

Youth Worker Characteristics and Self-reported Competency as Predictors of Intent to Continue Working with Youth

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Abstract Using a web-based self-report survey, this study examined the characteristics of individuals who worked directly with youth in out-of-school time programs. Specifically, it examined the relationships among intent to continue working in the youth development field and youth program staffs' experience, training, educational background, and self-reported competency in implementing the features of positive developmental settings for youth (Eccles and Gootman, Community programs to promote youth development, 2002). To accomplish this, we also developed a self-report youth worker competency measure and present its psychometric properties. Results suggested that intent to continue working in the youth development field is higher for youth workers who reported higher overall job-related competency, received professional development training, reported life experiences similar to the youth with whom they worked, learned aspects of their job from more experienced staff, had adequate supervision and support, and worked in programs where staff were more involved in program decision-making. Results are discussed in terms of the value of training and professional development in retaining frontline youth workers.

Keywords Staff retention · Staff competency · Frontline youth workers

As attention to the value of promoting positive development in youth increases, greater emphasis is being placed on the role of organized community-based out-of-school time programs in that process. Participating in organized activities fosters and supports personal growth among participating youth by providing them an opportunity to interact with peers and adults in their communities (Hirsch 2005; Perkins et al. 2003). As such, the goals of community-based youth programs include not only ameliorating problems associated with various risk conditions and behaviors (e.g., drinking, drugs, delinquency), but also preparing youth to meet other life challenges and make decisions that promote their own

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positive development (Benson and Pittman 2001; Perkins et al. 2003). Positive youth development emphasizes youth strengths, building youth competencies, and strengthening youth protective factors. By placing an intentional focus on positive development in youth, organizations are able to create environments that both reduce at-risk behaviors and teach youth how to become responsible adults (Benson and Pittman 2001; Perkins et al. 2003). For example, youth involvement in out-of-school time activities has been shown to reduce dropout (Mahoney and Cairnes 1997) and problem behaviors (Pittman et al. 2001), and can increase positive academic outcomes (Marsh 1992) and connection to school (Brown and Evans 2002).

Existing research on the features of youth programs associated with positive developmental outcomes reveal that program environments most effective in promoting personal and social assets in youth provide physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts (Eccles and Gootman 2002). However, for these features to become an effective part of youth programming, staff need to be cognizant of the benefits to the youth they serve. In addition, program staff need to feel competent in their ability to implement these features. To this end, a major goal of this paper was to develop a measure to help assess youth worker's competencies in implementing the features of positive youth programs as outlined by Eccles and Gootman (2002).

A critical link has been found to exist between youth outcomes and positive relationships with skilled staff (Bouffard and Little 2002), and calls attention to the importance of recruiting and retaining qualified and competent individuals to meet the challenges of working with youth. The decision to work with youth may not be due to individuals' beliefs that they are experts in the youth development field or related to potential monetary rewards. For some it may be a desire to pay back what someone did for them, to follow in the footsteps of a role model, or to make a difference in their community (Walker 2003). For others, it could be related to "the joy of being with young people, learning from them, contributing to their success; and the opportunity to help young people be heard and to advocate for them" (Walker 2003, p. 382), a temporary job that brings in needed income for college expenses, or a stepping stone toward a career in a related field. Given the diversity of backgrounds and motivations of the individuals who choose to work with youth, there is often a vast difference between what youth workers are asked to do and how well they are equipped for the task. Thus, one challenge faced by youth-serving organizations is how to attract and retain staff members who are adequately prepared and competent to provide program environments that promote positive development among youth.

Several themes have emerged in the literature as factors essential to promoting youth worker success: (1) adequate compensation and opportunities for advancement; (2) opportunities for professional development and training; (3) a supportive environment that fosters success (this includes adequate supervision and a climate of collaboration); (4) clear role descriptions and perceived competence to perform those roles; (5) a sense that staff members' work is valued; and (6) opportunities for professional networking (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003; Bednar 2003; Light 2003; National Collaboration for Youth 2006; Rycraft 1994; Stone et al. 2004; Vinokur-Kaplan 1991; Walker 2003). Although each of these features plays a substantial role in how individuals perceive their work environments, it is difficult to separate them completely in a practical sense. Consultations with leaders in the youth development field, however, have revealed a strong consensus that a key ingredient to quality out-of-school time youth development programs is staff training and

professional development (Little 2004). Unfortunately, individuals' level of formal education in youth development-related areas and opportunities for professional development within youth services agencies can vary a great deal. Consequently, limited or inadequate training leads to staff lacking the competence and confidence to implement program elements, resulting in increased levels of burnout and shortened tenure among staff (Light 2003). A continual influx of inexperienced and inadequately trained workers often reduces the skill level, strength, and effectiveness of the program (Bednar 2003). In addition, frequent worker turnover presents a significant challenge to program success because of the time it takes to develop positive youth-adult interactions, and supportive and cohesive relationships among staff members (Yohalem 2003).

Although recent research is finding that staff who work directly with youth are an essential component in creating program environments that facilitate positive development (McLaughlin 2000; Walker 2003; Yohalem 2003), little is known about how the characteristics of frontline youth workers influence program implementation and the accomplishment of program goals (Huebner et al. 2003). Further, we know of no studies that have examined factors relating to job tenure among youth workers, which is important to the establishment of positive youth-staff relationships in youth programs and critical for youth serving organizations that devote scarce resources on the recruitment, training, and supervision of youth workers. This current paper addresses these issues by first presenting the construction and properties of the youth worker competency measure we developed. This measure then was used to help answer the research question that guides this study: How do self-reported competencies, staff characteristics, and level of job satisfaction predict intent to continue working in community-based youth programs?

Method

Procedure

Data were collected through a web-based survey using a website exclusively designed for survey research. The survey posted on this site was assigned a survey-specific web address, thereby making it accessible only to those individuals who had obtained that web address from the researchers. This process helped ensure access to the survey by only legitimate program staff. Although some debate exists on the validity and reliability of using web-based research methods, two major advantages have been cited which support the use of Internet data collection methods over other forms of data collection methods. The first is that web-based surveys represent a relatively efficient survey method, which allows investigators to collect data from a large geographic area and obtain a large sample size with less effort and cost than other methods (Birnbaum 2001; Dillman 2000; Gosling et al. 2004). Likewise, research has found that Internet samples are generally more diverse than more traditional samples with respect to gender, socioeconomic status, geographic location, age, and race (Gosling et al. 2004). Finally, data can be downloaded directly into statistical analysis programs, thus minimizing work time and potential data entry error (Gosling et al. 2004). Perhaps the largest concern involves access to the web. However, since email now is the principal method most youth serving organizations use to communicate with their staff, this was believed to be an excellent method of data collection for this study.

This study was exploratory to the extent that it was testing a newly developed measure of youth worker competence. After seeking and obtaining Institutional Review Board

approval for this project through the author's home academic institution, the measure was pre-tested using a national convenience sample of youth workers. This sample was used to establish a baseline of self-reported competencies to validate the measure (see the Measures section for a discussion of the psychometric properties of this measure). Following the pre-test, the first step in administering the overall survey to youth workers was to contact administrative representatives from national youth organizations (e.g., 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs of America) and youth-serving collaborative organizations (e.g., National Collaboration for Youth) throughout the United States. Representatives from these national organizations were asked for their assistance in distributing the survey link to front-line program staff by either sending an email message to their listservs or providing their organizational email lists to the researchers. Organizations also were provided an announcement containing the survey link to post on their organizations' websites. To augment distribution of the survey, we also used a snowball sampling procedure by asking each organization to provide contact information for other professional organizations with staff that would be eligible to participate in this study. In the end, a total of 78 youth serving organizations were contacted to help disseminate the survey (none declined to participate).

The survey was available on the website between February and July 2004. During that period of time, 1,147 individuals who work in out-of-school time programs visited the site to participate in the survey. After eliminating respondents who were screened out because they did not meet the criteria for participation in this study (e.g., administrators and individuals who did not work directly with youth ages 10–18 years old in out-of-school time programs), a total of 886 program staff completed the survey.

Participants

The sample for this study was composed of adults, ages 18 years or older (mean age = 38 years old), who work directly with adolescents in out-of-school time programs. Responses were obtained from program staff that represented a variety of organizations (e.g., 4-H and Cooperative Extension, State and National Parks and Recreation Associations, Big Brothers/Big Sisters) that directly work with youth throughout the country. Although many of the youth workers in our sample work for affiliates of national organizations that provide support and umbrella policies, youth worker recruitment, retention procedures, and professional development opportunities within each organization differ greatly. For example, hiring requirements, training and ongoing professional development within 4-H are established by each state and often by each county. Given our interest in the diverse work settings and audiences of youth workers (often even in the same organizations), lack of prior research on this topic, and the exploratory nature of this study, it was not considered appropriate to cluster our analyses by youth-serving organization (there also were many youth workers in our sample who work for local organizations without national affiliation). For the purposes of this study, *youth worker* was defined as any frontline adult staff directly working with youth (ages 10–18) to positively influence their development.

Seventy-two percent of youth workers who participated in this study were female and 28% were male. Ethnic background was reported as follows: White/Non-Hispanic (77%); African-American (10%); Hispanic/Latino (5%); Multi-ethnic (3%); Asian/Pacific Islander (2%); and Other (1%). Level of formal education was reported by respondents as follows: high school diploma or GED (2%); community college degree or certificate (6%); some college (13%); bachelor's degree (48%); master's degree

(29%); doctorate degree (2%). Program staff were well distributed regarding the geographic area in which they work, with 37% serving youth in urban areas, 31% working with youth in suburban settings, and 32% working with rural youth. Nearly one-third (32%) of program staff said that 76–100% of their program was made up of low income or at-risk youth; almost half (49%) said that ethnic minorities comprised up to one quarter of their programs.

Measures

A multi-step process was used to develop the self-report web-based instrument that assessed staffs' perceptions of their skills. First, the researchers used the features of program settings that promote personal and social assets in youth (Eccles and Gootman 2002) as a framework to develop the staff competency scale items. Following the competency scale development, the entire survey was completed and reviewed for relevance and item clarity by five professionals from various national youth serving organizations who have extensive executive level and/or research experience in youth development programming. Based on minor suggested changes (e.g., typos, wording clarity) by this panel of national youth development experts, items were modified and the instrument created in the survey website. The web-based instrument was then reviewed by the same panel of experts before distribution.

Youth Program Staff Characteristics. To understand how individual youth program staff characteristics influence the interaction between self-reported competencies and intent to continue working directly with youth, data were obtained on the following characteristics: gender, age, ethnicity, level of formal education (including percentage of youth development-related specialization), degree of similar experiences as program audience (defined as having lived through experiences similar to the youth in their program), job-related training (e.g., youth safety, youth development, risk and protective factors, conflict management, substance abuse prevention/intervention, diversity training, program management, sexual issues, community networking), whether or not staff learn about the job from more experienced staff, and their perceptions of organizational factors (including climate, decision-making, and adequate supervision and support). Each of these variables was assessed using individual items.

Retention Scale (RS). The Retention Scale used for this study was developed to assess youth program staffs' intent to continue working directly with youth. The four-item scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .62, which although low, is acceptable in the early stages of research (Caplan et al. 1984; Pedhauser and Schmelkin 1991). Using a 4-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "very", the scale consisted of the following items: "How likely do you see yourself working directly with youth five years from now?"; "How satisfied are you with your job?"; "How much do you like working with youth?"; and "How important is it to you to work in this type of program?"

Self-reported Competency Scale (SRCS). Initially, eight subscales were created to assess youth program staffs' perceived competency in implementing the features associated with positive youth development outcomes outlined in a recent National Academy of Science report (Eccles and Gootman 2002) (see Table 1). Response sets were on a 10-point scale ranging from "I am not good at this" to "I am extremely good at this". Reliability for each of the eight subscales ranged from .85 to .92. In addition, a correlation analysis revealed moderate to very strong relationships among all eight subscales (Table 2).

Table 1 Features of positive development settings and corresponding survey items

Scale	Survey item
Physical and psychological safety	Keeping youth from hurting each other in the program
	Keeping youth from hurting each other's feelings
	Keeping youth from bullying each other
	Managing conflict between youth
	Making sure that the facility where we have our program does not have anything in it that might be dangerous to youth
	Making sure kids who are different feel like a part of our program
Appropriate structure	Making sure youth are occupied when they are in our program
	Making sure our program's rules are followed by youth
	Managing the time of youth while they participate in our program
	Providing youth with opportunities to do age-appropriate activities
Supportive relationships	Letting youth do things that interest them
	Listening to youth
	Building rapport with youth
	Understanding a "youth" point of view
	Relating well with youth from a variety of cultures and backgrounds
Opportunities to belong	If a youth has a problem, I am easy to approach
	Getting youth to "buy in" to an activity
	Including all youth in my program activities
	Doing activities that reflect the culture and background of the youth in our program
	Getting youth to feel like they are a part of a team or special group
Positive social norms	Getting youth to feel like they are an important part of my program
	Ensuring that our program environment is a place where youth think it is "normal" to behave well
	Ensuring that youth know that I have high expectations of them
	Ensuring that youth know how they should and should not act in my program
	Ensuring that youth act appropriately in my program
	Ensuring that youth understand the importance of giving back to their local communities
Support for efficacy and mattering	Encouraging youth to take on leadership in our program (i.e., activity planning)
	Conducting activities with youth that are challenging to them
	Looking at each youth's individual progress rather than focusing on group progress
	Providing opportunities for youth to give back to their local neighborhood or community
	Giving up some control of the program so youth can take on leadership roles

Table 1 continued

Scale	Survey item
Opportunities for skill building	Providing activities that are designed to help youth learn life skills (e.g., healthy life-styles, goal setting)
	Providing activities that are designed to help youth learn social skills (e.g., communication, conflict resolution)
	Providing activities for youth to practice the skills they have learned in my program
	Providing activities that reinforce what youth are learning in school
	Providing feedback to help youth improve the skills they learn in my program
Integration of family, school, and community efforts	Communicating with the parents or guardians of the youth in my program
	Providing referrals and resources to the youth and families in my program
	Collaborating with other programs and agencies to enhance my youth programming
	Using other community members and programs to help my work with youth
	Communicating with teachers and school personnel regarding the youth in my program

Table 2 Correlation between the eight competency subscales

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Safety	–	.686**	.589**	.663**	.677**	.493**	.546**	.425**
2. Structure		–	.582**	.742**	.747**	.584**	.638**	.490**
3. Support			–	.673**	.573**	.510**	.518**	.438**
4. Belong				–	.748**	.677**	.697**	.520**
5. Norms					–	.657**	.689**	.472**
6. Efficacy						–	.747**	.526**
7. Skills							–	.561**
8. Integration								–

Note: 1. Physical and psychological safety subscale; 2. Appropriate structure subscale; 3. Supportive relationships subscale; 4. Opportunities to belong subscale; 5. Positive social norms subscale; 6. Support for efficacy and mattering subscale; 7. Opportunities for skill building subscale; 8. Integration of family, school, and community subscale. ** $p < .01$

Results

The majority of the participants (72%) were employed full-time, 17% were employed part-time, and 11% volunteer their time in out-of-school time programs. Length of time participants had worked in out-of-school time programs was distributed as follows: 37% 3 years or less; 27% 4–7 years; 14% 8–11 years; 12% 12–19 years; and 11% 20 or more years. Most (79%) participants reported having a bachelor's degree or higher, with approximately one-third (36%) indicating that 80–100% of their formal education was in youth development or a related field (e.g., psychology, family and consumer science,

education, social work, human services). Almost half (48%) of all participants said they had learned “much” or “very much” about their jobs from more experienced staff members or colleagues, and 62% reported having had life experiences similar to the youth in their programs. Eighty-one percent of program staff said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their job. Likewise, 84% said it was likely or very likely that they would be working directly with youth 5 years from now.

Self-reported Competency Scale. One objective of this study was to develop and validate a measure of youth worker self-reported competency. As stated in an earlier section, the eight conceptual features of the National Academy youth development framework were used to develop parallel sub-scales to assess individuals’ perceived competency in implementing the features associated with positive youth development outcomes. For the purpose of this current study, however, we desired an overall competency measure for parsimony and use in our analyses. Thus, an exploratory factor analysis using a principal component extraction was conducted on the 41 self-report competency items to explore the psychometric properties of the global scale. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .95, indicating that the data were suitable for principal components analysis. Similarly, Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($p < .001$), indicating sufficient correlation between the variables to proceed with the analysis. The Kaiser–Guttman retention criterion of eigenvalues greater than 1.0 suggested a seven-factor solution, which accounted for 68% of the variance. Examination of the scree plot also indicated that retaining seven factors was most appropriate. After varimax rotation, all seven-factor loadings were greater than .30 and retained for the overall measure. The items and their factor loadings in each factor are shown in Table 3.

Overall, the seven factors were consistent with the originally developed eight subscales. The factor analysis revealed that the *Appropriate Structure* and *Opportunities to Belong* subscales were measuring the same constructs. Likewise, two items from the *Support for Efficacy* subscale loaded with items in the *Opportunities for Skill Building* subscale. As such, all original items were retained, but the factors were renamed as follows: Supportive Relationships; Program Structure that Promotes Belonging; Skill Building Opportunities; Physical/Psychological Safety; Integration of Family, School, & Community; Positive Social Norms; and Developing Social Capital (see Table 3). The Cronbach’s alpha for the overall scale was .98. Although we only used the overall competency measure (all seven subscales together) in our present analyses, additional details regarding the construction and psychometric properties of this measure and its subscales can be obtained from the lead author.

Significant positive correlations between several of the key study variables (Table 4) revealed that self-reported competency was positively correlated with the length of time individuals had worked in out-of-school time programs, youth development-specific education, having life experiences similar to the youth with whom they work, and intent to continue working with youth ($p < .01$). Similarly, intent to continue working with youth was positively correlated with the length of time individuals had worked in non-school time programs, “helpful” youth development-specific job training, having life experiences similar to the youth with whom they work, how much they learned about their job from co-workers, and overall self-reported competency ($p < .01$). An examination of our newly developed measure of self-reported competency by gender revealed a significant mean difference between males and females, with females ($M = .05$, $SD = .64$) self-reporting significantly higher overall competency than males ($M = -.09$, $SD = .69$) $t(784) = -2.66$, $p = .008$ (two-tailed).

Table 3 Factor loading of each item after varimax rotation

	Factors						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Keeping youth from hurting each other in the program				.79			
Keeping youth from hurting each other's feelings				.74			
Keeping youth from bullying each other				.78			
Managing conflict between youth				.76			
Making sure that the facility where we have our program does not have anything in it that might be dangerous to youth				.49			
Making sure kids who are different feel like a part of our program				.54			
Making sure youth are occupied when they are in our program	.58						
Making sure our program's rules are followed by youth	.32						
Managing the time of youth while they participate in our program	.62						
Providing youth with opportunities to do age-appropriate activities	.66						
Letting youth do things that interest them	.63						
Listening to youth	.82						
Building rapport with youth	.84						
Understanding a "youth" point of view	.81						
Relating well with youth from a variety of cultures and backgrounds	.64						
If a youth has a problem, I am easy to approach	.76						
Getting youth to "buy in" to an activity	.55						
Including all youth in my program activities	.57						
Doing activities that reflect the culture and background of the youth in our program	.39						
Getting youth to feel like they are a part of a team or special group	.57						
Getting youth to feel like they are an important part of my program	.56						
Ensuring that our program environment is a place where youth think it is "normal" to behave well						.62	
Ensuring that youth know that I have high expectations of them						.66	
Ensuring that youth know how they should and should not act in my program						.78	
Ensuring that youth act appropriately in my program						.76	
Ensuring that youth understand the importance of giving back to their local communities						.75	
Encouraging youth to take on leadership in our program (i.e., activity planning)						.65	
Conducting activities with youth that are challenging to them		.51					
Looking at each youth's individual progress rather than focusing on group progress		.42					
Providing opportunities for youth to give back to their local neighborhood or community						.81	
Giving up some control of the program so youth can take on leadership roles						.69	
Providing activities that are designed to help youth learn life skills (e.g., healthy life-styles, goal setting)		.73					
Providing activities that are designed to help youth learn social skills (e.g., communication, conflict resolution)		.72					

Table 3 continued

	Factors						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Providing activities for youth to practice the skills they have learned in my program					.70		
Providing activities that reinforce what youth are learning in school					.64		
Providing feedback to help youth improve the skills they learn in my program					.66		
Communicating with the parents or guardians of the youth in my program						.63	
Providing referrals and resources to the youth and families in my program						.73	
Collaborating with other programs and agencies to enhance my youth programming						.78	
Using other community members and programs to help my work with youth						.76	
Communicating with teachers and school personnel regarding the youth in my program						.70	

Note: 1 = Supportive relationships; 2 = Program structure that promotes belonging; 3 = Skill building opportunities; 4 = Physical/Psychological safety; 5 = Integration of family, school, & community; 6 = Positive social norms; 7 = Developing social capital

The primary research question guiding this study was: How do self-reported competencies, staff characteristics, and level of job satisfaction predict intent to continue working in community-based youth programs? To address this, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted using an enter procedure, with intent to continue working with youth as the dependent variable. Using a block entry procedure, independent variables were entered as follows: [Block 1] covariates (age, gender, ethnicity, and length of time working in out-of-school time programming); and [Block 2] overall self-reported competency, formal education, youth development-specific education, experience, job-related training, aspects of the job learned from co-workers, program decision-making, and program climate. Regression results are summarized in Table 5.

Using a cutoff alpha of $p = .05$, results revealed that Block 1 (covariates) accounted for a significant portion of the variance in the first model, $R^2 = .03$, $R_{adj}^2 = .03$,

Table 4 Correlation between key study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Time in NS program	–	.124**	.091**	.107**	–.007	.179**	.147**
2. Formal education		–	.255**	–.160**	–.026	–.056	–.066
3. Youth-specific educ			–	.042	.001	.181**	.115**
4. Life experience				–	.048	.250**	.196**
5. Learn from others					–	–.043	.104**
6. Competency						–	.313**
7. Retention							–

Note: 1. Length of time worked in non-school time teen programming; 2. Level of formal education; 3. Percentage of formal education related to youth development; 4. Life experiences similar to those of the youth served; 5. How much of job was learned from co-workers; 6. Self-reported competency scale; 7. Intent to continue working with youth scale. ** $p < .01$

Table 5 Hierarchical multiple regression equation predicting youth worker retention

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2	ΔF
Block 1				.03	.03	6.16***
Gender	-.03	.04	-.03			
Age	>.01	>.01	.03			
Race/ethnicity	.02	.01	.04			
Time worked	.01	.01	.04			
Block 2				.20	.16	18.15***
Competence	.19	.03	.27***			
Job training	.02	.01	.15***			
Learn from others	.06	.02	.11**			
Street experience	.04	.02	.09*			
Decision-making	-.04	.02	-.07*			
Program climate	.02	.02	.04			
Youth-specific Ed	.01	.01	.04			
Education	-.01	.02	-.02			

Note: Time worked = Length of time worked in non-school time teen programming; Competence = Self-reported competency scale; Job training = Youth work-specific training received on the job; Learn from others = Aspects of the job learned from co-workers; Street experience = Life experiences similar to those of the youth served; Decision-making = Opportunities to participate in work-related decision-making; Program climate = Features of the program environment that facilitate work group cohesion; Youth-specific ed = percent of formal education related to youth development; Education = Level of formal education

B, SE *B*, and β are presented for the model after all predictor variables were entered. *F*, R^2 , and ΔR^2 are presented for the model after each step. Full model: $R = .44$; $R^2 = .20$; $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .18$; $\Delta R^2 = .16$; $F(8, 719) = 18.15$; $p \leq .001$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

$F(4, 727) = 6.16$, $p < .001$, but were not significant in the final model. The addition of the independent variables in Block 2 resulted in a significant amount of the variance in intent to continue working with youth, $R^2 = .20$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .18$, $\Delta R^2 = .16$, $F(8, 719) = 18.15$, $p < .001$. Five of the eight independent variables contributed significantly to individuals' intent to continue working with youth: overall self-reported competency ($p < .001$); job related training ($p < .001$); learned from co-workers ($p < .01$); having life experience similar to the youth they serve ($p < .05$); and program decision-making ($p < .05$). The overall model accounted for approximately 17% of the variance and suggests that intent to continue working with youth was higher for staff who have received job-related training, view themselves as having the overall competence to work with youth, have opportunities to participate in work-related decision-making, have help from co-workers in learning job-related skills, and believe they can relate to the life experiences of the youth with whom they work. These relationships were significant despite statistical control for age, gender, ethnicity, and amount of time working in out-of-school time programming.

Discussion

Prior research has given little attention to the role of individuals who work directly with youth in the successful implementation of community-based, out-of-school time programs. In this study we examined the characteristics of frontline youth workers in these programs,

looking specifically at the relationship between their intent to continue working with youth as it relates to their experience, training, educational background, and self-reported competency in implementing the features previously identified as essential to providing program settings that result in positive youth outcomes (Eccles and Gootman 2002). We found that intent to continue working with youth was higher for staff who have received job related training, view themselves as having the overall competence to work with youth, have opportunities to participate in work-related decision-making, have help from co-workers in learning job-related skills, and believe they can relate to the life experiences of the youth with whom they work. These relationships were significant despite statistical control for age, gender, ethnicity, and amount of time working in out-of-school time programming. These results begin to expand the understanding of how program staff characteristics contribute to the development of effective youth programs, and what factors appear to influence youth worker's intent to continue working in the field. In addition, we presented the development and properties of a measure of youth worker self-reported competency that was used in our present analyses.

We found that youth program staff who rated themselves higher in overall competency also reported having lived through experiences similar to the youth in their program. It is possible that this correlation is related to a belief that their capacity to serve the needs of the youth with whom they work is associated with their ability to identify with the challenges that youth face on a daily basis. Having lived through experiences similar to the youth with whom they work also was an important factor in individuals' plans to continue working with youth, which may be related to a desire to pay back what someone did for them, to follow in the footsteps of a role model, or to make a difference in their community (Walker 2003).

Previous research has shown that staff training, educational background, and skill sets are considered by some to be key elements in the overall effectiveness of a program's ability to promote the positive development in youth (Astroth et al. 2004; Thomas 2002; Walker 2003). Our regression model did not reveal that formal education or youth development-specific education were significant predictors of intent to continue working with youth. However, job-related training was a significant predictor in our model of youth worker retention. This finding, as well as the significant binary correlation we found between specific youth development-related education and intent to continue working with youth, leads us to conclude that as training and educational experiences are more closely tied to practical, job related duties, the more likely these factors will be associated with greater levels of youth worker retention. Thus, current findings point to the possible value of youth worker specific training and educational preparation, as well as suggesting the importance of developing professional standards specific to youth work.

In examining the correlations among self-reported competency ratings and specialized training, we found that youth workers who received training and rated it as 'helpful' also rated their overall competency higher than those who received training but rated the training as 'not helpful'. This emphasizes the importance of the quality of training staff receives, as well as pointing to the need for additional research to understand the key components of what constitutes useful training format and content. Interestingly, in examining youth workers who reported receiving specialized training (whether they rated that training as helpful or not), youth workers who had specific training on sexual issues, developing community partnerships, and program mission/goals/objectives also reported higher competency levels. Additionally, results revealed that attending professional training sessions, particularly on the topics of how to manage a youth program, substance abuse prevention/intervention, and youth safety issues, appear to be related to staff

members' intent to continue working in the youth development field. It could be that these areas represent core components for providing out-of-school time programming, and as such are offered more consistently across programs and organizations. Alternatively, these particular topics may represent fundamental topics that, when in place, allow other aspects of quality programming to emerge.

In addition to receiving specialized training, intent to continue working with youth also was predicted by youth program staff who reported learning how to do their jobs from more experienced staff. This is consistent with prior research in which youth workers have "voiced enthusiasm for work-related training" and would prefer to get that training from people who work "in the trenches" in either formal (e.g., university) or informal (e.g., on the job) settings (Walker 2003). Similarly, a recent national study of individuals responsible for recruitment and retention of youth workers revealed that mentoring new staff is an effective approach to facilitating the process by which staff learns how to perform their job (National Collaboration for Youth 2006).

Mentoring not only helps new staff develop and enhance their job skills, but also promotes social networking within the organization and provides opportunities to develop a "professional" support network and a supportive work environment. This also has important implications for advancing the field of youth development. For example, some organizations provide internships and other practical experiences that give local high school and college students an opportunity to explore youth work as a career option. Once youth workers are hired, helping them explore their interests, educational goals, and offering them tuition reimbursement for advanced training can result in development of a youth program staff that reflects the culture and experiences of youth in that community (National Collaboration for Youth 2006).

Working with youth, while rewarding, also can be emotionally and physically challenging. It has been noted in previous research that organizational climate, which is defined as "the attitudes employees collectively hold about their work environment", can affect job satisfaction, quality of services, and youth outcomes (Bednar 2003). Likewise, inadequate support, supervision, resources, and training are likely to result in high staff turnover, thus requiring a continual rebuilding of the direct service segment of the youth organization (Walker 2003; Yohalem 2003). Our results reveal that the more supervision, support, and voice in decision-making youth workers believe they have, and the more democratic the organizational environment is, the more likely they are to indicate an intention to continue working with youth. Therefore, creating a supportive and inclusive work environment appears critical to staff retention.

Interestingly, although gender was not significant in our regression predicting intent to continue working with youth, we found that men rated themselves lower than women in overall youth worker competency. Since youth work often is perceived as a highly relational profession, women may experience a greater sense of satisfaction in this type of work setting than men and, as a result, rate themselves as having higher competencies. Also, youth work, which traditionally does not provide high incomes or opportunities for career advancement, may attract and retain more women than men. These conclusions are consistent with the literature on gender differences in other professions. For example, previous research on gender differences in job design, motivation, and satisfaction suggested that women place greater importance than men on interpersonal relationships (Carlson and Mellor 2004), and that women most often reported entering a profession because of attraction to the job, whereas men reported income and employment potential as the main reason for entering a profession (Kuhns et al. 2004). Youth worker competency will remain a central issue in future research that attempts to understand how adults

working with youth in out-of-school programming can promote positive youth development. It is our hope that the youth worker competency measure we have developed here can help with this task.

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, given the self-selected nature of the sample, the youth program staff who took time to complete the survey may be individuals who are more invested in the youth development field. Additionally, the findings of the study are based on self-report. Future research could include multiple data sources to observe competencies rather than relying solely on self-report measures. Although the majority of our measures consisted of multiple items or scales, several items (principally demographic in nature) were comprised of single items and should be interpreted cautiously. This caution also should be extended to the retention scale we employed with its relatively low alpha. An important next step for further research is an examination of the strategies used to recruit and retain individuals likely to choose youth development work as a career, and build competencies in those individuals. We would encourage the use of the robust competency measure developed for this study for future research in these areas. However, further psychometric work on this measure needs to be done before conducting such research. This includes convergent and discriminate validity, and test-retest reliability studies to ascertain the quality of the measure with diverse samples over time.

Recruitment and retention of qualified individuals to work directly with youth has been an ongoing challenge to the child and youth care field. Considered by many as being an entry-level job that prepares an individual for a higher status professional position, the field is plagued by high turnover, low pay, and lack of professional distinction (Thomas 2002). In recent years, leaders in child and youth care organizations have suggested the need for establishing standards of practice that would advance the development of the profession. Key elements of these standards of practice would include professional training programs, specification of educational qualifications, and the definition of professional boundaries and areas of competence (Thomas 2002). Development of professional and specialized training needs to be theory-based, and focused on the importance of providing practical experience that is innovative and accessible to everyone interested in a career as a youth development professional (National Collaboration for Youth 2006; Walker 2003; Yohalem 2003). Retention of qualified youth workers and attainment of high competency levels by those workers is essential to the professional advancement of the youth development field. As the field continues to move toward professionalism, the relationship between staff characteristics, recruitment, and retention will remain a central issue to efforts aimed at promoting positive youth development.

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