



The Youthwork Paradox: A Case for Studying the Complexity of Community-Based Youth Work in Education Research

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Community-based youth work, through which young people are engaged in community-based educational spaces (CBES; e.g., after-school programs, out-of-school time settings, youth organizations, etc.), is celebrated for supporting youth academically, socially, culturally, and politically. However, when these spaces receive attention, their social and political complexity is often overlooked. Studying the complexity of community-based youth work in education requires interrogating the multiple systems of oppression that impact young people's lives. It also demands examination of the sociopolitical context of youth work, including how race logics and economic pressures inform the construction of CBES and how these forces surface and intersect with market logics and educational policy reform. Building on existing scholarship on community-based youth work and my current research, I present the youthwork paradox, a framework that captures the complexity of the field and its relationship to structural forces and larger systems of oppression. I detail how this paradox does not always lead to dichotomous discourses; rather, CBES can encompass many logics at once. To illuminate the usefulness of this framework for deeper theorizing of community-based youth work, I ground this concept in an empirical case focused on Black youth workers.

Keywords: learning environments; qualitative research; race; social context; urban education

Education research is dominated by a school-centric focus that too often dismisses the deep pedagogical work occurring within informal learning spaces, including families, neighborhoods, and community-based organizations. Although some educational scholarship has provided powerful insights into the strategies that families and communities use to enhance the learning and development of young people (Heath & McLaughlin, 1994; McLaughlin, 2000; Rogoff et al., 2016; Vadeboncouer, 2006), this important work is often positioned as tangential or purely supplemental to learning within schools (Baldrige, 2018).

Community-based youth work, through which young people are engaged in community-based educational spaces (CBES¹; e.g., after-school programs, out-of-school time settings, youth organizations, etc.), is celebrated for supporting youth academically, socially, culturally, and politically (Heathfield & Fusco, 2016; Kirshner, 2015; Kwon, 2013). However, when these spaces receive attention, their social and political complexity is

often overlooked. CBES can be transformative, yet their paradoxical nature as potential spaces of liberation as well as sites of containment that reify deficit perspectives and racist discourses about minoritized² youth is rarely considered (Baldrige, 2014; Kwon, 2013). Studying the complexity of community-based youth work in education requires interrogating the multiple systems of oppression that impact young people's lives. It also demands the examination of the sociopolitical context of youth work, including how race logics and economic pressures inform the construction of CBES and how these forces surface and intersect with market logics and educational policy reform.

Community-based youth work deserves more legitimacy in mainstream education that extends beyond it being a supplement to schools or reifying neoliberal logics of academic success (Baldrige, 2014). In this article, I urge education researchers and those that study youth work to examine CBES

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(the organizations *and* youth workers) with the nuance and complexity they deserve and to study them as important milieus of inquiry for the educational, social, and political development of youth in their own right. However, this work cannot be disconnected from broader sociopolitical structures—namely, racial and economic forces that shape all organizations—that make them complex and, at times, paradoxical sites of learning and development. This complexity creates a conflict in the field that must be examined to address how race logics and the political economy shape the framing, the culture of programming, and the pedagogies of youth workers within these spaces.

Building on existing scholarship and my current research on community-based youth work, I present the *youthwork paradox*. I define the youthwork paradox as a conflict in which CBES have the potential to both disrupt and reify racism and deficit narratives in education. Those working in CBES frequently recognize structural oppression but are often forced to frame their work as a response to the perceived individual and cultural “deficits” of young people instead of emphasizing systemic racism, class subjugation, and other forces of domination. Therefore, these spaces exist as affirming and humanizing spaces of resistance *and* containers to “fix” minoritized youth. This paradox is constantly negotiated by community-based leaders and youth workers because these competing logics often exist simultaneously within CBES. To illustrate the usefulness of this framework for theorizing community-based youth work, I ground this concept with examples from an empirical case focused on Black youth workers.

As part of a larger research project, I am studying community-based youth work with Black youth and its relationship to racial disparity discourse in a Midwestern college town I call Pleasant Ridge. This self-proclaimed liberal city has immense racial and economic disparities, and Black youth experience anti-Black violence within school and in out-of-school contexts. I interviewed youth workers and organizational leaders about their understanding of the racial disparities impacting Black youth, how youth work supports Black students’ navigation of anti-Black racism in their schools and neighborhoods, and the precarious nature of their work. This article features examples from the aforementioned empirical case to ground the conceptual argument and to (a) center the voices of Black youth workers who are understudied, (b) highlight the politicized context in which youth workers engage young people, and (c) address the complexity of these paradoxical spaces. I encourage education researchers, thinkers, and practitioners to consider what is gained by examining the paradoxes, contradictions, and transformative potential of community-based youth work.

Education Research and the Sociopolitical Context of Community-Based Youth Work

Youth work is defined by the pedagogical processes of guiding, nurturing, and supporting youth through various stages of development (Hirsch et al., 2011; McLaughlin, 2000; Pittman et al., 2004). Although this work occurs in a variety of spaces (e.g., youth detention centers, parks, etc.), it commonly happens during nonschool hours in community-based spaces (Fusco, 2012). Community-based youth work is diverse, and the

philosophies of youth, pedagogy, funding structures, leadership, and programming vary across organizations. Scholarship on youth work is often located in applied psychology and social work, but it is also studied in education (Heath & McLaughlin, 1994), sociology and anthropology (Kwon, 2013; Nygreen, 2017), and learning sciences (Gutiérrez, 2008; Kirshner, 2015; Nasir & Cooks, 2009; Rogoff et al., 2016), among others.

Early research on youth work occurring outside of schools suggested that it was essential for keeping children productively occupied until parents returned home from work and was celebrated for providing opportunities for play, language development, gendered tasks, religious education, and so on (Halpern, 2002). As this work expanded, scholars argued that these spaces provide youth with important supplementary developmental contexts to schools (Bridglall & Gordon, 2002; Halpern, 2002). Other work lauded these spaces for supporting academic achievement (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kataoka & Vandell, 2013), facilitating greater attachment to schools (Woodland, 2016), fostering strong youth-adult relationships (Brown, 2006; Hirsch et al., 2011; Rogoff et al., 2016; Yohalem, 2003), and promoting healing, redemption, and activism among youth (Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Kirshner, 2015).

As my work and others have shown, CBES offer more than just academic support—they can be critical locations for social, political, and cultural development for young people, particularly Black, Latinx, and other youth experiencing oppression (Ginwright, 2010; Kirshner, 2015; Kwon, 2013; Ngo et al., 2017). In some spaces, youth-worker pedagogies are rooted in humanizing (Paris & Winn, 2013) and culturally relevant practices (Ladson-Billings, 2009) that acknowledge the lived realities of young people and affirm their identities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). These approaches, often referred to as *whole child development* or *youth-centered strategies*, acknowledge the humanity of young people in ways that schools often disregard (Jones & Deutsch, 2013). CBES are also important for the study of learning itself (Rogoff et al., 2016). For example, Gutiérrez and Vossoughi (2010) argued that these spaces can provide the pedagogical flexibility that allows young people and youth workers to uncover culturally responsive and affirming tools for learning and development.

Youth Workers, Neoliberal Logics, and Race

Although youth workers educate and nurture young people across many stages of development, they are rarely regarded as teachers in the conventional sense. In the public’s imagination, teachers in formal school settings are often the only educators acknowledged as such (Brion-Miesels et al., 2015; Watson, 2012). This may be in part because the profession of teaching has an infrastructure for selecting, training, supporting, and compensating teachers, whereas youth work has no such infrastructure (Fusco, 2012; Heathfield & Fusco, 2016).

Even though youth workers are not regarded as teachers, young people often feel more connected to them than to classroom teachers (Ginwright, 2007; Hirsch et al., 2011). Yet youth workers (and organizations) are overlooked as knowledgeable contributors to educational discourse or practice (Larson et al., 2015) or as educators from whom classroom teachers can learn

(Watson, 2012). Although youth workers' pedagogical expertise and practices vary, their engagement with youth in ways that are nonhierarchical and distinct from school-based teaching have provided youth with an important reprieve from violent school practices while also offering spaces of learning and development (Ginwright, 2007; Rogoff et al., 2016).

In most CBES, a major part of youth workers' pedagogical practice is establishing genuine connections with youth as people (Nicholson et al., 2004). CBES are diverse, and the pedagogy and learning within them is as well. Within youth work spaces, the focus can be on engagement and experience—and less on “teaching” (Gutiérrez, 2008). Studies on the significance of youth workers hold critical implications for how they manage tensions between organizational bureaucracy and youth development, grapple with ethical dilemmas, and understand the complex lives of young people, which may include crafting experiential learning opportunities, facilitating critical dialogues, or engaging in projects that allow young people to process their academic, familial, and activist lives (Heathfield & Fusco, 2016; Larson et al., 2015).

Recent scholarship shows how youth workers are challenged by the current educational policy context of neoliberal privatization increasing external pressures that make it difficult for CBES to design programming in the way they deem fit (Baldrige, 2019; Fusco et al., 2013; Kwon, 2013). Neoliberal ideology insists that society functions better and more efficiently according to market principles, including privatization of schooling, individualism, competition, choice, and standardization (Lipman, 2011; Spence, 2015). Educational restructuring as a result of neoliberal logics, including widespread public school closures (and subsequent displacement of Black teachers) and the mass production of privately run charter schools, is a key feature of neoliberal education reform (Ewing, 2018; Henry & Dixon, 2016; Lipman, 2011; Sanders et al., 2018). Common dimensions of neoliberal thought and practice—meritocracy, rugged individualism, and privatization—ignore structural oppression and reinforce racism and deficit-oriented discourse that shapes educational policy, discourse, and practice (Dumas, 2016; Gorski, 2011). This logic dismisses structural oppression, including systemic racism and economic exploitation, opening the door for deficit-oriented rhetoric that positions minoritized youth as needing to be saved by outside forces (Baldrige, 2014). Although the impact of this neoliberal logic is well documented in schools, it also appears within the nonprofit sector where most CBES are located and can reorient how organizations and youth workers engage with young people (Baldrige, 2014; Fusco et al., 2013; Nygreen, 2017) and abroad (de St. Croix, 2018). Given the embeddedness of community-based youth work in nonprofit structures, systems of oppression like racism and capitalism complicate the work of CBES and require unpacking.

Paradox and Complexity Within Community-Based Youth Work

Research on CBES and youth workers illustrates how this work can simultaneously disrupt and reproduce racist narratives and practices (Baldrige et al., 2017; Kwon, 2013). Specifically, minoritized youth and community-spaces themselves are racialized

in ways that obscure the structural causes that necessitate their very existence. Given the racialized and paradoxical nature of CBES as sites of neoliberal transformation (Baldrige et al., 2017), I suggest that we examine these settings as dynamic organizations and the youth workers within them as experts who understand and creatively respond to the multiple needs of young people (Larson et al., 2015).

Studying CBES as the complex organizations they are requires examining how broader sociopolitical forces structure these programs and the lives of youth workers. Community-based spaces can be autonomous from school sites (unless they share the same space). In other words, as informal learning organizations, they do not have to adhere to the expectations that come along with the structure of schooling (Rogoff et al., 2016). However, considering their relationship to the political economy, nonprofit structures, and the transformation of public education under market-based reforms, youth work sites are incentivized to function more like schools (Baldrige, 2014). For instance, these organizations face pressure to align their work to neoliberal measures of academic success that require deficit framing about minoritized youth *and* youth workers (Kwon, 2013; Singh, 2018). This reality makes their autonomy from schools dubious in that the same macro political structures that shape schools also influence youth work spaces. These external forces, which contribute to contradictions within CBES, are important to unpack if researchers seek to better understand how to create CBES for the optimal development of youth. In the following section, I draw on data from a larger project with Black youth workers to present the youthwork paradox framework (Figure 1), which highlights the complex and contradictory nature of youth work that results from the broader sociopolitical context in which it is embedded. More specifically, I focus on the racial and neoliberal logics shaping educational policy but also recognize other systems of intersectional oppressions, including gender, sexuality, ability, class, and nationality, as part of the larger sociopolitical context of youth work.

Youthwork Paradox

Sociopolitical context: racial logics. When race is discussed in connection to youth work scholarship, it is usually because the population of youth engaged are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, or Southeast Asian, and the organizations are often framed as “fixing” and “saving” “needy” youth (Baldrige, 2014; Kwon, 2013). This deficit-oriented framing reflects the fact that CBES are racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) in which macrolevel logics about race surface at microlevels and reinforce racist hierarchies, schemas, and practices. Like schools, CBES function within specific institutional logics about race that shape how these spaces are constructed and who is engaged within them.

CBES, developed to support minoritized youth, appear to make a statement about structural inequality but frequently end up perpetuating cultural and individual explanations for stratification or low achievement by locating problems within youth that “youth work” can fix (Baldrige, 2014). To illustrate, Ellis reflected on his time as a youth development coordinator at a regional chapter of a national organization. Through a slight chuckle, he exclaimed, “We don't get called in to work with

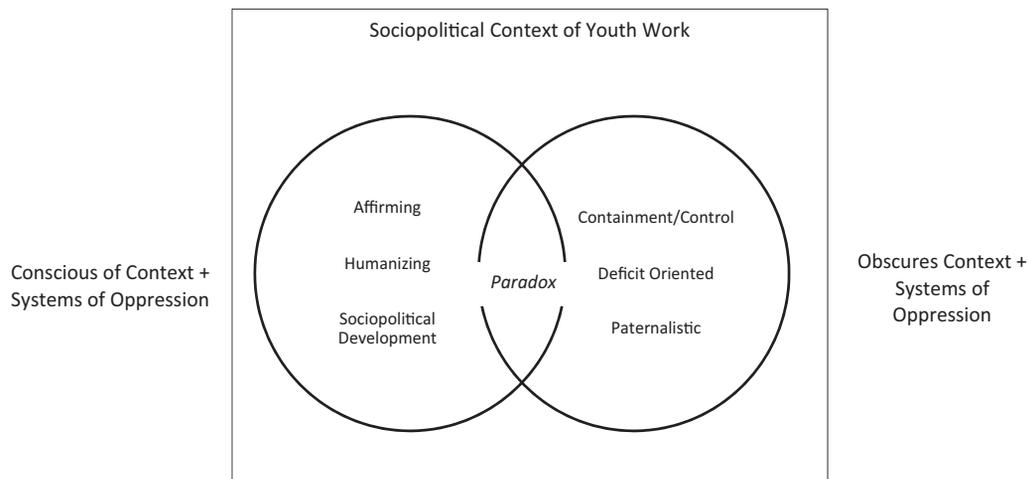


FIGURE 1. *Youthwork paradox.*

White kids.” In other words, in the public imagination, youth work is perceived as being good for Black, Latinx, or youth living in poverty who are deemed “at risk” (Baldrige, 2014). Community-based programming, after-school education, or supplementary “enrichment” programs are seen as *needed* by Black and minoritized youth—typically not because of structural oppression or lack of educational opportunity but because of perceived individual and cultural deficits (Baldrige, 2019). Meanwhile, affluent and White youth whose parents pay thousands of dollars to participate in after-school activities (Nelson, 2016) are not positioned as “needy” (Kwon, 2013). Yet, affluent youth also exist within a racialized space whereby the process of opportunity and resource hoarding reinforce their structural advantages but are rarely critiqued (Ginwright & James, 2002; Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

Within the broader context of CBES, the competing logics that frame the need for these spaces contribute to paradoxical approaches to programming. On one hand, many believe that minoritized youth need these spaces because of something they lack individually or culturally. On the other hand, a competing logic suggests that these spaces are necessary because of structural forces that undermine the educational opportunities of minoritized youth. Based on this second logic, some youth work spaces offer an asset-rich focus, believing that young people come to programs already whole and in need of nurturing from a positive youth development or social justice youth development approach (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Lerner et al., 2011). As Figure 1 indicates, being conscious of the sociopolitical context and systems of oppression that inform youth work spaces engenders CBES that draw on sociopolitical development and critical action (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015) and offer affirming and humanizing pedagogies for youth participants.

Affirming, humanizing, and sociopolitical development. CBES have the potential to be humanizing spaces for racially minoritized youth when community-based leaders and youth workers are aware of the political, racial, and economic structures working in the lives of youth and through the system of education (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). In other words, affirming and humanizing approaches to working with youth do not

pathologize, objectify, or locate deficiencies in young people or their communities. Rather, humanizing approaches center “building relationships of care, dignity, and dialogic consciousness raising” (Paris & Winn, 2013, p. xvi). Youth workers engaged in programs that acknowledge broader political structures and systems of oppression as an organization *and* alongside youth through programming are in a better position to assist young people in identifying sociopolitical problems and addressing them through activism and organizing (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Youth workers in my study suggested that youth spaces with an explicit focus on deconstructing systems of oppression were few and far between due to organizations’ leadership or funding status. Wahid, a long-time youth worker who lived in Pleasant Ridge for 4 years, was frustrated by this reality:

I felt like nothing was innovative, like I didn’t see any of the programs mentioning race, dealing with issues of sexism, dealing with issues of justice, dealing with issues of . . . what it meant to be Black or Latinx in America.

Wahid mentioned “funding” and “power structures” in the city as the reason youth work in Pleasant Ridge operates this way. Sam, a youth program coordinator, shared that he strives to “go there” in conversations with youth in his program about systems of oppression, especially anti-Black racism in the city and beyond. Sam claimed that the leadership of the organization he worked for was committed to social justice in some ways because of their background in organizing. At the same time, he said that some conversations were “shut down” because of discomfort among White leadership whom he characterized as “liberal,” “nice,” and on the side of racial justice even as they failed to fully address anti-Black racism and Whiteness.

Sam and Wahid’s comments reflect two interesting processes that contribute to the paradoxical nature of youth work. First, funders often frame Black and minoritized youth in deficit ways which may not align with the mission of the programs. As a result, youth workers and organizations are sometimes forced to change their engagement with youth, revise their program literature, and write funding requests in ways that appease donors

(Baldrige, 2014; Small, Pope, & Norton, 2012). Second, youth workers hold limited power compared to organizational leaders. As Sam described, if program leadership was uncomfortable with the direction of a conversation or programming focused on racism, it might be shutdown, even though the program claimed to be aligned with racial justice.

Containment, paternalism, and deficit discourse. As an education researcher with a professional background in youth work, I am an advocate for CBES that affirm young people. Yet the sociopolitical context of these spaces, including the competing racial logics of organizational leaders, funding structures, and youth workers, often leads to contradictions. In addition, actors within CBES carry racial logics that permeate organizations in ways that impact how these spaces are framed and the culture within them (Baldrige, 2014). CBES exist within the same systems of oppression as schools and often respond to the policies and practices that center schools, shaped by racial logics and the political economy of education (Baldrige, 2019). Given this reality, CBES can be positioned as sites to control and contain minoritized youth to “keep them off the streets” and take on a paternalistic role often rooted in deficit-oriented language that sets the stage for savior narratives that are prominent within youth work that engages racially minoritized students (Kwon, 2013; Small et al., 2012).

If CBES operate as places of containment, without understanding the sociopolitical structures that create the need for these spaces in the first place, they can reproduce harm (Baldrige et al., 2017). Community-based spaces where youth workers understand the plight of minoritized youth in schools and engage in humanizing practices can foster invaluable relationships with youth (Brion-Miesels et al., 2015; Ginwright, 2010; Heathfield & Fusco, 2016; McLaughlin, 2018). Hilton, a youth worker in his mid-40s who has worked in the same organization for almost 20 years, spoke about the relationship his program has with students *and* their families because of the racism and trauma they both experience in schools:

A lot of the parents probably faced the same challenges that the students face now and so whenever they get a phone call home, [imitating parent] “I’m not returning that phone call, I know exactly what you are going to say about my child because she said the same thing about me” . . . so, when we call home and they pick up. Our relationship is different.

According to Hilton and other youth workers in my research, youth participants and their parents connected with youth workers in genuine ways they did not experience often in Pleasant Ridge schools. Although CBES and youth workers like Hilton provide meaningful opportunities for youth that may mitigate the suffering they experience in schools and society, it is critical that scholars who take up this work understand that positioning CBES as solutions to all our social and political problems obscures the deep structural oppression that is at the root of these problems.

Community-based spaces—and nonprofit structures in general—are in a contradictory position (Gilmore, 2007; Rodriguez, 2007). They are positioned as spaces that intervene

on individual and cultural behaviors and end up being arbiters of neoliberal ideals by celebrating those who use community-based spaces, like after-school programs, to “make it” or persevere “despite the odds” (Clay, 2019). This framing obscures systems of oppression and ignores the sociopolitical context that shapes the lives of minoritized youth. As such, the youth work field is a paradoxical space that can guide youth to unpack the systems of oppression that shape their lives (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) but can simultaneously reify deficit narratives that blame youth for their academic and social position within society (Baldrige, 2014; Kwon, 2013).

In an interview with Gia, a youth worker engaging Black girls, she explained that her organization understands how structural oppression works in the lives of their students and provides political education to guide them toward activism through programming:

So, we do political education for, like I said, our youngest people that come here, like 2; to all the way to our elders who are 60, 70, 80. But, I think the young people are typically the most energized . . . they’re the ones who bring the most issues to us. And, they’re the ones—they have a really good analysis even when they—even if I don’t like the way they articulate it. I feel like they’re the ones who are coming into themselves and [are] ready to challenge authority.

Gia also shared, “our work is political and that makes people uncomfortable.” She acknowledges this reality for her program given that they sometimes receive negative press. Gia also connected the discomfort some may have to the struggles of seeking funding that may require a particular framing of their work with Black youth that was unsettling:

I do think when you’re the CEO or whatever of an organization and you’re perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black kids in order to get funding, I think that’s really fucked up, right? If you’re like behind the police chief when he’s announcing this gang injunction or the targeting of gang members *and* you’re also getting this money to have a picnic in the park for Black kids, I don’t like that.

Gia’s comments demonstrate that although community-based youth work may be doing “good”—the politics of funding rooted in nonprofit structures and neoliberal dominance creates deep precarity and forces community-based leaders and youth workers to make difficult choices that may not align with their mission or framing of youth. External sociopolitical factors that contribute to funding patterns of these spaces (which also has deep racial- and class-based hegemonic over/undertones) also create paradoxical and confounding circumstances that shape how youth experience these programs and how youth workers carry out their efforts (Baldrige, 2019).

At the core of this paradox, I argue, is the racialization of these spaces as organizations that are influenced by the political and social context within which they are embedded. As displayed in Figure 1, the paradox and contradictions I highlight are not static, nor are they simply dichotomous. They are not just paternalistic *or* affirming or just humanizing spaces *or* solely sites of containment. Rather, CBES can often embody *all* of these

logics, approaches, or practices precisely because they exist within a specific sociopolitical context that shifts based on the landscape of political, economic, racial, and educational change (Baldrige, 2019). With regard to pedagogy, youth workers too can embody all of these logics and enact contradictory actions through their engagement with youth.

This paradox also adds to the precarity of youth work as a profession. As Black youth workers in a predominantly white city, Gia, Ellis, Hilton, and Sam also believe that their quest for advancement in their organizations was often denied. Sam, a 35-year-old youth worker, shared that the leadership of many organizations in the area is mostly White. He explained that there was a particular kind of gatekeeping from leadership positions that youth workers in my study found difficult to penetrate. Sam cited “Whiteness” and “paternalism” as major reasons for this gatekeeping.

These denials for promotion to leadership for youth workers resulted in many challenges, including housing instability and food insecurity because youth workers received low wages. Bryon, for example, a youth worker in his mid-20s shared that he “was living in a motel with his siblings, while working at two jobs.” Both of these jobs were part-time, and one of them he held for 10 years before finally being promoted to a full-time position. Bryon’s economic challenges as a youth work professional is not uncommon and demonstrates deep precarity for youth workers (Quinn, 2012; Vasudevan, 2019). As my research reveals, competing logics about who gets to be an educator (even though classroom-based educators are not compensated as they should be either) contribute to precarity in the youth work profession (Baldrige, 2018). In addition, the demands and pressures stemming from broader neoliberal logics that make CBES function more like schools shift the duties of youth workers to adhere to measurable outcomes of success (Baldrige, 2014; de St. Croix, 2018).

Where Do We Go From Here?

Youth work exists within a complex political terrain and cannot be fully understood when disconnected from a rigorous analysis of the sociopolitical context surrounding the work. The youth-work paradox allows us to approach the study of CBES and youth workers with an awareness of the structural forces that shape their existence. This awareness can provide researchers with a more complete picture of the forces that shape youth work and allow them to study the tensions, contradictions, and challenges that will inevitably emerge as well as the triumphs and possibilities within these spaces. As research demonstrates, youth forge meaningful connections with youth workers in community-based settings and gain knowledge that can have powerful implications for their learning and sociopolitical development (Ginwright, 2010; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2002).

Scholarship on informal learning spans many decades and helps us understand the ways that families and communities are instrumental in fostering learning, creativity, and various forms of development for young people (Rogoff et al., 2016). Given the sociopolitical context of youth work and its significance to the educational, cultural, and social development of youth, I encourage education scholars to draw on broader disciplinary

and theoretical perspectives to examine the sociopolitical context of youth work spaces and the experiences of youth workers as educators. Although the diversity across disciplines has labeled the process of youth work as many things, varied disciplinary and theoretical approaches offer greater opportunity for expansive frameworks and understanding of youth work—its political, organizational, and pedagogical dimensions. Although scholarship on youths’ participation in youth work has been significant, examining how context matters to the field is imperative. Education and youth work researchers can draw on a wide range of disciplinary approaches to support their examination of the sociopolitical context of youth work, which might include sociology of work/labor, organizational theory, critical race theories, and economic theories for example.

Scholarship about the impact of neoliberal education restructuring holds important implications for CBES (Baldrige, 2019). Recent research about CBES has included the study of neoliberalism, governmentality, and race—pushing the field of education to consider the dangers of neoliberal control over community-based youth programming via mentoring programs, technological innovation programs, college preparation, and organizing spaces (Baldrige, 2014; Chang, 2020; Clay, 2019; Kwon, 2013; Nygreen, 2017; Singh, 2018). This work also connects to scholarship on trends in philanthropy that are often rooted in Whiteness and paternalism (Brown, 2016; Kohl-Arenas, 2015) and creates complicated relationships with organizations that can lead to mission drift or contradictions in the racial framing of youth work or difficult decisions based on the “strings” attached to philanthropic giving illustrated earlier by Gia (Gilmore, 2007; Kohl-Arenas, 2015).

Within community-based youth work, the occupational identities (Vasudevan, 2019), philosophies, and pedagogical practices of youth workers require more scholarly inquiry (Fusco et al., 2013). Given the sociopolitical context of community-based youth work, there is a specific precarity experienced by youth workers that is heightened by the paradoxical nature of youth work. As a group of professionals, youth workers are an essential part of the guidance and growth of young people, yet their jobs can be tenuous, low paying, and delegitimized by broader education research (Baldrige, 2018; Vasudevan, 2019; Watson, 2012; Yohalem, 2003). Additional research is needed to explore the precariousness of this profession, which is exacerbated by racism, educational and city restructuring, low wages, and the struggle to persist in the field (Baldrige, 2018; Fusco, et al., 2013; Vasudevan, 2019).

Conclusion: Bringing Education Back to Communities

As a community of education scholars, educators, and policymakers, we need to find ways to utilize community-based youth work more fully. To do so, deep interrogation of the sociopolitical context of youth work must be included. As prior scholarship within and outside education has shown, there is much to learn from these spaces and from youth workers. Centering the knowledge and expertise found within CBES is an important step for education researchers. Because youth work is heterogenous, the sociopolitical context of these spaces at the macro- and microlevels matters

to how researchers study the culture, organizational processes, and pedagogies established within CBES. Systems of oppression, including systemic racism and class oppression, among other forces, powerfully shape all organizations, and community-based educational spaces are not exempt.

As scholarship on education and community-based youth work continues, scholars of youth work must continue to pay attention to the deficit narratives often embedded in these spaces that reify paternalistic and racist tropes and obscure structural problems shaping the educational lives of minoritized youth. Researchers can collaborate with community-based leaders and youth workers to tackle issues that arise from research, policy, and practice in order to advocate for these spaces in ways that do not reproduce harm on already vulnerable youth. Although CBES are theorized as distinct spaces from schools, as past and emerging research reveals, they too are implicated in the reproduction of harm connected to a broader social and political context that all researchers must understand and study.

NOTES

I thank the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship program for supporting my research for this article. In addition, I thank Derrick Brooms, John B. Diamond, Stacey Lee, and Kathryn Moeller for their feedback on early versions of the manuscript.

¹I utilize the label *youth work* as an umbrella term to denote working with young people across many spaces in the United States and abroad. I employ community-based educational spaces (Baldrige, 2018) to center the agency and expertise of communities, decenter school (i.e., after school), and reclaim “education” as a process that is not limited to schools but can be enacted within communities and within community-based organizations. Youth work exists within community-based educational spaces and other spaces as well (Fusco, 2012).

²Although imperfect and imprecise, I use *minoritized* in some areas throughout the article to acknowledge the ways that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Southeast Asian youth are positioned within community-based youth work. It is not my intention to erase the unique struggles of specific communities by using an umbrella term. My prior scholarship has focused specifically on how Black youth are framed and positioned in youth work. However, the framework I offer in this article can be applicable to other youth oppressed by White supremacist structures. Although the nuances of how they are positioned in youth work vary, the framework I offer captures the paradoxical tensions that emerge within community-based education engaging minoritized youth.

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Manuscript received July 29, 2019

Revisions revised November 16, 2019, March 5, 2020,

and May 23, 2020

Accepted May 29, 2020