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# The Shape of Youth Work to Come: City Year's Approach to Youth Worker Development

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The Shape of Youth Work to Come: City Year's Approach to Youth Worker  
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## ABSTRACT

### The Shape of Youth Work to Come: City Year's Approach to Youth Worker Development

Jeremy Joseph

The concept of youth work as a profession is slowly gaining legitimacy in the United States and features varying approaches. In order to maintain the growth of the field, youth worker training programs must be examined through the lens of a theoretical framework to better understand best practices and ways in which the youth are impacted by the services. I have chosen to use the case of the non-profit organization, City Year to highlight ways in which young leaders from varying backgrounds are introduced to the field of youth work. Through this study I have found that City Year is an innovative way to combine national service with youth work and allow firsthand experience to train potential professional youth workers. Youth serving organizations, such as City Year, are directly impacting the lives of young people and need to be examined as the field continues to become professionalized.

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Exploring the training and best practices of youth workers is an overlooked, but extremely relevant topic, which impacts the wellbeing of thousands of young people each day. Although youth work is slowly gaining legitimacy and support, the field still lacks a definitive cohesiveness in terms of styles and practice. Much research still needs to be done to determine the most effective forms of youth work and how to balance professional development with relationships and interpersonal skills necessary in the field. In “Getting Down to Business: Defining Competencies for Entry-Level Youth Workers,” authors state:

There is agreement that staff characteristics are critical to high-quality youth development, but there is no consensus around what those characteristics are or how a youth worker should best acquire them. There is little research showing the connection between professionally trained youth workers and positive youth outcomes (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004, p. 26).

Forming a consensus on the most effective type of youth work remains controversial as diverse stakeholders search for different outcomes. Furthermore, the professionalization of youth work remains sluggish as the perception of working with young people often remains associated with education, as a teacher or school counselor. The idea remains that “youth workers in the United States have not been viewed as professionals, and youth work has not been viewed as a profession,” while “youth workers have operated on intuition and instinct or have had training in a related profession such as social work or education” (Watkins, 2012, p. 71). Meanwhile, thousands of youth workers in organizations outside of schools around the world serve millions of children and adolescents every day in some capacity. It is crucial to reflect on the progression of youth workers and how the profession is utilized in different organizations so that new

practices are considered and legitimacy continues to grow for those working in youth development as a career.

The research of youth workers often revolves around child development and skills that individuals need to work effectively with youth, however, the training of these workers varies greatly in scale and content. Youth organizations serve specific needs for their population and provide services that require different skills, but if professionalization occurs, a standard must be determined for skills training of youth workers. In addition, the funders of the organizations often ask for specific outputs and results to maintain financial assistance, and in turn, certain attributes may be valued differently at organizations with different missions. Furthermore, it may be difficult to agree upon a set of concrete skills for youth workers to possess, depending on the context of the service being provided or expectations of funders.

Despite the unclear skills requirement and training methods for youth workers, it is still crucial to continue analyzing effective practices of youth serving organizations to understand any new skills that are necessary for the field. Likewise, any skills or expectations of youth workers that were previously thought to be necessary may be dated or less relevant in certain contexts of working with youth. In order to examine these varying approaches and training practices that persist in youth work, it is important to understand some of the research that has been done in the field and different schools of thought regarding youth work. Accounting for adaptive training methods and reflective practices in youth work may shine more insight into how to train youth workers and, more importantly, meet the needs of the youth population, which they serve.

The non-profit youth serving organization, City Year will be the primary case in which youth worker trainings are considered and as an approach to engaging young people in at-risk schools. City Year allows for nearly three thousand youth workers to participate in this

introductory youth work experience in twenty six different cities around the United States and four sites internationally, serving nearly 150,000 students (City Year, 2014). However, it is important to understand the history and mission of City Year before continuing to analyze the organization in the framework of approaches to youth work. Growing familiar with the organization will allow for better contextualization of how they approach youth work and the types of trainings associated with the methods of City Year.

### City Year Background

City Year is an education-based nonprofit that primarily serves third to ninth grade students in some of the lowest performing schools around the United States as well as in the United Kingdom and South Africa. City Year began in 1988 from an idea by roommates, Michael Brown and Alan Khazei in Boston, Massachusetts while attending Harvard Law School. Brown and Khazei's original mission was to build a "model program that showcased the power of service to change lives and communities" with very few resources to begin with, almost as an experiment (Khazei, 2012, p. 47). The initial plan for City Year was to engage in community work and engagement, such as neighborhood beautification, but soon evolved to working primarily in schools with students to lower the dropout rate. The idea of promoting better citizenship through national service still holds true from Brown and Khazei's initial vision, but with the formation of Americorps in 1993 under the Clinton administration, City Year began receiving government funding and needed to meet different standards, primarily serving in schools (Khazei, p. 123). After the formation of Americorps, the national year of service model was in full effect for City Year (along with other organizations such as Teach for America and Youth Service America), giving young people the opportunity to work with students and community members in areas with limited resources. The relationship between Americorps and

City Year currently allows over three thousand corps members to serve in various cities on diverse teams helping to keep students in school and on track for graduation (City Year, 2014). Furthermore, upon finishing service in City Year through one or two years as a corps member or an additional year as a team leader, members are able to reenter the workforce and communities with valuable experiences and trainings.

City Year utilizes near-peer research based interventions to address students' academic performance as well as attendance and behavior. Programs and intervention frameworks are provided to Corps members in trainings, but much room exists for creative alterations and adjustments to fit the needs of the students. City Year members may serve upon receiving at least a high school diploma and are within the age range of seventeen to twenty four years old. Service is about a year and includes trainings in the summer leading into the school year. Each Corps Member is assigned a focus list of students to work with on a particular skill set (attendance, academics, or behavior), while also providing classroom support to teachers during other parts of the school day. In addition, the Corps Members working in the Whole School Whole Child initiative, which engages with the entire population, hosting events such as service projects or spelling bees. The whole-school initiative also reaches students from City Year members during morning greeting, where students are greeted upon entering the school with enthusiastic cheers and sometimes songs and chants to bring positive energy to the schools. The energy and idealism of the corps members serving in City Year is the fuel to driving home the mission of keeping students in school and on track to graduate, utilizing their youth to connect with community members and build positive relationships. Furthermore, the example of the City Year organization as a reference to professionalizing youth work is relevant to finding further



connections between effective skills of youth workers and positive outcomes as this is also a key example of a program training many future youth workers in many different settings.

The literature review section will delve into previous research in the field and aspects that help form a definition of youth work and prevailing theories that offer insight into effective practices. In addition, the literature will form a framework to analyze City Year youth work trainings and practices so that the concept of professionalization is clearer. The theories that will be included in the literature review are prominent in the field of youth work and illustrate the progression of the field to a more legitimate practice, which is still slowly gaining recognition. Furthermore, the chosen theories are foundational to many youth serving organizations, such as City Year, and reflect the values of many practitioners that work with youth or study the field in an academic setting. Hopefully, the literature will form a lens for which to view youth worker training and performance in multiple contexts and help answer the questions of how to best further the progress of youth work as a practice. The analytical framework should help determine how professionalizing or advancing youth work should look in the future in order to best serve the youth and begin to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population around the developing world.

## Literature Review

### What is Youth Work?

Before considering the specifics of youth worker trainings, it is important to identify what youth work entails and how it is perceived in literature. Typically, people identify formal education and teaching as primary aspects of youth work, but in addressing other aspects of

youth development, it is important to consider other definitions. In “Youth Work: Preparation for Practice,” the authors mention that “a range of practices loosely defined as ‘youth work’ flourish in a wide range of settings delivered by numerous organizations” (Wood, Westwood, & Thompson, 2015, p. 2). The exact definition of youth work continues to evolve as demands for youth programs vary in different contexts. In addition, varying youth serving organizations may have different approaches, causing the exact definition to be difficult to confine. However, in a broader sense it’s possible to define youth work as an educational and social practice, which may also distinguish it from other work with youth (Wood et al., p. 2). Youth work as an educational practice refers to the practitioners as educators that meet the youth where they are at, using purposeful interventions instead of stricter formal teaching methods. Next, youth work may be seen as a social practice when utilizing group work and operating within existing social contexts so that peers can work better with one another and better understand different behaviors and ideas. The flexibility that comes with the practice of youth work is not necessarily present in more structured environments involving youth, yet specific skills are also necessary to meet the needs of young people within this framework.

In “Youth Work: A Manifesto for Our Times,” youth work may be configured as a “distinctive practice” through various elements to consider regarding the practice. One element, and possibly “the defining feature of youth work,” described is “young people’s voluntary participation,” which is unique to youth work as a practice, since young people may not possess the power to decide when to actively engage with someone in a more formal setting such as school (Davies, 2005, p. 8). The fact that young people are able to walk away from or disengage with programs gives them power and makes many youth work environments need to adapt to their needs and consider their input as well. Furthermore, the voluntary principle requires

investment from the young people, which will allow youth work to benefit the participants and keep them committed to the goals of the organization. Another element of youth work is “tipping the balance of power in young people’s favor,” empowering them to be better citizens. The element of empowering youth refers to their limited formal power in other sectors such as education and employment, which is relative to the context, which the youth serving organization is located (Davies, 10). Moreover, the notion of empowering the youth is especially relevant in many developing countries where the populations of young people continue to grow historically high and more pressure builds towards their successes in the future.

#### Effective Characteristics and Training of Youth Workers

The consensus for specific factors to determine successful youth workers and organizations is still unclear as studies continue to explore this dilemma. In “Civic Youth Work” it is stated that “we have found that youth work is not something that can be taught directly... You cannot give a lecture on how to become a youth worker (at least not an effective one)” (Baizerman, Hildreth, and Roholt, 2013, p. 152). Narrowing down what specific skills effective youth workers need to possess may be difficult to pin down and quantify when considering trainings or hiring processes. However, in 2004 the National Collaboration for Youth (NCY) developed a set of ten competencies for youth workers, which have been embraced by many national organizations such as the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club. The competencies include communication, adaptability and empowering youth in a program setting. The professionalization of the youth worker position demands a blueprint, such as the one provided by the National Collaboration for Youth, in terms of determining successes working with youth.

The ten competencies from the NCY are a solid foundation for qualifications and training practices of youth workers. Many professionals agree that these competencies are necessary for

youth workers to possess in the field, but the means of providing these skills (or any additional qualities) in trainings may vary.

#### The 2004 National Collaboration for Youth 10 Competencies for Youth Workers

1. Understands and applies basic child and adolescent development principles.
2. Communicates and develops positive relationships with youth.
3. Adapts, facilitates, and evaluates age-appropriate activities with and for the group.
4. Respects and honors cultural and human diversity.
5. Involves and empowers youth.
6. Identifies potential risk factors (in a program environment) and takes measures to reduce those risks.
7. Cares for, involves, and works with families and community.
8. Works as part of a team and shows professionalism.
9. Demonstrates the attributes and qualities of a positive role model.
10. Interacts with and relates to youth in ways that support asset building

(Astroth et al., 2004, p. 31)

These ten competencies are standard frameworks for many youth serving organizations and reflect a foundation for professionalizing youth work. The second and fourth competencies, specifically, are also in accordance with the “voluntary principle” of youth work, as a skilled practitioner must be able to adequately negotiate with young people and respect their values, while “any youth worker who patronizes, rides roughshod over or simply ignores them is liable to find her or himself without a clientele to work with” (Davies, 2005, p. 9). Furthermore the competencies set a standard for qualities that effective youth workers need and are desired by potential employers at youth serving organizations. However, the list is not exhaustive in every context of youth work, when agencies may choose to alter or add competencies depending on the type of environment they face. Competencies of youth workers such as those set by the National Collaboration for Youth are examples of professionalizing youth work with set expectations for practitioners that are still being debated and evolving to corroborate positive outcomes from youth programs.

Besides determining specific traits for effective youth workers, it is also critical to consider the appropriate mindset involved in working with youth. In “Civic Youth Work,” the authors argue that teaching youth workers involves different approaches, beginning with reorienting how we see young people (Baizerman et al., 2013). In the sense of training youth workers, reorientation involves “disrupting relations of expertise” or the idea that experts teach a specific curriculum to trainees, which must be absorbed and memorized for future practice. Furthermore, the reorientation process done in the context of utilizing participants’ experiences and asking questions also reflects how youth work may look when working with young people, forming a “cocreative process” (Baizerman et. al, 2013, p. 155). Along with reorientation, reframing is also necessary to make sense of shared experiences and use different perspectives to understand others’ experiences. Reframing will allow youth workers to better understand young people’s experiences and their potential. Finally, Baizerman and others explain that reflective practice is the third essential approach to teach youth workers, which involves stepping back and thinking about daily actions, while forming connections “between theory and practice” to sometimes “enlarge and deepen both” (Baizerman et al., 2013, p.158). The three elements of teaching youth workers is a solid starting piece as well as forming continual room for growth and reflection when continuing to think about these ideas and how they relate to working with young people. The profession of youth work involves adaptability and challenging ways of thinking to fully engage with young people, recognizing their value and potential instead of simply passing on expertise.

Along the same lines of reorienting and reflecting on preparing youth workers, the concept of positive youth development is another popular model used to guide youth work programs and training. Positive youth development is the notion of viewing young people as

resources instead of problems and determining goals of success for youth. The concepts of positive youth development are implemented in many youth serving organizations still and attempt to influence young people to successfully navigate life's challenges. Some assets are associated with promoting positive youth development, such as physical, intellectual and social development, which are often aligned with academic successes as well. The model of positive development also makes assumptions for a successful maturation process, while avoiding prison or drug abuse after considering the development assets of the youth (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). In order to correctly foster positive youth development, youth workers must create spaces in which these assets are addressed, such as maintaining consistent rules or limits and allowing opportunities for all young people to feel a sense of belonging. In addition, positive youth development speaks to the tenth youth worker competency, "interacts with and relates to youth in ways that support asset building," which further emphasizes its relevance in the field (Astroth et al., 2004, p. 31). Many training practices for youth workers incorporate a positive development framework, which is also applied to the environment in which the practitioners work with young people.

Critical viewpoints of positive youth development also exist, such as the social justice approach to youth development, which includes concepts of critical consciousness and social action. A critique that the social justice approach has towards positive youth development is that the situation for minority populations often features unique circumstances that needs to be acknowledged. The piece, "New Terrain in Youth Development: The Promise of a Social Justice Approach" explains:

The limits of current youth development models are bound by an inability to examine the complex social, economic, and political forces that bear on the lives

of urban youth. A discussion of these forces is particularly important for youth who struggle with identity, racism, sexism, police brutality, and poverty that are supported by unjust economic policies (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 82).

Furthermore, the argument for the social justice approach to youth development is that the current model, shifting the approach of youth work towards asset building for youth, ignores the challenges that many youth (particularly young people, whom many youth serving organizations target) are facing in terms of systemic barriers and complex forces affecting their lives on a daily basis. The skills and services of youth serving organizations may not be enough to positively develop young people, then, if social factors are not taken into consideration, especially when dealing with urban youth of color. The shift then changes from individual behavior to “social and community forces and their impact on youth” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 93). Moreover, in terms of preparing youth workers through the lens of the social justice approach, this might include fostering opportunities for young people dealing with outside oppressions to heal and connect with others, along with practitioners educating themselves on the conditions within a specific community that the youth they work with face on a daily basis. The more that a youth worker understands these environmental forces and the way they influence young people’s lives, the more effective the work will be and benefit the youth.

These theoretical frameworks and competencies are all useful for youth workers, but in many ways the field is primarily defined by putting idealism to work. Propositional knowledge is typically what may be taught in a class about youth development or theoretical approaches to working with young people, but is insufficient without being combined with practice and understanding self (Baizerman et al., 2013, p.153). Personal knowledge involves youth workers understanding their own story and experiences, which better aligns their positionality in the

context of working with young people, and better understanding where they might be coming from as well. The combination of different forms of knowledge and experience is critical to developing a better youth worker, while practicing the skills and theories learned about in books plus reflecting on how to best put that knowledge into action. Furthermore, the notion of viewing youth work as a profession through gaining propositional knowledge is also somewhat at odds with gaining firsthand experience and reflecting on the practice. Expertise as a practitioner in the field may also stem from “doing the right thing at the right time” and require more reflection on specific dilemmas rather than studying generalized theories of youth work (Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker, 2009, p. 83). The measurement of youth workers’ abilities in terms of assessing situations is difficult, but these skills may be refined through reflective practice and breaking down reactions in various situations in the field. Although the mentioned overarching frameworks of youth work are relevant in all aspects of youth work, the fundamental approach to becoming a professional practitioner may rise from either experience or study through gaining propositional knowledge. The case of the City Year model utilizes a primarily experience-based approach to youth work as it puts individuals in the field with guiding trainings and reflections throughout the service.

### Methodology

I have examined the practice of training youth workers, as well as the approach to serving youth, by looking at the case of City Year’s model, with specific attention to practices in the Cleveland site due to firsthand experience in that location. The training methods provided for City Year youth workers have been taken into consideration along with the work done in the communities and schools by the corps members. I have examined training schedules from recent years in the Cleveland site and documents describing the service events done in the communities.



By highlighting this example of youth work service in Cleveland, the professionalization of youth work and competencies that are integral to these organizations have been considered and analyzed in this context framed through the literature review. In addition, the research that City Year bases its interventions off of has been taken into account and referenced in sections of exploring specific practices. The program annual report was used as a key resource as well as some documents and known practices from personal experience as a corps member in Cleveland, Ohio. Different aspects of City Year's mission and work were analyzed and considered using the literature framework of effective youth work and competencies.

The methods utilized by City Year Cleveland for training the youth workers are adaptive and utilize many frameworks in the education field as well as traditional youth serving organizations. City Year was chosen as the organization also because it spans across various cities in the United States along with two sites in Europe (London and Birmingham) and one in South Africa. The international reach of City Year culture adds to the uniqueness of the services provide for youth populations in those communities and its influence. Therefore, examining youth work training practices of City Year members encompasses its international presence, which is continuing to grow, and leadership development for many future youth workers or educators after serving with City Year. An independent study of corps members from the first three years of City Year United Kingdom found that "95% said their experience prepared them for work and 83% said it was likely that their choice of career would involve service to others" (City Year, 2014, p. 39). The experiences of serving in City Year allow young adults to grow in development as a youth worker through direct experience and community engagement, accompanied by regular trainings and reflections throughout the year.

The exploration of youth worker training and professionalization through the case of City Year is appropriate, not only because of the reach and impact of the organization's sites, but also the unique environments in which City Year utilizes youth work skills. The corps members in City Year are able to provide interventions to students during and after school days, which allows after school initiatives as well as a more formal setting, collaborating with teachers. The framework of key characteristics of youth workers will be considered in the context of City Years' service and training to analyze how these values may be applied in this innovative form of serving youth. For example, the ten youth worker competencies from the National Collaboration for Youth are considered in the analysis as well as the concepts of positive youth development and social youth justice. In addition, the broader concept of experience and reflective practice as training youth workers is key to consider because it applies directly to City Year's model. If City Year is found to be missing components of the literature, in terms of youth worker trainings and characteristics, then it may be worth analyzing how these changes may further City Year's impact in the schools and communities, which they serve.

### City Year's Approach

The methods of City Year's approach working with the youth primarily uses research-based interventions and the understanding that students who are not promoted to tenth grade only have a one in four chance of earning a diploma in an eight year span (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). The research from scholars like Balfanz and Johns Hopkins University form the foundation for City Year's methods of selecting students to work with, in the hopes of addressing the importance of them reaching tenth grade successfully. The model that utilizes this research and represents the findings of the graduation research is the ABC approach, in which attendance,

behavior and coursework account for the early signs of a student at risk of dropping out of school. Analysis of this model is necessary to begin examining City Year's presence in the school and how corps members are given opportunities to work with youth. Furthermore successful utilization of the dropout research using the ABC model recognizes one of the ten competencies for youth workers, "identifies potential risk factors (in a program environment) and takes measures to reduce those risks" (Astroth et. al, 2004, p. 31). Therefore, it is worthwhile to better understand the ABC approach and how it ties into City Year's mission and daily practice of the youth workers in the schools, since it is the essence of City Year's work with the students.

#### A: Attendance Initiatives

City Year members focus on students' attendance as part of the ABC's of their research-based approach, indicate this factor as instrumental in determining if a student will drop out of school by the end of ninth grade. Students that are deemed "near-dropouts" attend school less than fifty percent of the time and seventy percent of them were in 9th or 10th grade, which makes them too young to officially drop out (Neild & Belfanz, 2006). Moreover, City Year finds it critical to listen to these findings and target the near-dropouts in the hopes that targeted interventions may get the students back on track to attend school more frequently and graduate before becoming official dropouts. The students with low attendance rates (primarily the near-dropout students) are placed in groups and assigned to different corps members to track weekly school attendance and suspensions. In addition, phone calls are frequently made to the parents of students not coming to school to check in for attendance updates and also alert parents of progress made by students. Sometimes, teams in schools with City Year will have celebrations or events to recognize students with perfect or improved attendance and provide positive

reinforcement to encourage them to come to school on a regular basis. Furthermore, the hope is that City Year's presence in a school will positively affect attendance by creating enthusiasm and a welcoming culture to the building, making students want to come to school.

#### B: Behavior Initiatives

Similar to attendance focus lists, specific students are also tracked by corps members on a focus list to address students with disruptive behavior, which is another indicator of falling off track to graduate. The behavior lists of students use suspension numbers and other disciplinary actions from school faculty in the hopes that corps members may work on specific behavioral struggles with certain students each week. The program "50 Acts of Leadership" is one example of a behavior initiative that City Year Cleveland utilizes in schools, which allows students to meet with corps members during lunch (or another free time during the day) each week to track acts of students demonstrating leadership. The concept is that once a student reaches fifty acts or examples of leadership behaviors in school, they are recognized as completing the program and able to participate in a graduation type event at the end of the year. The behavior initiatives attempt to encourage positive role modeling to other students and pointing out when young people are making positive decisions or demonstrating leadership qualities.

#### C: Coursework Initiatives

The coursework focus of City Year is the most common association with the education-based approach to corps members' role in the schools and involves tracking certain students' academic progress through measures such as grades and test scores. Similar to attendance data, students' academic success (specifically in math and English) serves as a key indicator of remaining on track to graduate. In addition, research has shown that course failure in math and

English was a strong indicator of dropping out for seventy seven percent of the students being tracked for graduation before entering high school (Neild & Belfanz, 2006, p. 28). City Year stands by the coursework indicators found in the research and puts students on focus lists for each corps member to use and develop targeted interventions with in the hopes of preventing failures in math or English. The research-based interventions are typically done during school in pull outs from class and are made to meet the student where they are struggling instead of where the class may be moving for content. Focus list students are monitored based on grades and test scores, while English and math focused interventions are used to meet students where they are at in the subjects to catch up on the grade expectations.

### City Year Trainings

The training process of City Year members is another important aspect to consider amongst the framework of youth worker effectiveness as it prepares the future practitioners for understanding and using practices such as the ABC model with students. Each corps member goes through an initial training and orientation period in the summer leading up to the school year. The period of training during the summer is known as Basic Training Academy (BTA), which is meant to orient the new members with City Year culture and the methods that are used with students in the schools, such as the ABC approach. Each day during BTA, the training schedule is set to provide introductions into City Year's values and the type of work that corps members will be doing once they form teams and enter the schools. The trainings for corps members continue after BTA on certain Fridays throughout the school year, in which corps members are in the downtown office doing skills building and reflecting on experiences in the school. Furthermore, the trainings that City Year conducts align with many of the values of

training youth workers, such as positive youth development and youth social justice, along with the ten competencies.

One particular youth worker value that is emphasized in City Year trainings is reflective practice, in which corps members meet in small groups and discuss personal dilemmas and struggles as the year progresses. The time allotted for these discussions is a space called Idealist's Journey, which is introduced in BTA and followed through in Friday trainings consistently. The Idealist's Journey discussions are led by team leaders (typically those who have been a corps member in a school the previous year) and allow opportunities for people to state personal dilemmas, while getting feedback from others in the group, who offer different perspectives on the situations. In addition, the Idealist Journey group meetings provide a space for the corps members to track their "journey" towards becoming better leaders and take a step back to reflect on their experiences from serving in the different communities. Youth work is widely accepted as a reflective practice as unique struggles and experiences occur, which often require reflection and different perspectives to fully grow from them. Moreover it is stated that "youth workers need the space to reflect individually and with colleagues to determine best practices and career paths" (Williamson, 2012, p. 104). Idealist Journey group meetings on training days offer valuable opportunities for corps members to develop as youth workers and constantly reflect on their experiences and progress throughout the year.

### Reorientation Trainings

In addition to personal reflection opportunities throughout the year, City Year trainings also touch on reorienting corps member's perceptions of the students they will work with and the communities in which the students live. Examples of these include Justice Talking trainings and Diversity Center trainings. The justice talks are times during meetings with the whole corps

when issues such as race and privilege are openly discussed with coinciding readings or poems to guide the discussions. The discussions led in these Justice Talking trainings are often accompanied by a poem or article from recent events in the media and reflecting on the meanings behind the piece, while relating it to working with the youth in the schools. The concept of reorientation is relevant in these trainings as it exposes stereotypes about students in inner city schools and how systemic racism is a component of the education gap, leading to a higher dropout rate in concentrated areas. A specific example of a training incorporating current events and issues of race into the youth service through City Year is a training run in Cleveland in 2015 called “Processing Current Events: What Ferguson has to do with our Service,” which forced corps members to consider their position on race and how their future service interacts with issues brought up in current events like the Ferguson protests. The concept of positionality is also important in this area because corps members serving with City Year in inner city schools need to recognize their privilege and role in the schools and while interacting with members of the community. Recognizing privilege is crucial in youth work because it forces practitioners to consider the conditions in which the students are earning an education and living in communities, which may include a severe lack in adequate resources or support systems that other schools receive. Furthermore, as explained with the social justice approach to youth work, it is critical to not only focus on individual development (such as in positive youth development), but also factors such as race and class that affect entire communities on a daily basis. The training workshops that City Year provides for incoming corps members allows for discussions on tough subjects (such as race and gender) that directly impact students they will be working with and allow them to reflect on their positionality in that context throughout their time serving with City Year.

## ABC's Trainings

A large portion of the trainings for City Year members focus on the interventions that will be provided for the students in the schools, demonstrating the ABC's model, while developing skills in those areas. The trainings for the attendance and behavior initiatives are primarily to roll out how these check-ins with students look and the types of things that corps members are responsible for each week. The responsibilities for attendance initiatives include making phone calls home to students that are absent and on their focus list and logging the attendance of the other students each day in the schools. Behavior initiative trainings include more specific strategies to engaging students in reducing suspensions and detentions along with how that data is monitored in the schools by City Year members for their focus list students. Activities such as the 50 Acts of Leadership program are explained in trainings so that they may be utilized in some of the schools that City Year members serve in each week, along with more general concepts of addressing behavior issues. Behavior trainings for the 2015 incoming corps members in City Year Cleveland included "CY Behavior Management" and "Impact of Trauma on Student Development," which offered more insight into why students may act out in school and how to address these concerns within City Year's role. Finally, academic interventions are a key component of corps member trainings, which focus on conducting the interventions with students and tailoring them to meet the student where they are academically so that they may catch up to be on track for understanding work in their classes. Specifically, ELA and math interventions are subjects in the City Year training schedule, which also includes the content itself, involving the corps members practicing math problems and reading interventions with each other in the training sessions. The hope is that through exposure to different intervention tactics and content familiarity, the corps members will be better prepared to work with focus list



students in the schools on their coursework, regardless of where the student is academically in ELA or math. Moreover, the ABC's of City Year's work in the schools is fundamental to their impact in the communities, since that is where corps members spend the majority of their service time, which makes the trainings offered throughout BTA and the rest of the year that much more vital to their youth work services.

### Team-Based Approach

The structure in which City Year operates involves constantly utilizing a team-based approach in every aspect of its service. Professional and youth work development for corps members happen while constantly being a part of a small team within the entire corps rather than individual progress offered in many other organizations or careers. For example, before being split into school teams (the teams that corps members remain on while serving in the schools during the weeks) with an assigned team leader, corps members are assigned "crazy teams" during the beginning of BTA and given the chance to meet people in the corps and participate in different training activities and reflections in small groups. Moreover, almost every aspect of service in City Year involves working as part of a team, which requires individuals to play off of each other's strengths and support each other throughout the year. Idealist Journey sessions are grouped into sets of people from each school team and committees that plan service events also work together. Furthermore, working on teams (especially the school teams, which become the standard teams that corps members meet with on a daily basis working in the schools) forms close bonds and strength in solidarity while adapting to challenges within the schools and communities. The ability to work as part of a team also speaks to the eighth core competency of youth workers from the National Collaboration for Youth and provides a valuable experience for different careers, which often demand working within diverse teams (Astroth et al., 2004). The

City Year team-based approach to service offers a strong support system for the corps members to share their experiences with and, simultaneously, provides a highly sought after trait in young professionals, which is the ability to work and succeed on a team.

#### Professional Development: Leadership After City Year (LACY)

The trainings for corps members throughout the year (along with the service experiences themselves) allow for professional development opportunities in youth work as well as skills that are transferable in most other fields. City Year training topics include resume writing and budgeting finances, which are sometimes run by guests from Deloitte, which has a partnership with City Year and assists in professional development. In the Cleveland site, Deloitte also offers mock interview opportunities for corps members to better prepare them for employment upon completing service with City Year. In addition, when Deloitte runs trainings in Cleveland, they ask for facilitators from the corps to help with the presentations, which gives valuable opportunities to corps members in assisting with trainings as well. Besides the professional trainings, networking events are also held throughout the year for corps members to meet with local businesses and larger organizations such as Peace Corps or Teach for America. The networking opportunities also include optional lunch meetings with these organizations, which allow for contact information to be exchanged and professional connections to be made, utilizing City Year's variety of partnerships.

## Findings

City Year's approach to preparation and execution in intensive services within at-risk communities addresses most of the competencies and theoretical approaches to the field of youth work. The quick exposure and constant reflective trainings involved in serving with City Year offers unique opportunities for young people to enter the field of youth work and community development, while also gaining valuable professional development skills preparing them for different career paths as well. The culture of City Year in the schools offers an energetic factor of caring about students' successes and holding them accountable for their work, which is not always available in at-risk communities, lacking financial resources. Furthermore, the corps members offer more chances for students to connect with young professionals from various backgrounds, which offers positive role modelling and supportive relationships to guide them through some difficult situations in school that may not be available through other outlets such as teachers or counselors. City Year's work is about developing young leaders out of the corps members, ready to engage the field of youth work and community development with intensive hours of direct service in the schools during the week and community projects on weekends or holidays as well, such as Martin Luther King Jr. day. The opportunity to be a part of a cause greater than self is a City Year value that speaks to the need for exposing young adults to the field of youth work and social inequalities through firsthand experiences, while also shaping leadership skills and building a network of young professionals along the way.

The opportunities that City Year provides for at-risk youth include time outside of the school day as well with community projects and after school programming. The presence of corps members in a school offers a safe space for students to check in and share their experiences, which is not possible in the classroom. Moreover, since City Year remains in the

school after the class schedule is finished, after school programs are able to emerge, such as additional tutoring or homework help and any ideas that corps members feel comfortable facilitating in that space. For example, if a corps member in a school is knowledgeable in gender studies or masculinity from previous studies or experiences, they are welcome to start up a support group for students and utilize after school time for that resource with a partnership from the school. The relationships formed between the students and corps members allows for opportunities to engage on issues that are meaningful to the students and addressed in an after school setting. Furthermore, City Year serves as an academic support during the school day, but also an after school resource that expands upon relationships built in the school with teachers and students to continue providing services in the schools and communities.

The trainings and activities of City Year members reflect many aspects of youth work theories and provide spaces for constant reflection on practice. The idealist journey sessions are a key example of the corps members reflecting as beginner practitioners and considering how they assessed dilemmas with students or teammates that ultimately allow growth in the youth work field. In addition, the notion of positive youth development is heavily present in the corps member trainings and intervention strategies with the students as they focus on building personal skills for the students and goal-orientation. The social youth justice aspect is approached through dialogues in training sessions, but not integrated much into the interventions with the students and really left to the discretion (or comfort level) of the individual corps members. For example, if a corps member wanted to start an after school group discussing the experiences of black male students and their role in society, that would be a strong possibility, but not a requirement by any means for the presence of City Year in the schools. Instead, City Year is primarily around as an academic support for students and behavioral coaching involving asset building and many

positive youth development strategies within behavioral plans such as 50 Acts of Leadership. While the City Year experience allows opportunities for corps members to grow as leaders and potential youth workers (with a strong emphasis on reflective practice and professional development), the interactions with students are primarily centered around academic coaching and role modelling these leadership qualities to the at-risk youth.

The culmination of leadership development opportunities for corps members and experience in the school offer unique training opportunities for young adults, which may lead to a long-term career in youth work. The direct exposure to working in at-risk schools facing adverse challenges that may be eye opening to corps members from privileged backgrounds allows for a glimpse into the struggle that thousands of students face each day. Moreover, the experiences of building relationships with students in these communities and recognizing their potential may lead to a desire to stay in the field of youth work or community development in a non-profit or education setting. However, even if the career path of a young adult changes after serving in City Year, the opportunities and skills gained from the firsthand experiences are invaluable and leave impressions that propositional knowledge alone would not provide. The notion of a year of service (as provided by an organization like City Year) is an innovative approach to exposing young adults of varying backgrounds to the field of youth work and gaining new insights through trainings and constant reflection. Therefore, City Year may be viewed as an introductory exposure to the field of youth work and professional development, which utilizes reflective practices, but not so much as a formal setting with professionals engaging in the practice since the year of service is only a temporary placement and stepping stone to a next opportunity.

## Looking Forward

Further research into the specific experiences of City Year members may be valuable to consider for insights into how the service affects their development as leaders and potential youth workers. Perhaps, conducting interviews or focus groups may allow for more personal experiences to frame the development of working with youth and communities, which will also show how the trainings affect the service. Introducing the personal experiences of corps members in City Year will also allow for suggestions as to what is needed to improve the organization's role in schools and communities that may be missed in the available data. Currently, City Year issues surveys to corps members and teachers working with them in the schools to gauge their impressions, but interviews will offer more specific data and elaborate on how their presence in the community was positive or negative. In addition, the effectiveness of the trainings may be better understood through interviews with former corps members and delving into what was most beneficial and what was missing for maximizing their experiences in the schools. The interviews would be a powerful indicator of apparent benefits of serving with City Year and how it presents different theories of youth work as well as leadership development for future careers.

Finally, it would be interesting to speak to students that had previously worked with City Year members in their schools and see how those relationships had affected their future development as leaders and students in their community. The findings from talking to former students will also provide a unique perspective that is often overlooked, but extremely valuable in youth work, which is from the youth and how they are affected by the interactions with different programs. Furthermore, the research opportunities for delving deeper into City Year's impact in high needs communities and schools are out there and would better speak to how this

may be leading to the future of youth workers in various sectors (formal and informal), which impacts the professionalization of the field.

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