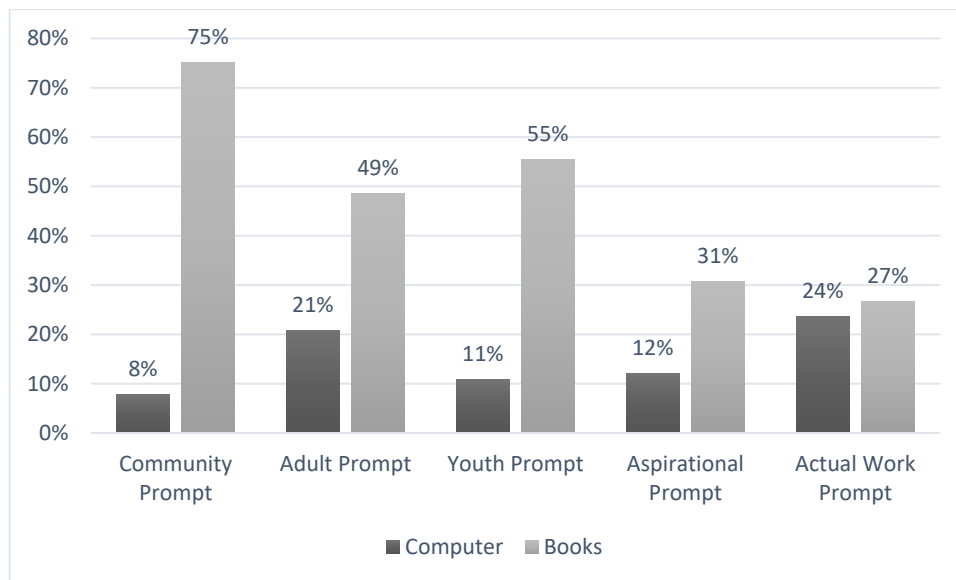
Of the 69 responses about the community, 30 referenced “checking out” books or materials. The remainder referenced shelving books and answering questions. Responses to the Adult Prompt included helping with computers and technology, recommending books and answering

questions. Several responses included finding books for youth. Responses the Youth Prompt included finding and recommending books as well as answering questions.

We also examined the drawings for evidence of books and computers which would illustrate specific resources for learning. Books were also a prevailing theme in all drawings in response to what outside stakeholders think they do (See Figures 3.7 and 3.8). Sixty-one percent of all responses for outside stakeholders had at least one book in it. While 75% of responses about non-patrons mentioned books, 52% of patrons (both adult and youth) drawings contained books. Computers also appeared in some drawings, but not many.



**Figure 3.7. A Sample Response to the Adult Prompt**



**Figure 3.8. Drawings That Included Books and Computers**

### 3.8.3 Facilitating Learning Activities

Text responses for the Think Prompt were dominated by learning activities including story time, singing, running educational programs and having fun with youth (See Figure 3.8). Very few responses in the Community Prompt related to learning activities, but some mentioned tutoring and reading to children. The Adult Prompt elicited similar responses related to reading and doing crafts with children. This paper is framed by the perspective that learning is a relational process that requires more than one person (Li & Julian, 2012; Osher et al., 2020). However, 68% of the participants' drawings for the community prompt included only one person while only 14% included two or more people in the picture (See Figure 3.8). The results were very different when looking at the Adult Prompt. In those drawings, solitary people and groups of two or more were more equal in representation.

Participants responded to the Aspirational Prompt in terms of programs and non-school skills. "I feel like I teach little ones skills they will need when they start school, through books, music/rhyme, and other activities," "I try to deliver the best programs I can," and "I instill a love of reading and learning in children." As seen in Figure 3.10, almost half of the drawings had two or more people in them, similar to the youth prompts. Learning activities also appeared in response to *What I Actually do*, but it was typically couched in a list of other duties. They described their actual work as, "running a program, helping with computers, being in meetings, talking with families, ordering and processing books and materials, picking up toys, and yes, even shelving books sometimes," and

I do a ton of programming. More than a program a day. I buy books and maintain the collection. I manage my staff. I am a shoulder to cry on. A person who will accept vicious toddler knee hugs. And someone who has a stack of books ready for

the next avid reader. I will edit your homework, demolish your Lego tower, and admire your artwork. I will also probably forgive all your overdue fines.

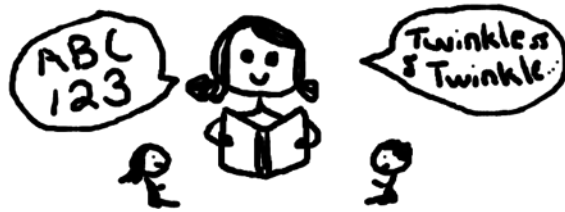


Figure 3.9. A Drawing Response to the Adult Prompt

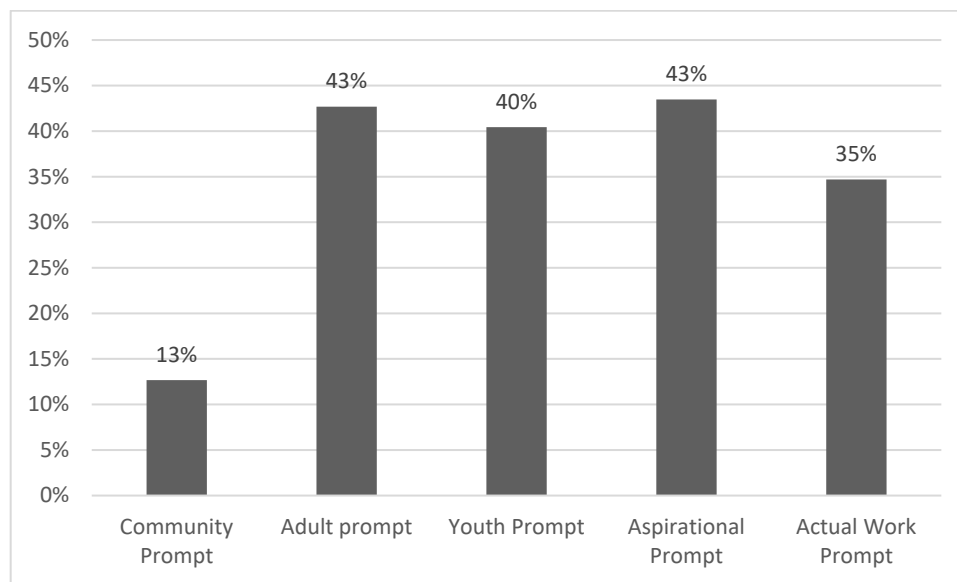


Figure 3.10. Drawings with 2 or More People in Response to Each Prompt

### 3.8.4 Creating a Space for Learning

This code appeared least frequently in the responses to the outside stakeholder prompts. However, the youth prompt elicited responses like, “make magic,” “make the library a super fun place,” “provide a space for them to read,” and “make them feel welcome.”

In response to the Aspirational Prompt, participants described creating community. Thirty-one of the participants used the word community in response to the prompt. Participants described

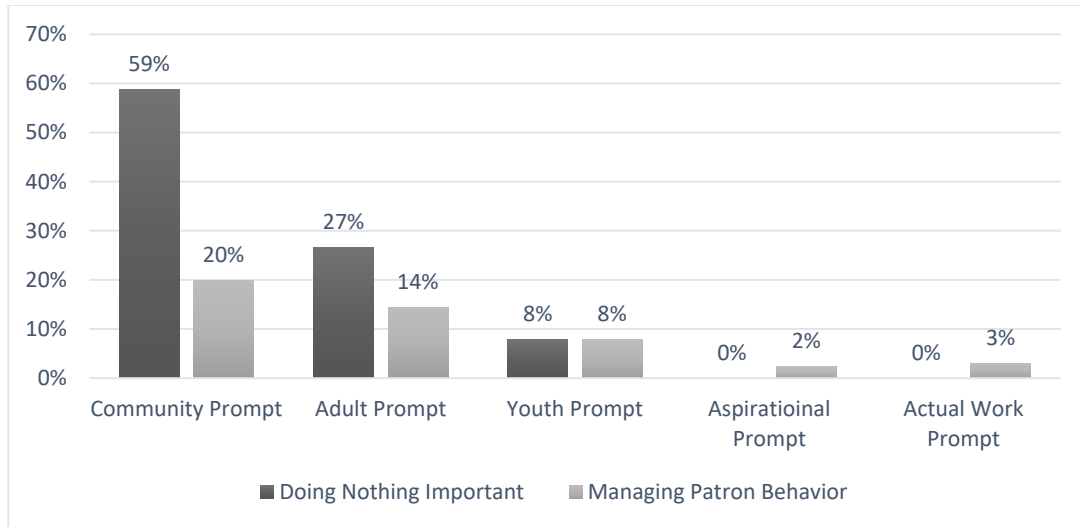
their work as, “build[ing] community,” “network[ing] with the community,” and “help[ing] grow my community.” When asked *What I actually Do*, participants described creating a safe and welcoming space for youth which included cleaning, organizing and being a positive presence. I “create a safe space for the pre-verbal kids, the iPad weary, the Wi-Fi seeking, the craft-inspired and more to feel welcome and seen and heard,” and “I do what I can to make the department a great place to visit and come back to. Rather it be keeping it clean, having new materials to display, or a program or activity that the kids and parents can enjoy together.”



Figure 3.11. A Response to the Youth Prompt

#### 3.8.4.1 No Learning

Figure 3.12 shows the ways that participants believe that outside stakeholders think they engage in non-learning activities such as managing patron behavior and doing nothing important. This was most common in the community prompt. The “community thinks its only about books, can we help you find a book. And if they do not read there is no reason to use the library.” One participant explained that the community saw library staff as “grouchy old ladies with glasses who wear cardigans and tell you to shush all the time.” “Community members think that I volunteer at the library. I've been asked "but what do you do for income?" They also think I get to read all day.” Drawings reflected the same themes but Figure 3.13 and the image of burning tax dollars goes even farther. Less than 10% of participants believed that youth patrons thought they engaged in these activities, but almost 60% thought that the community saw them as doing nothing important.



**Figure 3.12. Non-Learning Activities in Outside Stakeholder Prompts**

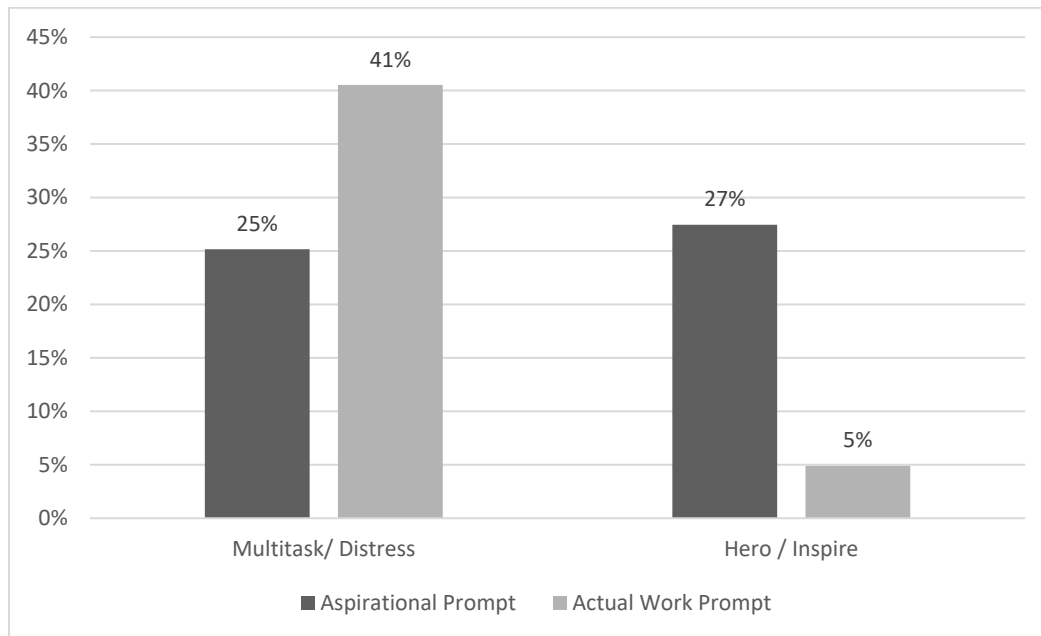


**Figure 3.13. Response to the Community Prompt (left) and the Adult Prompt (right)**

### 3.9 Emergent Themes

Two additional themes warrant exploration: Multiasking/Doing Everything/ Expressing Distress and Being a Hero/Inspiring Youth / Being Magical or Superhuman. We grouped these responses because the former seemed to reflect participants feeling overwhelmed and/or burdened by the amount of work or by a sense of disrespect (See Figure 3.14). On the other hand, the latter group seems to represent an expectation that library staff are supernatural in some way. These two emergent themes seem to be connected. In response to *What do you think you do*, about 25% of participants expressed distress or sense of being overwhelmed with work and a similar percentage

of them also expressed that they think of themselves as heroes who go above and beyond for their community. In response to What do you actually do, there were far fewer mentions of being a hero while 40% of respondents expressed distress.



**Figure 3.14. Emergent Themes in Think and Actually Prompts**

### **3.9.1 Heroes in Distress**

One of the emergent themes we found in about a quarter of the responses was the idea of being a hero. This came out in terms of grandiose imagery of being a superhero, wearing a cape or changing the world, “Move mountains!” or being magical (See Figure 3.15). The heroic status was often tied to literacy or books in some way, indicating that they associate their superpowers with learning resources.

Another theme that was apparent in 41% of actual work was distress or the idea of doing everything with very few resources. This is an example of job creep (Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004) where the youth library workers believe that they are expected to do everything. “I tell people it's



like herding cats in a tornado while keeping everything tidy, but in a research-based way.” Another participant described that “I think I defend democracy and media literacy while running around trying to get everything done before school is out for the day.” Another described it as “defend[ing] users' rights, especially for teens, laugh a lot, but do a million things in one day that are always unrelated to the next.” “Slave over reports, weeding, shelving program prep, displays, and more all while doing it short staffed and with not enough time in the day.” Figure 3.15 shows two of many images with a superhero on one side and an overworked and tired youth library worker on the other.



Figure 3.15. Responses to the Aspirational Prompt (left) and the Actual Work Prompt (right)

### 3.10 Discussion

This study provides a deep look into the occupational identity of youth services public library workers. Very little existing research focuses on public library work, so this study lays some important groundwork. Overall, the participants in our study described their work as deeply connected to learning. This is reflective of the recent changes in library services that include traditional book services (Providing Resources for Learning) as well as other, more active learning endeavors. It seems that participants think that adults see them in the more traditional role of book broker rather than active facilitators of learning. This resource-provider role is also reflected in

the Actual Work Prompt which could either mean that they feel that they are pulled toward the resource role or that these tasks take up a significant amount of time.

Unfortunately, many library workers feel significant friction between their own understanding of their job and the views of outside stakeholders. A majority of participants felt misunderstood and disrespected by groups who were removed from their work. More than a quarter of our participants thought that adult library users think that they do nothing important. Libraries are community organizations so it is troubling that library workers feel disrespected by the community at large.

Referring back to the conceptual model (Figure 3.1), library workers feel that they are misunderstood most by those who are farthest from their actual work (the community). However, it is noteworthy that many participants thought that adult patrons saw them as mainly providing resources and youth patrons as mainly facilitating activities when they do both. This may reflect how these particular library workers interact with patrons in the library or it may reflect how they think these populations use the library itself. Perhaps library workers think adult library patrons value resources such as books and digital resources more than other types of services while youth patrons value the more interactive learning activities. This is important when thinking about who pays for libraries. Adults pay taxes and are much more likely to vote for a library that meets their needs than one that does not. In many instances, adults bring children into the library, so they may value those services as well, but the fact that library workers feel undervalued by adults is troubling.

Another noteworthy trend is seen in Figure 3.4 where we illustrated non-learning activities by prompt. Of youth library workers in this study, 59% reported that they thought the community saw their work as “doing nothing important.” This was seen in a few ways – “read all day,”

“nothing” or some misconception that libraries are no longer relevant or even open. “The community” was the prompt that is farthest from the actual work and participants may be referring to people who never come into the library or may not even know that it exists. On the other hand, 27% of participants reported that they thought adult *patrons* believed they do nothing important as well. This means that these library workers feel that more than a quarter of the adults who come into the library see their job as unimportant or useless. 14% of participants thought that adult patrons saw them as managing behavior – shushing patrons, keeping kids quiet or enforcing rules. This may be a reflection of different roles in the library. Youth services library staff may feel especially misunderstood by adults because their work is focused on youth. Or, it is possible that the youth section of the library is removed from the main part of the building. However, many adults are connected to youth in some way – as parents, relatives, educators or neighbors. So it is of concern that these library workers feel so disrespected by adults who use the library.

Facilitating learning is not a new concept for public libraries, but the research community and society at large have not yet legitimized this as the work of library staff (Garcia & Barbour, 2018). Although libraries have always been tied to connecting people with learning resources such as books, community learning spaces and facilitated learning activities in libraries are relatively new (Braun et al., 2014). It is clear from this sample that facilitating learning is a prominent component of library work and library staff engage in several types of learning-related work. Traditional book-related work is closely tied to history and stereotypes about library work (Wilson, 1982); relational work and facilitated learning are farther from the social stereotype. Library workers feel that their work is seen as “playing dress-up” or “doing nothing,” when they are often actually planning rich and deeply educational programs and services for youth (Bilandzic, 2016; Mills et al., 2016).

Our findings suggest that library workers often feel that they are misunderstood and even disrespected by outside stakeholders including library patrons and the community at large. The friction between the prompts related to outside stakeholders and those related to internal perceptions were striking. The fact that library workers feel that the people who support their existence through taxes, donations and votes disrespect and devalue their work is concerning. Burnout is a serious concern when occupational identity is in friction, especially within a profession or organization (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Occupational identity exists in a context that includes society's expectations and assumptions (Côté & Levine, 2002) and unfortunately, it seems that library workers have internalized the stereotypes about library work.

Another concerning finding is the distress that library workers expressed when describing what they think they do versus what they actually do. They seem to be overloaded with work that extends far beyond their expectations. This, paired with the levels of disrespect they feel, could weigh heavily on these workers and could affect their ability to deliver meaningful services to their communities.

### **3.11 Implications and Future Research**

The library profession supports public libraries and the workers there, but training has not evolved to meet the expectations of the field (American Library Association, 2015). The current study included mostly credentialed librarians with MLS (Masters of Library Science) degrees. Paraprofessionals often engage in the work of the library so they should be included in future research (Oberg, 1995; Patterson, 2004). Future research should include both degreed and non-degreed library workers to explore the occupational identities of both. In both cases, training for

public library staff should be focused on learning-based work that they are doing in addition to the resource training that the MLS programs provide.

This study is not representative of libraries across the United States. It is a large snowball sample of public library youth workers. More work should be done to understand the occupational identities and work of library staff across the country and internationally. In addition, studies should triangulate reports with data from community members and library patrons in order to understand the complete picture. There is a possibility that these library workers feel disrespect where none is intended. If the community simply does not understand the value of the public library (rather than seeing it as lacking in value altogether), communication and marketing could be good tools for improving their understanding.

The friction that library workers in this study express is extremely concerning. Future research should focus especially on the distress that they feel and the causes of it. In addition, the idea of library workers being “heroes” should be explored in depth to understand from where it stems and whether it is adding to the distress.

### **3.12 Conclusion**

The findings from this study demonstrate that public libraries and youth library workers are an important part of the learning landscape. Hopefully this study is the beginning of a research agenda that includes public libraries as spaces of learning. The friction that library workers express seems to be compounded by long-held stereotypes, social misunderstandings, and a professional organization that is not supporting the education changing expectations of its workers. Managing

the expectations and assumptions of library work could be key to relieving the pressure that library workers experience.

#### **4.0 Paper Three: Who Are the Adults Who Work With Youth? Understanding the Occupational Identities of Library and Afterschool Workers in the Context of Learning and Developmental Ecosystems<sup>4</sup>**

Who are the adults (besides teachers) who work with youth? Society makes a lot of assumptions about these adults, especially outside of school. Images of babysitters and tutors might come to mind for afterschool workers. If we extend the question to “who are the adults who work with youth in libraries?”, we can add stereotypes about unkind older women, perhaps with their hair in a tight bun, who shush people all day. Why do societal stereotypes about people who work with youth matter? We suggest that in a learning and development ecosystem, the adults who work with young people play a crucial role and that their wellbeing is essential for the wellbeing of the entire ecosystem. We further argue that assessing these adults’ identities is one way to assess their wellbeing, and by extension, the health of the entire ecosystem. After all, adult wellbeing affects the wellbeing—and the learning and development—of the youth with whom they work.

#### **4.1 The Learning & Development Ecosystem**

In this chapter, we focus specifically on adults who work with youth and how they fit into the system. The learning and development ecosystem concept, as framed by Hecht & Crowley

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<sup>4</sup> Colvin, S., & White, A.M. (Under Review). Who are the adults who work with youth? Understanding the occupational identities of library and afterschool workers in the context of learning and developmental ecosystems. In T. Akiva & K.H. Robinson (Eds.), *It takes an Ecosystem: Understanding the People, Places, and Possibilities of Learning and Development Across Settings*. Information Age

(2019), is based on biological ecosystems. Species from microorganisms to predators interact with one another and the health and wellbeing of each impacts the entire system. Similarly, each aspect of the learning and development ecosystem – teachers, youth, schools, libraries, etc. – is important in various ways to the health of the entire system. In biological ecosystems, *a keystone species* is critical to the wellbeing of other species’ survival. *A keystone species* helps balance the ecosystem so that all organisms flourish – all the way down to the microbes in the soil. Hecht & Crowley (2019) propose that adults who work with youth are the keystone species which make them essential to the learning and development ecosystem. In fact, in their model, the health of these adults drives the health of the entire system. This may seem extreme, but consider what would happen if all the adults who work with young people in one city all stopped working. This would negatively affect young people, organizations, and the education system in general.

## **4.2 Youth Workers as Keystone Species**

We use the term ‘youth worker’ broadly, to refer to adults who work with young people in a variety of learning and developmental contexts. More specifically, Yohalem, Pittman, & Moore (2006) define youth workers as all individuals who “facilitate [youth] personal, social and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence” (p. 6). These adults include afterschool workers, coaches, library workers, teachers, tutors and many more. Teachers and others who work in the formal education system are important to learning and development of young people, but we will focus here on the adults who work outside the formal education system in out of school time.



Youth workers, as a group, lack cohesive training, many work part time, and many are underpaid (Borden et al., 2011; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Many of these out-of-school time contexts have a long history of supporting homework completion and academic achievement as well as keeping youth “out of trouble” (Brady & Abbott, 2015; Mahoney et al., 2009). If they are seen as institutions that keep children out of trouble and “save” certain groups, they are expected to act in a related way. Out of school time is hindered by a lack of cohesion in the field coupled with a lack of legitimacy and recognition that can be found in formal education (Pozzoboni & Kirshner, 2016).

In this chapter, we focus on youth workers in afterschool programs (specifically, Boys and Girls Clubs of America and YMCA) and in public libraries. Our research has found that these youth workers engage in very similar work related to learning and connecting with youth (Colvin et al., 2020). Learning in these settings may look different than that which happens in classrooms, but it can be just as important (Baldrige, Beck, Medina, & Reeves, 2017; Durlak et al., 2010; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Libraries and afterschool programs tend to emphasize learning such as social-emotional skills, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math), and social justice (Akiva, Carey, Cross, Delale-O’Connor, & Brown, 2017; Baldrige, 2020; Durlak et al., 2010; Vossoughi & Bevan, 2014).

Public libraries are not typically included in discussions of youth workers. Public libraries have been fixtures of American life since Benjamin Franklin opened the first one in 1833 (Brady & Abbott, 2015). If you walk into a library today you may see concerts, makerspaces and resources for everyone in the community. This is very different from the old-fashioned prescriptive library that required memberships and silence (Wiegand, 2015). Very little academic research has been done with public library workers, especially those who work with youth, but we have found that

they are deeply engaged in learning and building relationships with youth in their communities (Colvin, White, & Akiva, 2021; Colvin et al., 2020; Mills, Campana, & Clarke, 2016; Subramaniam, Scaff, Kawas, Hoffman, & Davis, 2018). These spaces and programs are similar to those we saw in afterschool programs.

### **4.3 Wellbeing of Youth Workers**

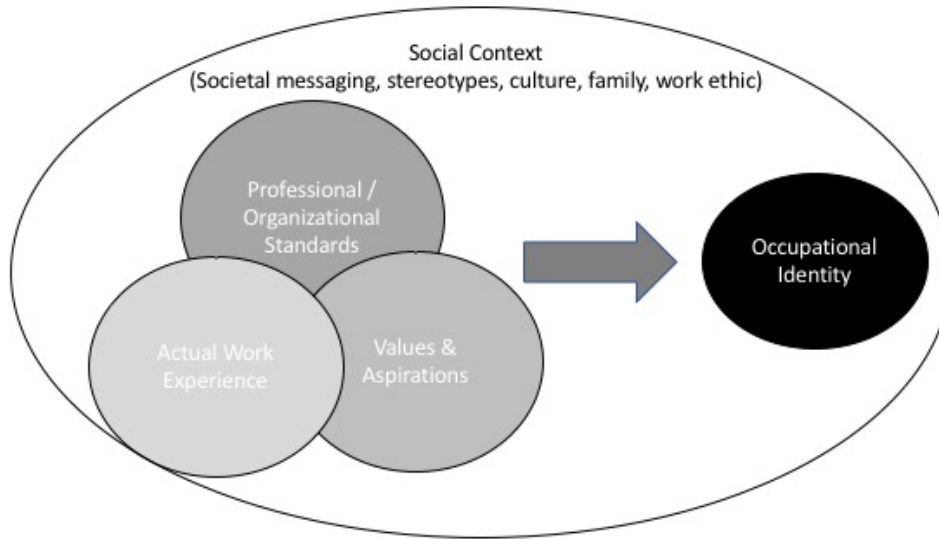
We are concerned about the health and wellbeing of youth workers because, as noted above, they can be considered a keystone species and their health deeply affects the health of the entire learning and development ecosystem (Hecht & Crowley, 2019). When we think of health and wellbeing, we think of concepts such as job satisfaction, burnout, turnover, salary and mental health. Rather than looking at individual measures, we suggest looking at how strongly youth workers feel they are connected to the learning and development ecosystem. We know from previous studies (and from experience with the media) that educators are often disrespected and disenchanted and that burnout is a concern (Colvin et al., 2020; Zee & Koomen, 2016). We have also found considerable friction between how youth workers feel they are perceived and how they see themselves. This cognitive dissonance is concerning because it could lead to dissatisfaction and burnout (Mckimmie, 2015; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). One way to understand this friction is to look at the occupational identity of youth workers.

## **4.4 A Model of Youth Worker Occupational Identity**

### **4.4.1 Occupational Identity**

In order to understand how youth workers feel they are connected to the ecosystem, we need to understand how they think they are perceived and if that matches with their internal identities. We draw on identity research to understand youth workers' professional identity and their role as keystone species in the ecosystem. The field of Identity research is vast. After all, humans have many identities throughout their lives including race, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, religion and culture (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). These identities change over time and some identities are more or less important at different times of life or within certain contexts. For example, sexual orientation may develop as an identity during adolescence and become extremely important once they come out to their friends and family.

Occupational identity is an important facet of most adults' identities because adults spend a great deal of time at work. Some are lucky enough to have a calling, or a vocation that closely aligns with their internal values, while others have a job and occupational identity that is just one part of their overall identity (Billett, 2011). There are many different approaches to understanding occupational identity. Psychology tends to focus on the individual while sociology focuses on the social context in which people develop. Institutions also play into identity as they frame a person's actual work. Beyond the institution, professional and organizational standards set expectations for workers. Figure 4.1 illustrates how these perspectives might fit together. Notice that the social context influences all parts of the model.



**Figure 4.1. Occupational Identity Model**

#### **4.4.1.1 Values and Aspirations**

Adolescence and emerging adulthood (ages 18-24) is a time of individuality, independence and, sometimes, risk taking behavior. This is also a time when people search for and explore their occupational identity (Christiansen, 1999; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011; Strauser, Lustig, & Çiftçi, 2008; Waters & Fivush, 2015). Psychology research explains this process as an exploration followed by the selection of a career and establishment of an occupational identity (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). In this perspective, occupational identity is seen as a goal or an achievement of development (Hammack, 2015; Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Sociologists and social psychologists add to the research on occupational identity by making space for context. In this view, people develop identities through experience and context such as structural inequities, economic circumstances, and cultural expectations (Côté, 1996; Côté & Levine, 2002, 2014).

Occupational identity can be a way to make meaning in life, to gain internal and external validation, and to meet societal expectations (Côté & Levine, 2002; Phelan & Kinsella, 2009; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011; Unruh, 2004). For example, some cultures, families or people find

validation in choosing an occupation that provides financial security. Others may value giving back to the community. However, social context tells us that some people have more choices than others. “Helping professions,” such as youth work, are often characterized by very low pay and require a great deal of emotional and time investment (Hopwood, Schutte, & Loi, 2019; Koenig, Rodger, & Specht, 2018). Not everyone is in a position to choose an occupation like this. On the other hand, some people are deeply connected to their community and want to give back by choosing an occupation that helps people. Social validation is an important part of identity. Part of adulthood involves choosing which expectations to follow and which incentives are valued (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). This feedback loop is key to self-validation and success in a job.

Some social expectations turn into stereotypes (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). These stereotypes can affect occupational identity both positively and negatively. For example, school teachers struggle with stereotypes about controlling students, being subject specialists, and having an identity entirely defined by teaching (Beijaard et al., 2004; Smith, 2015; Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Library workers tend to be stereotyped as quiet, conservative rule-followers (Walter, 2008). Everyone deals with stereotypes differently. Some people opt in to certain stereotypes as a way to define themselves while others go to great lengths to separate themselves from expectations (Spears, 2011). Youth workers have very public jobs. Communities support these positions both monetarily and through leadership. This allows for community expectations, some of which are defined by stereotypes of the profession or job (Unruh, 2004). Not all stereotypes are negative, but they tend to categorize certain people as a monolith rather than allowing for contextual differences (Stets & Burke, 1994).

#### **4.4.1.2 Professional/Organization Standards**

Occupational identity is also tied to the standards set by their organization and profession. When we look at library and afterschool professional standards, we see some differences. While libraries are supported by a large and established profession, afterschool programs are largely independent. Neither group has mandated access to professional development or training on how to work with young people. In both contexts, we found that the individual organizations at which the youth worker was employed played a large role in their experiences and how they talked about their occupational identity (Colvin et al., 2020). Library workers faced strong, specific social stereotypes whereas afterschool workers described their social standing in much more vague terms.

#### **4.4.1.2.1 Libraries**

Public libraries are part of large profession of librarianship. The American Library Association (ALA) professionalized libraries in 1876 and became the oldest and largest professional organization in the United States (American Library Association, 2020a). ALA tightly controls the guidelines for Masters in Library/Information Science programs across the country. Each library and its associated system or state agency works a little differently (Colvin et al., 2020). The library system we worked with in had 18 branches with children's and teen services in each one. In order to better understand the context of this library system, we interviewed the Teen Services Coordinator, who, along with the Children's Service Coordinator, provides onboard training and mentorship to youth services staff in all 18 branches. She described the strategic plan and its emphasis on "Interest Based Learning" which involves encouraging young people to pursue interests and to acquire skills and knowledge to reach mastery, feel independent and gain career skills. Under this plan, the library is to be a space for informal learning for anyone at any time. There is an emphasis on youth services staff being mentors to youth, but this mentorship seems very much tied to interest and skill development. The emphasis is less on social-emotional skills and more on "practical" skill acquisition. The professional development available to youth services staff revolves around skill building. This institutional view is supportive of staff in a very specific, skill-related way.

#### **4.4.1.2.2 Afterschool**

Afterschool workers are part of a very different professional setting. Afterschool workers tend to be part time and underpaid (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006; Yohalem et al., 2006). Compared to libraries, there is a lack of cohesion and recognition (Pozzoboni & Kirshner, 2016). In 2011, the National Afterschool Association (NAA) published core competencies for youth workers (National AfterSchool Association, 2011) that included curriculum, assessment, interactions, relationships and more. NAA continues to update these competencies and support the work of afterschool workers but afterschool organizations do not have to follow them (Starr & Gannett, 2016). The work of afterschool employees and their training is therefore most likely shaped by the organization that employs them rather than by an overarching profession (Emslie, 2013; Fusco, 2012).

#### **4.4.1.3 Actual Work Experience**

A key part of occupational identity is tied to the organization and profession in which a person works. This can include supervisors, regional and national leadership, boards and donors. Each level of the organization may have expectations for the work that should be done (Brown, 2015; Scott & Davis, 2007). For example, the Boys and Girls Club of America has a mission and directives that trickle down to each regional team and specific site. The higher-level directives must be interpreted at each level and then implemented at a local level. Each level of these organizations can be part of a person's occupational identity. Being associated with a national organization and a specific location can bring pride and loyalty and can also cause friction if the organization is not in line with personal values. Similarly, being associated with a small organization can bring local pride and connection as well as friction, especially as leadership changes.



Another way that institutions frame identity is that they define the work and the positions and thus define how a person can fit into the organization and the work they can do. Not all people have jobs that line up with their internal identities (Billett, 2011). Accomplishments within the organization, being a member of an organization and upholding expectations of the organization and of society all play into how validated someone feels about their work (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Billett, 2011).

#### **4.4.2 The Occupational Identity Model**

Thus far we have established a few key concepts. First, youth workers are a key part of the learning and development ecosystem. Their health and wellbeing is essential to the health of the entire system that includes youth and other institutions of learning. Second, we focused specifically on afterschool and public library workers who are not part of the formal education system. Third, we are exploring one way to assess health of these youth workers: occupational identity. This identity is made up of individual development, social context and the institutions that define the actual work. Figure 4.1 shows how we conceptualize occupational identity. On the left is internal values and aspirations, actual work experience and the standards of the organization. All of those things are deeply affected by the social context in which the person is situated. Work ethic, culture, family expectations, societal expectations and social messaging all play into how youth workers understand and experience their occupational identity. Figure 4.1 provides a way to help conceptualize the different parts of identity and how they play in to occupational identity.

## 4.5 Investigating Youth Worker Occupational Identity

### 4.5.1 Measuring Identity

Now that we have a model for occupational identity, we need to create a way to assess identity in the complex way. In order to explore the occupational identity of youth workers, we have been developing a tool to stimulate interview conversations about complex levels of identity. The idea for this tool came from a popular internet meme that circulated a few years ago and illustrated (sometimes humorously or ironically) “what my friends think I do”, “What my parents think I do” and “what other people think I do”. The last two cells are always the same: “What I think I do” and “What I really/actually do.” We used the Public School Teacher meme (Figure 4.2) as an example in several interview-based studies. We then gave participants a blank grid with their own prompts. The meme tool, when used in interviews or surveys, hopefully gives participants a fun way to engage in the research and may evoke ideas that would be otherwise inaccessible with direct questions. Figure 4.3 shows the external and internal perspectives that participants were asked to consider. Cells were left open so that participants could write or draw in response to each prompt. We then analyzed the verbal and written responses. For this chapter, we only refer to *What the community thinks I do*, *What I think I do* and *What I actually do*.

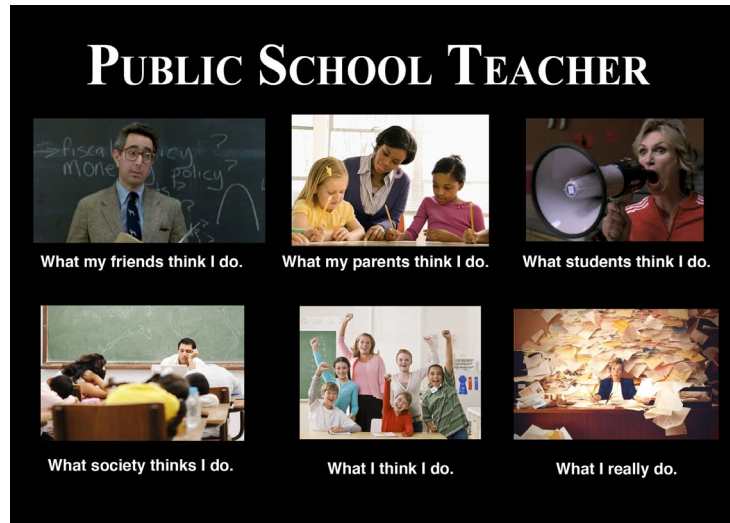


Figure 4.2. Internet Meme Example Used in Interviews

<b>External Perceptions</b>	<b>What the community thinks I do.</b>	<b>What (adult) library patrons think I do.</b> (library staff only) <b>What parents think I do.</b> (afterschool staff only)	<b>What the kids think I do.</b>
	<b>What I think I do.</b>	<b>What I actually do.</b>	
<b>Internal Expectations / Perceptions</b>			

Figure 4.3. Prompts for Identity Interviews

Figure 4.1 laid out the pieces of occupational identity. This meme activity presents a way to capture some of that complexity by asking participants to describe external and internal perspectives. *What the Community Thinks I do* represents the external identity that youth workers have. *What I Think I Do* and *What I Actually Do* are internal perspectives. The former is shaped by aspirations about the work but is still influenced by societal expectations and stereotypes. *What*

*I Actually Do*, on the other hand, is the reality of youth workers – both their work and their identities as workers.

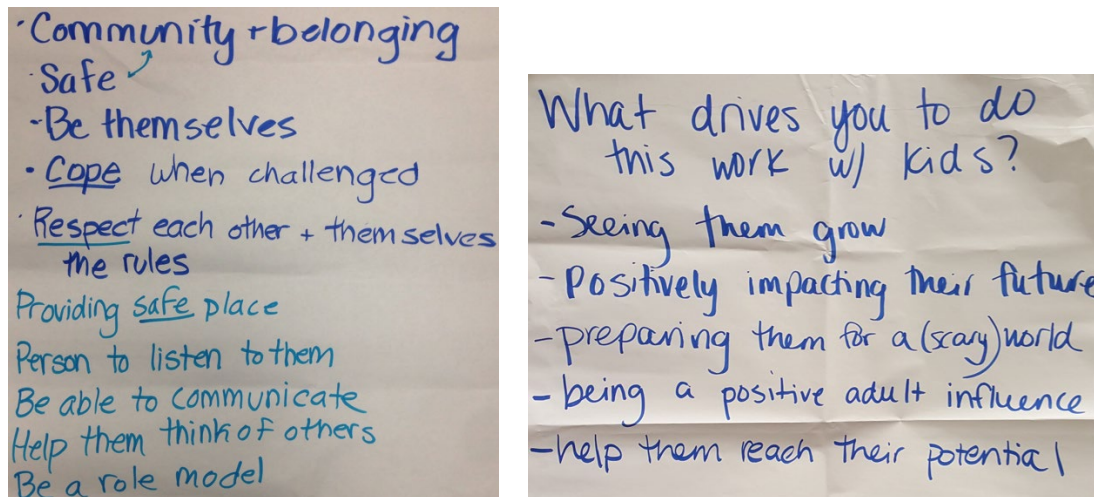
This tool gives us a way to consider multiple facets of youth worker identity and how it is connected to the learning and development ecosystem. Youth workers are connected to fellow youth workers, coworkers, the children they serve, caregivers, other educators, the organizational leadership, and the community. Some of those groups are monetary stakeholders in the organizations or professions to which the youth workers belong. Some of these groups may have no knowledge of the work being done. These connections are all an important part of the learning and development ecosystem and play into the identity of youth workers. This is just one way to look at identity, but we think we gathered important insights on the health and wellbeing of youth workers.

In order to understand more about youth worker occupational identity, we drew on observations from a professional development workshop (Simple Interactions) where youth workers learned about the importance of interactions with youth (Akiva, White, Colvin, DeMand, & Page, 2020). We did not use the meme tool in these workshops, but used focus groups to ask about aspirations and daily work experience. We think this data adds to our discussion.

#### **4.5.2 Values, Aspirations, and Stereotypes**

Aspirations are deeply internal but they are also shaped by societal expectations and previous experiences. People have very personal reasons for choosing to be youth workers and to continue doing this work over time. Burnout and turnover are serious concerns for this field because of the low pay and challenging work (Yohalem, Granger, & Pittman, 2012; Yohalem et al., 2010). Cognitive dissonance, or the friction between how something is understood externally

and how something is understood internally, is a psychological concept that can lead to confusion and distress (Glasford, Pratto, & Dovidio, 2008; Mckimmie, 2015). So we are very interested to know what youth workers aspire to when they work with youth.



**Figure 4.4. What Do You Want for Kids?**

During a professional learning program, we asked participants in focus groups two questions about their aspirations: “What do you want youth to get out of your program?” and “What drives the work you do with kids?” In response, a majority of participants said they wanted to help youth with abstract goals such as feeling agency, becoming confident, learning and growing, reaching their potential, and having a bright future (see Figure 4.6). Fewer shared specific ways they might do this such as building relationships, setting high expectations, and creating a safe environment (Akiva, White, Colvin, DeMand, & Page, 2020; Akiva, White, Colvin, Li, & Wardrip, Under Review). It is interesting (and also expected) that the aspirations were large, lofty goals for youth. While abstract goals are good, we worry that this might set youth workers up for friction when these aspirations meet daily life.

In several studies, we asked “*What Do You Think You Do?*” in order to understand youth workers’ aspirations for the work they do (Colvin et al., 2020, 2021; White et al., Under Review).

Their responses reflected a few different patterns. We found that youth workers thought they were multitaskers, heroes who bring books, knowledge and learning to children and brokers of happiness. In a national study of library workers, we found 25% of participants described themselves as being overwhelmed with work while 28% described themselves as heroes (Colvin et al., 2021). One in four of the library workers in this study felt that they had far more work than they could handle and nearly one in three described themselves as being superhuman. We will discuss the hero concept later in the chapter, but here we want to emphasize the aspirations of youth workers as somewhat unattainable.

When considering societal expectations, we used the prompt, *What Does the Community Think I Do?* from the meme tool in Figure 4.3. The patterns were striking. Both afterschool and library workers felt that the community thought of them as stereotypical. Library workers thought they were perceived as an older white lady with a bun, a scowl and a book while afterschool workers felt that they were seen as “glorified babysitters” who did not warrant much respect (Colvin et al., 2020). Even more concerning is that a substantial number of the library and afterschool youth workers thought that the community saw them as not doing anything of any importance at all, bringing up images of clock watching, relaxing and, for library workers especially, being “extinct.” We found similar stereotypical answers to *What Does the Community Think I Do* in a national study of library workers (Colvin et al., 2021).

These stereotypes are in the media, society and in conversation all around youth workers. It is possible that the aspirations that youth workers internalize are a reaction to these stereotypes. The community thinks I do nothing of importance, but I actually do everything!

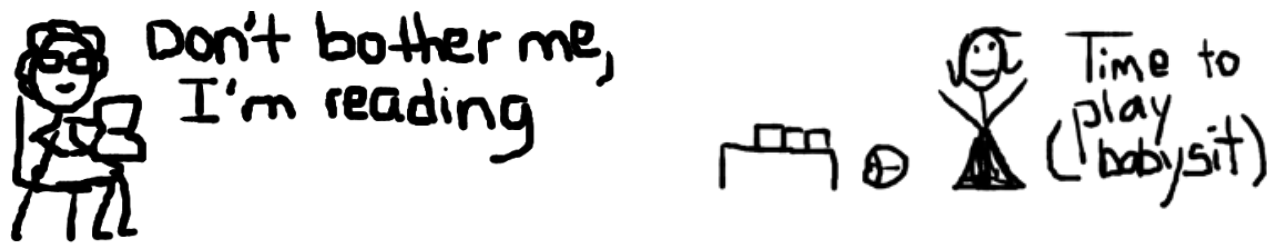


Figure 4.5. What the Community Thinks I Do

#### 4.5.3 Professional/Organizational Standards and the Allied Youth Field

Our research has found that organizational work often got in the way of engaging with the youth (Colvin et al., 2020). In response to *What I Actually Do*, 21 of the 34 participants mentioned administrative work of some kind. The fact that the jobs entailed administrative tasks and meetings was not a problem on its own. The friction appeared when the administrative tasks got in the way of engaging with youth. One afterschool worker commented, “Sometimes I do feel like it’s very much focused on the behind the scenes stuff, which is fine because that’s necessary to have this run. But I want to do more of just the hanging out with kids part. So sometimes I feel the emphasis and the importance is placed on have the employees be perfect, have these programs be perfect, let’s spread yourself as thin as you can doing all these programs instead of just let’s go hang out with kids. Let’s play a game. Let’s play cards.” To the outside, “hanging out with kids” may seem like an unimportant part of youth work, but it is actually a key part of building relationships with youth and relationships are a key part of learning (Li & Julian, 2012; Rhodes, 2004). This may point to a general misunderstanding about the importance of youth work.

Management is an important consideration because managers can help mediate the stress of youth workers; decreased stress is associated with healthier, more satisfied employees (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; White et al., 2020). We described the

professions of library and afterschool workers above. There are no overarching organizations that support the training and development of afterschool workers. An Allied Youth Field has been proposed by some, but funding and support have thwarted this development (Borden et al., 2011; Hartje, Evans, Killian, & Brown, 2008; Yohalem et al., 2012, 2010). Others worry that introducing requirements like training and education will create a barrier for some people to become youth workers and will not encourage minoritized applicants to pursue the field (Baldrige, 2020; Starr & Gannett, 2016). Both the library and afterschool fields are majority white (Lance, 2005; Yohalem et al., 2006).

The American Library Association (ALA) maintains a loosely coupled control over local libraries (Scott & Davis, 2007) because while they control training and guidelines for librarianship, local boards and governments provide the funding for the library services. So, like afterschool programs, libraries are very much molded by their local community. Local management is therefore important to consider.

We found that directors tended to take two different approaches: they either enforced compliance to top-down mandates or they buffered staff from top-down mandates. Staff that worked for compliance-oriented directors stated feeling disconnected from management and frustrated by rules and regulations they had to follow (White, Akiva, Colvin, & Li, Under Review). Staff that worked at organizations whose management took a buffering approach described having agency in their jobs and choosing to use their time with children to build relationships and support social and emotional learning. Agency is a key aspect of identity (Waters & Fivush, 2015) so management might play a role in the occupational identity and health of the keystone species.



#### **4.5.4 Actual Work Experience & Stress**

The closest perspective to youth worker occupational identity is daily practice, or the work they actually do. In Akiva et al. (Under Review), we describe a professional learning approach (Simple Interactions) that affirms youth workers' daily practice. The program focuses on relational practices between youth and youth workers. The program allows participants to connect with other professionals, see their interactions in a positive light (through videos) and help them make plans to create more of these positive interactions. Through interviews, participants' responses to this program was overwhelmingly positive. One of the program features participants found most useful was the opportunity to become more intentional about everyday interactions and to be active in their own learning. They did this by watching videos of their daily practice, conducting improvement science projects, and growing a community of practice. One of the basic messages of the program is grounded in positive deviance and assumes that youth workers already do great work (Marsh, Schroeder, Dearden, Sternin, & Sternin, 2004). One participant explained, "I know one of the things that was really nice about the fall cohort was just absolutely positive, supportive space." This program gives them space to see their own work in a positive and meaningful way. These professionals are thirsty for education and training. They also explain that they really need connection with other youth workers who are engaged in similar work. "I think there's value in the way that other people have interactions and you can see things that work really well for other people that maybe you wouldn't have taken that course of action, but seeing somebody else do it and do it successfully can translate back into your work as well."

While we saw affirmation of daily practice in the professional development program, participants shared the stress they felt in their actual practice in our interviews (Colvin et al., 2020, 2021). Afterschool workers found themselves stretched thin doing administrative tasks rather than

the work they aspired to do, such as building relationships with youth(Colvin et al., 2020). Afterschool workers described a lot of “running around,” engaging in behavior management, cleaning, “putting out fires” and changing plans because of bad behavior. One afterschool worker said that it “makes me kind of sad” because she has exciting plans that get diverted because of discipline issues, “No going outside today because there was a lot of shouting and hitting.” Another afterschool educator described being a “jack of all trades,” and that she never gets to focus because “I was the front desk coordinator, I'm homework help, I used to teach dance, I'm a summer camp counselor.” This was in addition to the distress of feeling disrespected and misunderstood: “I just feel like we could be doing more in terms of teaching because we are an enrichment program but the parents calls us aftercare.”

Similarly, library workers described their daily work as overwhelming, being pulled in many directions and “being bombarded by questions”(Colvin et al., 2020, 2021). In particular, almost half of participants expressed distress at the overwhelming amount of work they felt required to do when talking about their actual work. Only 5% of participants thought of their actual work as heroic (compared to 28% who aspired to be heroes). There was a clear sense of distress with comments like, “I lead a life of quiet desperation” and “there’s not enough time in the day” and “I pull my hair out ever so gently while smiling”.

The differences between aspirational and actual work are troubling because it seems that reality is not matching up with goals. The fact that youth workers are distressed and that daily practice does not match up with aspirations could be problematic and could lead to burnout and distress (Maslach et al., 2001; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). On the other hand, these identities could be shaped in opposition to the stereotypes they perceive.

## **4.6 Conclusions & Takeaways**

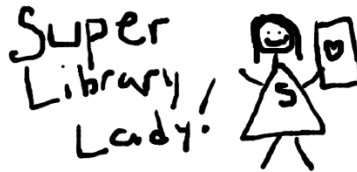
### **4.6.1 Social Justice in Youth Work**

Library work started with monks and religious texts (Maxwell, 2005) and libraries, like afterschool programs can also be traced back to the desire to help immigrants assimilate into American life (Brady & Abbott, 2015; Halpern, 2003; P. A. Jones, 1999). The idea of youth workers as shepherds and brokers of knowledge continues today as programs are framed to enrich minoritized and “disadvantaged” youth (Baldrige, 2020). This idea of youth workers as saviors seems to be baked into the system and is deeply problematic. White saviorism reinforces systemic racism and creates an environment where youth workers are there to “save” or “fix” youth who do not know any better (Albright, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017; Baldrige, 2019; Walsh, 2020).

There also seems to be link between youth work being a “calling” to help people to the detriment of their own wellbeing (Ettarh, 2018). In our studies, youth workers were overwhelmed and in distress by actual daily work. Job creep (Van Dyne & Ellis, 2004), or the gradual inclusion of additional tasks and responsibilities can add to the stress of youth workers. More than that, it may point to a more systemic issue. Fobazi Ettarh coined a term, “vocational awe” which describes the library profession as a calling and library work as inherently sacred work and is above reproach (Ettarh, 2018). Ettarh argues that this kind of culture sets librarians up for burn out and job creep that will never be compensated appropriately. In addition, it perpetuates the idea that youth workers should continue to be underpaid and undervalued. This, like credentialing, is a barrier to access for people who want to enter the field.

Our research suggests that librarians are not alone in this paradigm. Identity researchers explain that callings, or vocations, are work that is deeply tied to individual values and self-worth

(Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Billett, 2011). This kind of deeply personal work can create a scenario where youth workers feel they need to take on more work than they can handle and where setting boundaries is discouraged (Ettarh, 2018). The problem is that when work is so deeply tied to personal values, struggle and failure may also feel deeply personal. In a field that struggles with burnout and turnover, this is something about which we should worry.



**Figure 4.6. What Do You Think You Do?**

While it may be fun to see youth workers as superheroes in capes, ready to save the day, the trope could be deeply disrespectful. A recent article from the National Afterschool Association pointed out that seeing youth workers as heroes undermines their professional skills and creates an unrealistic image of a human who can do anything (Ham, 2020). From an identity point of view, we wonder if the narrative of “I am a superhero” might be a reflection of unrealistic expectations for themselves. If youth workers expect that they can do anything, even save the world, reality will always be disappointing. When work is mismatched with personal goals and expectations, burnout is a serious result (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). In the Simple Interactions professional development program, youth workers were affirmed that they are already doing good work. In other words, rather than trying to be a superhero (an impossible task) their actual work is what they can aspire to. This may help youth workers set themselves up for success.

#### 4.6.2 Disrespect

Our analysis of these studies highlights some troubling trends in the occupational identities of youth workers; this may give us insight into the health of youth workers as keystone species. The most striking is the deep disrespect that youth workers feel from the community. Stereotypes are pervasive in these studies and youth workers seem to feel misunderstood by the community at large. The general misunderstanding that youth workers are “just playing” or “doing nothing” is not only harmful to the identities of the youth workers, it completely undermines the work they do. One afterschool youth worker explained that it often looks like he’s just playing when he’s doing much more.

“I think what a lot of parents and some people in the community can think... I just kind of go out and play ping pong with the kids and it’s more than that. What they don’t see is that if I am playing ping pong, I’m also probably talking to the kid about how their day was, and how was school, or why are they tired. And you know they’d be, “oh, I had to stay up late” or “I was on Fortnite all night last night.” Well, of course you’re going to be tired but it could be a number of different things. But I mean I’m having that informal relationship, building that relationship with that kid at that point. But they don’t see that, they’re just like, ‘Ok, you’re here to have fun with my kid.’”

When youth work is seen as unimportant or easy, all of the time, effort and energy they put into their work is disrespected and erased. In the context of a learning and development ecosystem, this kind of disrespect has ripple effects. Youth workers rely on the community for monetary and structural support. If youth work is ignored or disrespected, the connections between youth, adults and the community are weakened and the organizations may miss out on opportunities to collaborate and help each other.

### **4.6.3 Implications for the Learning and Development Ecosystem**

The tension we find between the external and internal occupational identities is likely a sign of cognitive dissonance and an unhealthy keystone species. Society and the ecosystem itself have set unrealistically high expectations for youth workers. At the same time, youth workers feel that the community disrespects and disregards all of their hard work. They are in a precarious situation because the reality of daily practice seems to be overwhelming and disappointing at the same time. If the keystone species is living in a culture where job creep, vocational awe and disrespect prevail, there seems to be no end to the high turnover and low pay that affects the field (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). But, in the face of all of this stress, youth workers show up to work every and continue inspire and teach youth. We had youth workers in our studies who have showed up for 50 years and continue to do so. While the health of the keystone species looks poor, the persistence of youth workers looks strong.

### **4.6.4 Next Steps**

These forgotten helpers have told us through focus groups, interviews and surveys, what they need to survive. Youth workers need time to reflect, connect with peers, build networks and share ideas. Above all, they need legitimacy and recognition. There are arguments for and against credentialing in the Allied Youth Field at large (Starr & Gannett, 2016), but legitimacy within the local learning and development ecosystem could be much simpler. This chapter focuses on only two examples of youth workers: afterschool and library youth workers. There are many other youth workers in many other unique learning and development ecosystems such as coaches, camp counselors, corrections counselors, social workers and more. There is no one-size-fits-all approach

to learning and development ecosystems (Hecht & Crowley, 2019). Future research should address the hero narrative, vocational awe and the friction caused by negative stereotypes.

One approach that we have seen succeed in our professional development program was giving youth workers time to reflect on their own work and to affirm the good work they are already doing. This legitimizes their daily practice and the practice of their colleagues (Akiva et al., 2020, Under Review). Connecting youth workers to each other for support and morale also creates a community of practice which has been shown to be positive for many different groups (Graff, Korum, Randall, & Simmons, 2013; Hatch, Hill, & Roegman, 2016; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, providing a space to set meaningful and attainable goals would help youth workers calm internal occupational friction.

## **5.0 Conclusions and Future Research**

I began this journey as a librarian who wanted to bring library work into the realm of education research. I find myself completing this dissertation as an identity researcher interested in libraries as spaces for connection and learning. The difference is subtle, but it reflects my deep inquiry of the last 5 years. In this final chapter, I will focus on the overall conclusions of this dissertation as well as the future research I would like to do with what I have learned so far.

### **5.1 Bringing Libraries Into the Learning Ecosystem**

My first two papers reflect my work in public libraries and how I brought them into education research and into conversations about the learning ecosystem. Public libraries are an incredibly important part of communities, but they were not typically associated with education and learning. Though STEM, makerspaces, and summer reading have pushed libraries into academic and academic-adjacent areas, library workers have not been given attention in educational research. Afterschool workers occupy a small corner of the research but more research is needed. Though it may seem obvious to practitioners, the findings from this dissertation that youth library workers are engaged in relational and learning related work are foundational for future work with libraries and youth workers.

The learning ecosystem is a useful frame for understanding all of the people and organizations that play a part in youth learning. Education does not stop at the end of the school day. In fact, Out of School Learning is a key part of youth development and includes learning that



happens in sports programs, camps, afterschool programs, and in libraries (Baldrige et al., 2017; Hwang et al., 2020; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Paper 1 brought youth services library workers together with afterschool workers and showed the crucial, relational aspect of their work with youth (Colvin et al., 2020). Relationships with youth are crucial for learning (Li & Julian, 2012) and Paper 2 explored the types of learning that library workers engage in with youth (Colvin et al., 2021). Libraries are typically associated with books, but youth services library workers provide much more than resources for learning, they also provide space for learning independently and in groups and programs that teach everything from basic literacy to STEM.

## **5.2 The Reality of Youth Work**

My first two papers also revealed an unfortunate, harsh truth about youth work: workers feel disrespected, overworked, and misunderstood. Disrespectful library stereotypes are not new, but their effect on the identity of library workers is important. Nancy Pearl is the quintessential librarian; she is an older white lady with a bun and pearls and her action figure can be seen shushing people. Afterschool workers are not bound to such detailed stereotypes, but report similarly disrespectful views of their work. By looking at the layers of occupational identity of youth workers, I was able to identify points of tension and friction. Teachers have long felt the disrespect of doing what is considered to be “feminine work” or work that involves helping and caring for young people (Daiski & Richards, 2007; Drudy, 2008). It seems that youth workers have inherited societal disrespect from the educational field, but not the actual legitimacy as educators. The drawings that my research participants completed in both studies (Chapters 2 and 3) show youth

workers as talking (or shushing) heads and as disengaged from the work they actually do every day.

In the third paper, I describe the “Hero mythology” that emerged from research with afterschool and youth services library workers. This is one area on which my future research will focus. Many of the participants described themselves as superheroes or as super-human (Colvin et al., 2020). These images do not appear in a vacuum. In fact, the Library of Congress is now selling Nancy Pearl super hero figures (<https://library-of-congress-shop.myshopify.com/products/nancy-pearl-the-super-librarian>). Nancy Pearl, the quintessential pearl-wearing, shushing librarian now wears a cape. Stereotypes converge in this action figure. Ironically, the bun and pearls are a disrespectful stereotype of a library worker who reads all day while the cape is a symbol of a selfless superhero who saves the day. The idea of a youth worker as a superhero on an individual scale is problematic because that worker may have absorbed the job as part of their identity and is taking on super-human responsibilities, at least in some sense. The idea of a youth worker as a superhero on an institutional and ecological scale, is problematic because it reinforces a deficit perspective of youth, youth who need to be saved. It is also noteworthy that these stereotypes have remained tied to the image of white women. Future research needs to be done on the racial and ethnic makeup of youth workers, especially library workers, to determine if these stereotypes affect recruitment into the field, access to credentialing and connection to youth and communities of color.

The cognitive dissonance of being disrespected, overworked and heroic should be explored further. In Paper 3, I expand on the concept of “vocational awe,” which was coined by Fobazi Ettarh, a librarian at Rutgers University. The idea of librarianship, and by extension, youth work, as a calling in a profession that is inherently sacred work and is above reproach (Ettarh, 2018)

emphasizes an individualized occupational identity. This view is incomplete because youth work is done in the context of their social environment and profession or organization. Youth workers do not work alone, nor do they work in a vacuum. The idea of a super hero is similarly individualistic. Youth workers are actually part of a larger learning ecosystem that includes educators, organizations and youth. These connections are powerful and necessary levers for education and systemic change (Russell, Knutson, & Crowley, 2013). More research could be done to explore whether youth workers truly feel like they are working in isolation. Especially if youth work is considered a calling, or work that is deeply tied to individual values and self-worth (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Billett, 2011), it will perpetuate this individual thinking. This kind of deeply personal work can create a scenario where youth workers feel they need to take on more work than they can handle and where setting boundaries is discouraged (Ettarh, 2018). The challenge is that when work is so deeply tied to personal values, struggle and perceived failure may also feel deeply personal. The systems and communities in the learning ecosystem are where youth workers can and should draw strength, but organizations must first recognize and support these kinds of connections.

Future research should situate youth workers in the historical context and as part of institutionalized inequality. Afterschool and youth library workers (youth workers) are part of an old tradition of education. Educational programs began as a way to “Americanize” immigrant children and to keep them off the streets (Brady & Abbott, 2015; Halpern, 2003; P. A. Jones, 1999). The idea of the educator and the “disadvantaged” youth is steeped in deficit thinking and continues today (Baldrige, 2014, 2020; Halpern, 2003). This idea of a youth workers as saviors is deeply problematic and should be investigated further, especially in the context of colonialism. Research with international youth work endeavors have illuminated some strategies to bridge

cultural and structural divides (Heathfield & Fusco, 2016). White saviorism, in particular, reinforces systemic racism and creates an environment where youth workers are there to “save” or “fix” youth who do not know any better (Albright et al., 2017; Baldridge, 2019; Walsh, 2020). A systemic deficit perspective may be leading youth workers to describe themselves as heroes. This perspective may or may not align with how the youth worker thinks of the work they do with youth. This is worth exploring further.

While there is very little recent data on the racial makeup of youth workers, we can assume that they, like teachers, include a large number of white women (Goldenberg, 2014; Lance, 2005; Wyatt, Oswalt, White, & Peterson, 2008; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). I suspect that jobs or fields that are described (by society or by youth workers) as heroes with a great deal of stress, disrespect and a low salary are likely to attract a very specific type of person: well-meaning, but privileged people who can afford to take a low paying job that fulfills their identity as a helper or, people who have benefited from the organization and feel that they should “pay back” the support that they received. Additional research can illuminate if these social and institutional expectations are perpetuating deficit thinking.

In order to explore the phenomenon of disrespect, stress and heroism, my coauthors and I are considering the patterns of responses to two prompts from the national library study in Paper 2: *What I think I do* and *What I actually Do*. We hope to illuminate the differences in these responses and where the distress and heroism appear. Thus far, we have noticed that these two responses rarely match each other. We are interested in exploring how youth workers are making sense of the work they do in the face of this stress and disrespect. Essentially, we would like to understand how someone can be a superhero and disrespected at the same time.

### 5.3 Pushing the Meme Method Forward

The meme tool allows interviewers to talk about complex, contextualized identity in a way that more straightforward questions might not allow. It also provides valuable data in the form of drawings or written words and phrases. Thus far I have used this tool with library workers, afterschool workers, and a small group of adolescents in a summer science program. I have also adapted the tool for use in an online survey. I am currently piloting the same tool with LGBTQ undergraduates in a study of identity and supportive relationships.

The meme tool has evolved over time and with different groups of participants. I created this tool as a fun way to explore stereotypes and identity with library workers. I then adapted it for afterschool workers and supervisors. It is a powerful elicitation device for starting conversations about the complex subject of identity. Specifically, this tool allows the participant to consider not only how they think of themselves, but how other people might think about them. For occupational identities, this is useful for considering stakeholders in the community and for teasing apart perceived expectations that trickle down from national organizations to regional to local. It is also an interesting way to look at the way that youth workers adapt their work to fit the expectations of supervisors, grantors and government. As the priorities of funders change, does the actual work change? It may or may not, but the expectations may change drastically. This may reveal whether or not supervisors are buffering youth workers from changing expectations. This type of buffering appears in afterschool programs where the national organization changes expectations and local branches are expected to comply (White, Akiva, Colvin, & Li, Under Review).

Another benefit of this method is that it allows people to respond in personal and unique ways. Both in person and online, participants can write and draw their answers to explain their

understanding of their identity. Not everyone is comfortable drawing, so having both a written and drawing option is important. While doing in-person interviews, participants also narrated their responses out loud, which provided rich detail into how they were forming their thoughts. Some talked while they drew or wrote, and some explained their work afterward. Unfortunately, online surveys do not provide this kind of interaction. I conducted a short pilot study with middle school students in a summer science program and these youth participants suggested that I give people art supplies and collage materials so that they could create elaborate pictures in response to the prompt. While this could be a fun and rewarding activity, it would likely take a great deal of time. But it could be a great activity for a youth program to conduct—it could yield rich conversations about identity and self-image.

I plan to continue adapting this tool for use with young people. In the version of the tool I used with LGBTQIA+ undergraduates, I learned that students do not like to draw pictures of themselves, that zoom hinders the artistic process, and that personal identities like gender and sexuality require more trust and time than occupational identity. The stereotypes and social expectations in this context can be personal and painful. Some students even went so far as to describe themselves in terms of how they failed to fill stereotypical expectations. The ways in which students emphasized certain identities in certain contexts and with certain people was interesting and informative.

I would love for other researchers to use this tool for their own work. I think that adolescents, especially, are very aware of how adults perceive them. I think it is interesting and important for educators of all kinds to understand how youth think they are being seen. For example, this is especially true for African American boys who are more likely to be disciplined and less likely to feel like they matter (Carey, 2020; DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Moussavi

Saeedi, 2017). While LGBTQIA+ youth may be able to control who knows their gender or sexual identities, black boys wear their racial identities on their skin.

The interplay between visible and invisible identities is an important area for exploration and this tool could help explore how these identities form perceptions of self as well as how youth think they are being perceived. Perception is an important aspect of identity because it captures the social expectations that youth feel. Every time youth walk into a room or a new situation, they are arranging their identities and behavior according to how they think they are perceived, how safe they feel and how they want to be treated. This process will inform much of my future research.

#### **5.4 Final Thoughts**

Identity is incredibly complex. My experience as a youth services librarian taught me that the pressures of stereotypes and mismatched expectations are real and important. These societal messages affected the way I entered the field, my choice to pursue a degree and occupation in libraries and, in the end, my choice to leave. I always had my own identity and tried very hard to buck stereotypes, but those pressures were unavoidable and ultimately the disrespect kept me from doing the work I thought needed to be done. My journey taught me about myself and about libraries, but it also led me to learn about identities and their deeply contextualized layers. Disrespectful stereotypes of shushing library workers and babysitting afterschool workers not only hinder the work that is done with youth currently, but they could also affect recruitment and legitimization. If these jobs are not seen as sustainable or viable careers, young people will not pursue them. Similarly, stereotypes and misunderstandings of the work will get in the way when

looking for funding and legitimization from the government and community. Why would someone fund an organization if they think the youth workers do nothing all day? Professionalization of youth workers is an important pursuit but credentialing and additional hurdles to entry may exacerbate the lack of diversity in the field. Images of overworked heroes separates youth workers from the community in an unhelpful and untrue way. The identities we put forth in each situation affects not only how we perceive ourselves but how we are perceived. I hope that my exploration helps some of those disrespected youth workers get the support and respect they deserve.



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