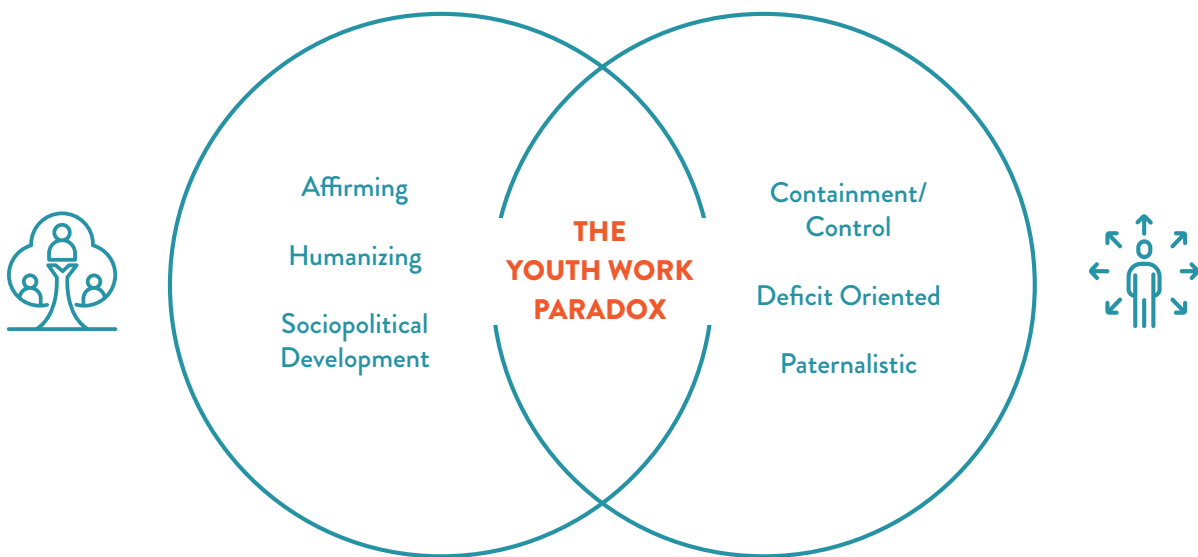


FACTSHEET

THE YOUTH WORK PARADOX

Community-based youth work takes place in a variety of settings, including after-school programs, youth-serving organizations, and other out-of-school learning environments. These spaces are often celebrated for supporting young people academically, socially, culturally, and politically. However, the complexity of these community-based educational spaces is often overlooked in education research – they exist within broader social and political systems shaped by race, economic inequality, and education policy, and these structural forces influence how youth programs operate and how youth workers engage with young people.

Dr. Bianca Baldrige examines these complexities in her research and proposes the **youth work paradox** as a framework for understanding how youth work spaces can simultaneously both *support* and *constrain* youth experiencing marginalization.*



*Adapted from Figure 1 of the article.**

Dr. Baldrige uses existing scholarship and examples from a larger research project on community-based youth work with Black youth to identify the tensions in how youth workers describe both their work and the context in which they work. The concept of the youth work paradox emerges from this tension.



Youth workers recognize structural inequity and create supportive environments.

Many youth workers understand how racism, economic inequality, school policies, and other forms of oppression affect young people's lives. They try to create humanizing and supportive environments that affirm youth identities, emphasize their strengths, and support youth to understand, navigate, and challenge these realities.



External systems shape how youth programs operate.

Community-based programs exist within broader systems, such as:

- non-profit funding structures
- discriminatory policies
- racialized and deficit-based narratives about youth
- market-oriented approaches to education

These systems shape how programs define success, present their work, and organize daily practice.

Youth work spaces are pulled in competing directions.

Because of these pressures, community-based youth programs may simultaneously:

- support youth empowerment and social awareness, existing as sites of *affirmation* and *resistance*, where youth develop critical awareness and supportive relationships
- (re)produce deficit narratives about youth experiencing marginalization, existing as sites of *containment*, where youth are managed through deficit-based narratives and paternalistic programming.

Programs may offer humanizing relationships while also participating in systems that frame youth as needing to be 'fixed'.

Within this paradox, community-based youth work can both challenge and reinforce inequity at the same time.

Importantly, these dynamics can occur *simultaneously*, rather than as opposites.

By recognizing and understanding these dynamics, we can better acknowledge the tensions within youth work and explore ways to support youth without reproducing harmful narratives. Dr. Baldrige argues that **youth workers should be recognized as important educators, and that their experiences, labour, and knowledge deserve more serious attention within education research.**

**This Factsheet was developed from the article [The Youthwork Paradox: A Case for Studying the Complexity of Community-Based Youth Work in Education Research](#), published in 2020 in Educational Researcher, 49(8), 618–625.*