

The Social Service Industrial Complex:
Exploring the Supportive and Obstructive Factors of Critical Youth Work

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Social Justice Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

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Abstract

Youth work offers dynamic and rewarding experiences for frontline workers; however, the contestation between the prioritization of communal and neoliberal notions of equity create tensions within the youth sector. While youth workers benefit from reciprocal, fulfilling and transformational elements in their work which align with their vocation and values, a critical analysis of may expose layers of structural violence, including chronic precarity, overwork, moral distress, underappreciation, tokenization, and silencing. These contradictory dynamics can limit the full potential of youth worker's critical impact, which seeks to support and advocate for social justice on a communal and systemic level in addition to providing interpersonal services. To explore how the social service sector can better optimize policy and practice while reaffirming frontline worker's ethical principles of equity, this study investigates how youth workers in Central Ontario navigate factors that support and obstruct their critical (anti-oppressive) practices. Grounded in historical and socio-political contexts, this research examines twenty-five semi-structured interviews utilizing Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022/2024). Incorporating the concepts of Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000) and praxis to examine the supportive factors, and Structural Violence (Galtung, 1969) and *ap Praxis* to examine the obstructive factors, this study presents a discursive model which combines theoretical frameworks with lived experience. The findings of this study provide a model that illustrates the dynamic relationship between five principles of critical practice (relational, holistic, responsive, transformational, and reflexive) and twelve supportive and obstructive factors that have a significant impact on critical youth work. By grounding these lived experiences in shared conceptual language to deconstruct dynamics of the "Social Service Industrial Complex," this dissertation presents implications for critical praxis in research, policy and practice.

Acknowledgments

My research journey has not been a conventional one. After completed my Maters degree and all PhD course work within four years, between 2006 – 2010, I found myself deeply engaged in community endeavours and adrift when it came to a vision and pathway forward for my research. I soon paused my academic pursuits and began working full-time as a media arts and leadership development coordinator. As I delved deeper into community and youth work, my interest in bridging my personal, professional and political interests expanded. I began to envision my future research as an advocacy opportunity to draw attention to the troubling contradictions that I experienced in the social service sector. Now, having been reinstated in 2025 to finish this doctoral work, there is a long list of people to thank. I wish to acknowledge my family, particularly my parents Cyril and Theresa, who have always been willing to offer unconditional love, provision, and acceptance in ways that can never be repaid. I am grateful for the camaraderie of the many co-workers, colleagues and friends that I have had the pleasure of learning from in both communal and institutional settings. In my earliest days of involvement with youth media arts training, I am appreciative of the collaborative mentorship of Paul and Esau, who provided a piercing and critical lens for engaging youth and community work.

I am thankful to the many community-based organizations and employees who opened doors for me to share my art, knowledge and passion through resourced and self-funded projects. While this research explores critical questions for improving the sector’s ethical shortfalls, I am thankful to the many individuals who consistently chose to engage in critical practice, whether they filled administrative, policy, funding, management, or frontline roles. There is also ethical responsibility required for academics who engage in community-based research work, understanding that moral work should not be transactional and based on the politics of “owning” experiences and knowledge. My time and investment in community began before this research

and will continue after, as I seek out future collaborations to advance transformative potential and legacy building. During my time away from this academic program, the expansion of my actions and reflections within the sector blossomed. I also had the privilege of engaging in new academic projects which made space for my scholarly and creative capacity. In 2009, I supported a youth photovoice project led by Dr. Uzo Anucha, who I would connect with 5 years later to be welcomed into the new Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) project, an expansion of the community-engaged research model of our previous collaboration. After a decade of working with YouthREX in various capacities, the support from Dr. Anucha, Chanel Herbert, Kathe Rogers, Alex Lovel, and countless others has been indispensable for this research journey and my professional development. I also wish to thank Dr. Carl James and the external examiner, Dr. Nombuso Dlamini, for their contributions to community-engaged education which has greatly assisted by journey.

To the thesis committee, thank you for your support. I have a long history with Dr. Njoki Wane, who stepped in when I found myself increasingly untethered from this academic program. Dr. Wane has consistently gone beyond the call of duty to support students on a personal and international level and for that I am thankful. Dr. John Portelli's willingness to support is deeply appreciated and the efforts of Dr. Lance McCready who offered insightful, challenging and nurturing spaces for professional growth over this last year has been invaluable. For my fellow students and friends who shared countless study group and library sessions with me throughout this long journey, thank you. Finally, I am thankful to the many community members, frontline staff, and young people that I have had the honour of working with over the years. It has been a blessing watching many of these young people develop their gifts, talents, families and legacies over the years. My hope is that critical youth work will be better supported by all stakeholders in the sector, to improve outcomes and processes for youth and youth workers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Complex

The Critical Care “Complex”

Frontline youth work is a rewarding but complex vocation. Youth workers assist young people in navigating structural barriers, often while operating within social, economic, and political conditions that undermine their morale and the full potential of their efforts. The political pendulum that sways between economic and communal priorities in the social service sector creates paradoxical tensions in youth work because social values and capitalist valuations are often at odds with each other. In this way, youth workers occupy a unique disposition where their obligations to the funders, policy makers and the organizations that employ may not align with their personal and what they perceive as their professional obligations to service youth and community (Schild et al., 2017). In this context there is an over emphasis on measurable outcomes and fiscal implications that outweighs the recognition and support of ethical and equitable engagement. Youth workers are a relational resource, providing critical guidance and connection to services that attempt to circumvent the consequences of systemic exploitation, neglect, and precarity in education, employment, mental and physical health, criminalization, and matters (Fouché et al., 2010; Lavalette, 2011; Murdoch & Larsen, 2018). Navigating these dynamics can be particularly difficult for young people affiliated with under-resourced and socially marginalized communities.

Frontline youth workers also provide a broad range of proactive engagement including mentorship, leadership development, civic education, crisis intervention, and harm reduction strategies (Belton, 2014; Sapin, 2008; Sonneveld, 2020). In addition to supporting the individual wellbeing of adolescents and young adults, youth workers who incorporate *critical* practices apply anti-oppressive frameworks to combat racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, transphobic,

agist, ableist, and various dehumanizing tropes that can be used to pathologize youth (Baldrige, 2020b; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Critical youth work is political and deeply tied to social justice efforts in a field that is rapidly expanding, professionalizing and challenging the status quo (Borden et al., 2011; Kearney & Donovan, 2013; Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013; Walker, 2003). However, despite their essential role in advancing interpersonal and social wellbeing, youth worker's contributions are largely misunderstood, underappreciated, precarious, and constrained by structures and policies that overly defer to bureaucratic compliance, placing the potential for transformational and compassionate interventions and collaborations at risk (Bradford & Cullen, 2014). The overemphasis placed on measurable outcomes and standardized practice can strip youth work of its relational depth, sacrificing ethical reciprocity for what is perceived to be institutional efficiency (Coussée et al., 2009; Hallam et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2015). To deconstruct these limitations, it is necessary to understand how the youth sector (and the broader social service landscape) is deeply entangled within neoliberal frameworks which privilege purely economic objectives (Bradford & Cullen, 2014; De St Croix, 2015; Lavalette, 2011; Ord, 2014; Schild et al., 2017). In this context, programs justify their existence through evaluative metrics that align with cost-saving procedures, validating expenses through a social return of investment logic that fails to meaningfully account for communal reciprocity, capacity building, and long-term well-being for youth and youth workers (Harrison & Weber, 2015; Lohmeyer, 2017).

As neoliberal-oriented governments increasingly place responsibility for social services onto non-profits and community organizations, many youth workers are tasked with filling service gaps which are exacerbated by chronic underfunding and misaligned policy (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014). By deemphasizing the urgent need for funding and administrative bodies to take accountability for resourcing solutions to systemic challenges and addressing the root causes

of social disenfranchisement, these dynamics become depoliticized, focusing instead on stories of youth struggles and success (Williamson, 2011). Despite these constraints, critical youth workers continue to reimagine progressive possibilities for the sector, creating strategies for more ethical, social justice-oriented practice within structurally confounding circumstances. In traversing these socio-political contradictions, critical youth workers are challenged with finding ways to reconcile their occupational obligations with their own vocational values. Through an examination of youth worker experiences, this dissertation will explore how critical youth work principles are conceptualized and the factors that support and obstruct the practical implementation of these values. By exploring insights from youth workers, this study contributes to an overlooked discourse on the ethics of care to support youth worker's critical practice and to consider their personal and professional wellbeing, which is often compromised by structural disenfranchisement.

Youth Worker Disenfranchisement and Resistance

The youth sector, notwithstanding its important contributions and altruistic reputation, can be a contentious site constrained by neoliberal frameworks. Often these frameworks prioritize transactional short-term projects over relational and sustainable re-investments in community (Spolander et al., 2014). Rather than address social inequities as a matter of structural responsibility, neoliberal frameworks tend to view youth work as individualized interventions, where success is measured by instances of behavioral adjustment and program products (Baldrige, 2014). Neoliberalism has been identified as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Azevedo et al., 2019, p. 50; Harvey, 2005, p. 2). However, the outcome of this ideology in a capitalist economy prioritizes profit margins at

the expense of social wellbeing, increasing corporate deregulation while divesting in community-based initiatives further exacerbating conditions of inequity and harming wellbeing on an individual and shared level (Becker et al., 2021; Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014).

The emphasis on short-term, output-driven checkmarks which evaluate overall numerical reach, attendance frequency, and generic satisfaction scores, neglect to account for the relational and process-oriented necessities of youth work. Thereby privileging programs that can demonstrate “success” that aligns with rotating funding priorities, as opposed to programs that are more agile and responsive to the lived realities and long-term interests of young people and their communities (Harris, 2014). The disconnection between these governing frameworks (funding, policy and administration) and frontline engagement is reinforced by the ever-expanding professionalization discourses that lauds standardization, bureaucracy, managerialism, and the depoliticization of service delivery models, disenfranchising much of the expertise and experience of critical practitioners (Baines, 2004; Baines, Cunningham, et al., 2014; Carroll, 2015; Durst, 2006a).

While bureaucratic processes need not be regarded as inherently problematic in themselves, they do produce harmful consequences if they are not ethically responsive to the needs of community (Venter et al., 2019). By compromising the quality of youth engagement and long-term outcomes, the capacity of youth workers to fully engage in critical practice is eroded. Within this context, it is important to note that the disposition of youth workers is connected to broader conditions of devaluation and underestimation that impact frontline workers across the social service sector. The impact of sexism, classism and additional layers of identity-based marginalization that often extends to the youth workers themselves compounds experiences of disenfranchisement. Ironically, this feeling of disenfranchisement harms those who are tasked with providing youth with opportunities for social amelioration, furthering a

systemic paradox that perpetuates the problems it purports to repute. Despite the significant expertise and ethical tact required to effectively support young people navigating structural barriers, many frontline youth workers chronically encounter low wages, a lack of benefits, being overworked, silencing in policy and administrative measures, disregard for professional acumen, meager protections for self-care and wellbeing, few opportunities for career advancement, and a reliance on short-term contracts compromise their ability to leverage rapport with youth and communities, and threatens their sense of security (Addati et al., 2018; Baines, 2010a; Bureau for Workers' Activities, 2012; Coholic et al., 2009; Dato' Wasitah & Lee, 2023). In this way, neoliberalism practices in policy and administration produces counterproductive and harmful dynamics for youth and youth workers.

In North America, there is a tendency to frame care work as a self-sacrificing moral duty. This point is evidenced by the fact that employers do not warrant significant compensatory benefits and structural provision, an ideology grounded in sexism and dehumanization (Baines, 2011; Karabanow, 1999; Lightman & Kevins, 2021). Nevertheless, youth workers push against structural limitations imposed on their practice, incorporating alternative strategies to sustain critical, community-based approaches that resist the depoliticization of their work (Bamber & Murphy, 1999; Cooper, 2012; Lynch et al., 2020). Some youth workers use their positions to advocate for equitable policies, leveraging their proximity to young people to challenge dominant narratives that contribute to youth marginalization (Ruíz, 2024). These acts of resistance highlight the way that critical youth work can be viewed as operating in a liminal space, between hegemonic and transformational forces, between reaction, repression and revolution, incorporating advocacy and agency in a complex field of promise and contradiction. (Baines, Charlesworth, et al., 2014; Davidson, 2020; Kwon, 2013). By examining these intersecting dynamics, this study pushes beyond an analysis of youth

work as an individualized practice to interrogate the conditions that shape youth worker experiences from interpersonal, professional and political factors. Understanding how youth workers recognize and navigate systemic oppression and identify opportunities for change is essential to advancing transformative practice, strengthening frontline efforts and outcomes, and upholding the principles of ethics and equity throughout the process.

The Gaps

Problem Statement and Research Gaps

The ultimate objective of this research is to provide evidence for the need to acknowledge and expand an ethics of care towards youth workers from affluent sector stakeholders including policy, funding and administrative leaders to ensure that the community-oriented and equity-based efforts of critical youth work practitioners is supported and sustained. This research addresses four problematic gaps in knowledge regarding critical youth work practice by 1) emphasising frontline youth worker's experiences which are often marginalized, 2) providing Canadian context which remains understudied, 3) expanding the discourse of “decent work” to address ethical contradictions and socio-political implications, and 4) applying critical theoretical frameworks for understanding and deconstructing the roots of youth sector contradiction.

Excluding Experience and Expertise

In their direct engagement with young people, youth workers gain a deep understanding of the systemic barriers and nuanced challenges that youth encounter, yet youth workers are often excluded from decision-making processes that shape policy and program design (Davidson, 2020; Road & Kingdom, 2008). Their knowledge, cultivated through direct experience and relational exchange is frequently discredited and waved in favour of administrative and academic perspectives that may overemphasize notions of an “evidence-base” without validating lived experience and practical efficacy (Beaton et al., 2021; M. Ramos, 2015). This exclusion weakens

the sector's ability to respond effectively to the needs of youth and community, reinforcing a disconnect between policy rhetoric and practical realities. Purnima George et al. highlighted the "paradox" inherent in social service work, arguing that while organizations may claim to center youth voices, many frequently fail to follow through on their ambitions in meaningful ways (George et al., 2007, p. 6). This contradiction extends to youth workers themselves, who, despite their proximity to both young people and institutional structures, are nearly silenced in shaping the systems they navigate daily. By addressing these contradictions, this dissertation stresses the need for the intentional incorporation of youth worker experiences and expertise in decision-making processes, advocating for policies and practices that are more reflective of the realities on the ground as well as the theoretical insights that are informing frontline perspectives.

Missing Canadian Context

Despite the growing significance of youth work in Ontario, limited research has examined how frontline practitioners experience and respond to the structural factors shaping their professionalism (Wilson, 2011; Wilson et al., 2020). While Canadian studies on the context of youth work are expanding, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and in some cases Australia have had significant traction in this disciplinary space (K. Healy & Meagher, 2004). Existing literature, even while practice-focused, tends to omit in-depth experience of youth workers themselves, understandably focusing more on programs and practices but placing too little attention on the socio-political implications of everyday youth work. This gap in research has contributed to a limited understanding of how youth workers engage with and resist systemic constraints, particularly when attempting to integrate critical approaches into practice. This study seeks to address this gap by centering the lived experiences of youth workers and analyzing how they interpret and engage in their critical practice within the Canadian context, thereby contributing to the broader international discourse.

Depoliticizing Decent Work

The dominant discourse advocating for improved youth work conditions has largely concentrated on issues of burnout, employment precarity, and the expansion of accessible professionalization opportunities (Baines, 2010a; L. Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). However, these issues are rarely tied to deeper theoretically structural inquiries on inequity and the ethical dilemma that has emerged from contexts of colonization and systemic violence (Rossier & Ouedraogo, 2021). While efforts to improve wages, job security, and access to professional development are important, most of these advocacy campaigns do not challenge the underlying ideological and material conditions that shape the sector. On the other hand, the drive to increase professionalization may introduce additional layers of standardization and managerial oversight, which can interrupt community-driven models of practice if they are not guided by the principles of critical practice (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014). While increased professionalization is framed as being a step towards legitimacy and stability for the sector, it can also reinforce bureaucratic priorities that limit the flexibility and autonomy necessary for critical youth work. By framing challenges to critical engagement as systemic and political, this study asserts that discussions on self-care and professionalization must also include a critical examination of how youth work is administered, evaluated, funded, and regarded, addressing labor conditions and the ideological frameworks that inform the contexts of the sector.

Alienating Critical Practice from Theory

One of the central limitations of existing research on youth work is its failure to connect frontline experiences with grounded theoretical frameworks that illuminate the structural and ideological conditions shaping the sector, namely neoliberalism. This dissertation seeks to connect the factors identified through the youth worker narratives to the concepts of Galtung's Structural Violence and Freire's Critical Pedagogy, revealing the deeper political and economic

logic that have implications for practice. By exploring how youth workers navigate systemic barriers, sustain their commitments to advocacy, and develop strategies for resisting co-optation while supporting young people, this study calls for a candid examination of sectoral contradictions. In so doing, this study challenges the assumption that the social service sector is inherently aligned with social justice.

By critically examining these dynamics, this dissertation intends to promote Critical Praxis to advance the collective well-being of frontline staff and service users, while addressing the Structural Violence that deprives the youth sector in general, and youth workers in particular, of realizing their full potential. The author's goal for the outcome of this study will be to have its findings inform broader discussions on policy reform, administrative operations, funding structures, and a culture of care that endeavours to fulfill its mandates in more authentic, considerate, ethical and equitable ways.

This Research

To address the structural conditions that shape critical youth work practice in Ontario, this research examines the implications of systemic forces on the experiences of frontline youth workers. Focusing on Central Ontario specifically, a region that encompasses multiple urban, suburban and rural settings, the rapid evolution of government policy and investments from the provincial and municipality levels has garnered attention from critical researchers, but intimate insights on frontline practice remain elusive in academia (Ahmed & Carpenter, 2017; Nolas, 2014). For the great expanse of programs and policy development in recent years, led by Ontario's Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and a host of Ministry funded lead agencies, the programmatic focus remains largely concentrated on ensuring that young people are engaged in education and employment to secure pathways to developing productive taxpaying citizens, while concerns of social equity and moral distress remain on the margins.

For the social justice and civic engagement initiatives that do exist, most are oriented towards individualized accomplishment to help youth “succeed” in ways that fail to challenge status quo social stratification (McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007, 2013b, 2014). A transformative and more equitable youth sector requires the developments of new programs to be accompanied by investments in the stability of the frontline workforce and a critical examination of the systemic conditions that obstruct transformative practice (De St Croix, 2015; Petkovic, 2022; Road & Kingdom, 2008; Spence, 2010). As the youth field remains ethically discombobulated in the context of neoliberalism, new research advances a critical praxis – one that incorporates a theoretical analysis of socio-political and economic factors, while accounting for historical and contemporary realities that shape the lived experiences for practitioners who approach frontline work as a deeply personal and social engagement.

To contribute to critical discourse, this study examines the deeper institutional and ideological structures that frame youth work in Ontario, connecting localized and international context, formulating an intentional research design and research questions, and framing the findings within relevant theoretical and practical dynamics.

Research Context

While Ontarian youth workers are positioned as key actors in supporting young people, their exclusion from decision-making opportunities in larger funding and administrative spheres is a disservice to the frontline workers, the sector and the community at large (Durst, 2006b). Moreover, the Ontario youth sector has not effectively studied ways to better understand and sustain critical practices amongst frontline staff, nor has this analysis been extended into the examination of structural determinants. The expansion of youth-serving organizations across the province is still orientated towards competitive, short-term funding model, reinforcing labor precarity, producing high turnover rates, and increased pressure for programs to align their

working objectives with shifting funder priorities (Clutterbuck & Novick, 2003; Government of Ontario, 2013; United Way Greater Toronto & BGM Strategy Group, 2023). While organizations depend on youth workers to build trust with young people who may be navigating complex social and interpersonal circumstances, in turn youth workers are often unable to depend upon organizations to provide them with sustainable resources for their youth engagement efforts and their own long-term financial security. Furthermore, critical youth workers who centre relational integrity, political consciousness, and engage in systemic advocacy may themselves be navigating the same personal and professional barriers that they are expected to help young people traverse. These conditions can create a sense of cognitive dissonance and moral distress, where the critical principles and personal values that initially inspired youth worker's commitment to the field are conflicting with the work procedures (Belton, 2014; Fyfe & Mackie, 2024; Melaugh, 2015).

Another challenge shaping the context of youth work in Ontario, from the professionalization perspective, is the absence of a formalized regulation body, leading to inconsistent training, disparities in pay scales, and unclear roles and expectations for frontline work (Baillergeau & Hoijtink, 2010). Unlike social work or education, youth work has not necessarily been fully institutionalized within a standardized framework. As a result, the labor environment where workers must navigate varied organizational standards and career tracks is fragmented (Baldrige, 2018; Banks, 2010; Fusco, 2012). This lack of sectoral cohesion has left youth workers operating in conditions where their professional legitimacy is often subject to institutional hierarchies that privilege managerial oversight over practitioner expertise (López-Cabrera et al., 2020). While these inconsistencies may contribute to a degree of instability, they also create opportunities for evolving and transformational approaches that enhance youth and youth worker agency and broaden career pathways providing greater to a wide range of

disciplines and professional opportunities. Herein lies a tension within in Ontario youth sector, a contradictory continuum between neoliberal market logic of capitalism which individualizes and standardizes versus the humanizing “magic” of youth worker autonomy, personality and communalism (Baines, 2015; De St Croix & Doherty, 2022).

It would be erroneous to assume that all proponents of regulation and professionalization are antithetical to human-centred approaches and vice versa, (Fusco & Baizerman, 2013) rather, a more constructive question is grounded in the heart of the current study: how are supportive and obstructive factors of critical youth work experienced on the frontlines? How can we reconcile contradictions in theoretical and practical approaches with the aim of enhancing evidence-based practices, standardized training, fiscally sustainable programs, and professional oversight that also support critical inquiry, social justice, healthy working environments, decent work standards, promote wholesome wellbeing, uphold communal values and advance an ethics of care? The research and advocacy objective at the core of this study is not to manifest a utopia or to promote a dogmatic manifesto, but to rely on historical, theoretical and testimonial evidence from youth workers to highlight what is working and what is need of urgent reform to combat factors that impede the potentiality of youth worker impact and wellbeing.

Research Design

This research draws upon qualitative data gathered from the Ontario Youth Compass (OYC) project, an initiative conducted by the Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) at York University. YouthREX, as a provincially funded program from 2015 to 2025, was designed to support youth-service organizations and youth workers in the Ontario youth sector by providing free knowledge mobilization, capacity building and evaluation services. Over the decade, YouthREX has played a significant role in sector, attempting to balance Ministry and organisational interests of increasing evaluation capacity and compliance,

and the grassroots goals for creating space for critically reflexive dialogue and collaboration. In addition to providing in-person and online events and managing a robust repository of accessible resources for improving youth work practice, YouthREX also led several community-based research projects. The OYC data collection phase, conducted between late 2021 and early 2022, utilized a mixed-methods approach to assess the structural conditions of youth work, with a particular focus on funding dynamics, labor conditions, the impact of the global pandemic (at the time), and personal and professional perspectives on the work and sector. While there was a significant component of the research project that collected data from youth regarding their experience and sense of wellbeing, this dissertation only analyzes a subset of qualitative data from youth workers. In particular, this study examines interview transcripts from twenty-five full-time frontline youth workers based in Central Ontario. Each participant had at least one year of experience, ensuring that interview participants were able to speak from experiences grounded in practice within a localized context. Through reflexive thematic analysis, this study explores how youth workers describe the principles that guide their practice through their experiences within the sector. By examining how youth workers articulated the rewards, challenges and unique experiences of their work and the personal and professional implications of engaging in this vocation, numerous themes were identified pertaining to the principles of critical youth work and the factors that enable or disable the exercise of these values.

Research Questions

This study is based on two points of inquiry. The first question investigates how youth workers enact the core values and principles of critical engagement into their practice, focusing on how they engage in reflexive and transformative actions. Given the context of the youth sector within neoliberal frameworks, more research is needed to explore the benefits of critical practice and how it can be enabled more effectively. Frontline youth workers prioritize relational

engagement and holistic support as central to their practice. Recognizing these ethical efforts are difficult to quantify and measure with standard evaluation tools, and the “soft” skills and less visible work that is being done to build reciprocity with youth and community are often unaccounted for in the purview of funders, administrators and policy developers (Fyfe & Mackie, 2024; Morgan et al., 2008; Perkins et al., 2013; Williamson, 2011), the purpose of the study is to examine and listen to the lived experience of participants. By focusing on how youth workers define and enact critical engagement, this research process problematizes the potential misalignment between frontline values and systemic prescriptions that shape youth work practice. By way of examining how youth workers attempt to sustain their ethical and ideological convictions within professional environments that may have alternative allegiances, the desired significance of the study is to strengthen the professional conditions for youth workers while driving improved outcomes for the employer and community at large as well.

The second research question examines the interpersonal and institutional factors that either support or obstruct critical youth work practice in Ontario. This investigation surveys workplace conditions, relationships, constraints, and broader policy and economic frameworks affecting the ability of youth workers to engage in justice-oriented practice. While some organizational environments may create opportunities for relational and advocacy-based approaches, others may impose bureaucratic restraints that limit reflexive capacity (Baines et al., 2011; Karabanow, 1999). This research considers how systemic circumstances, (including funding requirements, policy directives, and neoliberal ideologies) impact the sector and youth workers on the individual, interpersonal, institutional levels. By determining supportive and obstructive factors from the perspective of frontline practitioners, the sector has an opportunity to improve the harmony (or “praxis”) between policy, theory, practice, and program reflexive development.

This study presents the findings through an interpretive analysis of Reflexive Thematic Analysis to advance understandings of the theory and practices that undergird critical youth work. Ultimately, this research includes and extends discussions of labour conditions, institutional ethics, sustainable economics, and ideological tensions that exist within Ontario's youth work, suggesting a more ethical (inclusive and equitable) and critical praxis from all youth sector stakeholders, especially those in positions of affluence and accountability.

Researcher Positionality

This dissertation is deeply informed by my personal, professional, and political trajectory within the youth sector, spanning over two decades. My experiences navigating this sector, moving from youth participant to youth-led initiatives, to contracted professional, to frontline worker, and ultimately into capacity-building, community education, and research, have shaped my understanding of the structural contradictions, power imbalances, and precarity that define youth work in Central Ontario. These lived experiences have provided me with a layered perspective on how systemic constraints obstruct critical youth work while simultaneously demanding deep relational engagement from practitioners.

A fundamental component of this research is its use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as developed by Braun and Clarke, ensuring that youth worker voices remain central without being overshadowed by researcher interpretations or pre-imposed theoretical frameworks (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2023, 2024). RTA is distinct in its explicit embrace of researcher subjectivity, requiring critical engagement and denying assumptions of neutrality. While bracketing, a concept rooted in phenomenological approaches is useful in recognizing and working through preconceptions, this research does not assume that researchers can fully separate themselves from the subject matter. Instead, qualitative inquiry demands an intentional process where the quality of engagement and the richness of data are central to knowledge

production, social reflection, and progression. For this reason, my experience as a youth program participant, peer-mentor, frontline youth worker, and youth work educator is leveraged in this work to supplement the theoretical and analytical contexts with examples from lived experience. The conviction of advocating for more academic exploration of critical youth work studies that centers youth worker experience (without excluding youth voice) is needed to improve both the outcomes and the process of youth engagement. Though I am not currently practicing youth work full-time and I acknowledge that the field of youth work is incredibly diverse and always shifting, my passion invested in deconstructing these experiences fuel an interest to prioritize the voices and experiences of other youth workers and to combat the siloing of youth worker concerns through a sociological and social justice-oriented analysis that is grounded in critical theory and reflexive practice.

Navigating the Youth Work Sector in Central Ontario

My earliest engagement with youth work began as a participant in youth programs in Toronto's urban center, where I experienced firsthand the benefits and barriers that accompany youth work. My involvement extended beyond participation as I became active in youth-led initiatives and community-based advocacy, providing an early understanding of youth agency, relational engagement, and the necessity of community-driven approaches. As a Black male navigating systemic exclusion, my experiences with youth services, peer mentorship, and community engagement were shaped by discourses of risk, resilience, and opportunity. The ways racialized and low-income youth are positioned within institutional narratives of success and failure profoundly influenced my perspective on the structural and ideological constraints that shape youth work practice. Racialized youth are constantly framed as being "at risk" of becoming violent and socially disconnected, without regard to the disproportionate tokenism, exploitation, alienation, low expectations, and chronic marginalization in industries of education,

employment and entertainment that they frequently encounter. With the added pressure of classism, youth who lack material and social capital in addition to ageism and social discrimination are met with attempts to contain and control through formal regulation, “pacification” and social policing. (Emslie, 2019). For youth workers who push back against these deficit framings, who may be experiencing these social tensions in their own lives, there are additional layers and risks of feeling tokenized by being hired for front-facing activities but finding that there are barriers to their career mobility and authority.

During these early experiences in youth work where my experience as a young participant led me to engaging in more youth-led community-based initiatives, I began pursuing academic training in sociology, Caribbean studies, and social justice education. These academic exercises provided me with theoretical tools to critically assess colonialism, capitalism, and their systemic legacies within the youth sector, which I in turn used to reflect on my own experiences. It was helpful to understand how my experiences were not necessarily isolated, but a part of a broader structural condition. After a decade of being involved in youth-centred programming as a participant (which ranged from participating in an inner-city youth Olympic-style rowing crew where I became an assistant coach for youth and adults, to supporting community organizing based on themes of anti-violence and university access) and as a community-educator (partnering with programs as a trainer and consultant to deliver media arts projects across a number of neighbourhoods in Toronto), I took on a full-time role as a frontline youth worker which lasted for three years. In this role, I led a media arts training program and leadership development program in community-based settings, open-custody detention centres and schools, where I witnessed and experienced firsthand a number of structural contradictions embedded in youth work institutions. The mission of the program was to reduce instances of youth violence by involving young people in leadership training and supporting their self-advocacy efforts through

photography and video production. However, the violence prevention model did not attempt to meaningfully address (or even name) the structural factors that compound the interpersonal dynamics of violence.

In many instances, I witnessed a divide between the largely racializing and younger frontline staff, those responsible for recruiting and maintaining youth participation, and the largely Caucasian administrative staff and board members who worked to satisfy the economic and regulatory needs of the program. In an extreme way, within a simplified and mechanistic framing of youth programs, young people can almost be regarded as the “currency” that keeps the sector running. In this sense, the program’s existential narrative necessitates youth engagement to showcase the success of interventions that promote the public good from a mostly administrative perspective. Programs are therefore funded to address the perils of problematic and pathologized people who are draining society of fiscal reassurance and civic order, which in turn justifies a fluctuating (but minimal) investment in programs and labourers to intervene by promoting prosocial behaviour and institutional conformity to better enable career viability. If this were the job description for a youth worker post, it is doubtful that those who would apply would be invested in critical approaches to their work. For youth workers who find themselves encountering these market-driven priorities which clash with their value-inspired vocations, a great sense of demoralization may emerge (Jones, 2001). Since the “heart work” which inspires and motivates much of the rapport between youth and youth workers is not typically well integrated into the operational function of some programs, particularly the larger non-grassroots organizations, critical youth workers must be aware of these tensions and intentional about their approaches to navigating them in ways that reduces harm to youth, communities and themselves (De St Croix, 2022).

As a former frontline youth worker, the lack of critical awareness and sensitivity that I perceived from members of organizational leadership and the board of directors that I worked with often produces disconnection and fostered distrust. Likewise, I imagined that youth workers had a low amount of trust and regard from those in more affluent positions, evidenced by the fact that youth and youth workers were not involved in conversations pertaining to strategic planning or program development beyond “mining” and appropriating creative ideas. While interpersonal rapport between all stakeholders was largely amicable in my network, and I believe that most if not all actors believed that their intentions were well-meaning, it was the lack of critical awareness in regard to how their actions could be harmful that caused much of my distress. As youth and youth workers exercised critical agency to navigate the challenging social circumstances, those informing policy, funding and administration often (not exclusively) did not perceive how their theory and actions were disconnected and at times dysfunctional. This dynamic often created an “us versus them” dynamic between the frontline and those who were in more affluent positions, at least on a political level. On a socio-political level, it seemed that critical youth workers needed to always consider ways to “protect” the young people from the potential harm coming from the organization itself. These exploitative measures of institutional harm might include: the leveraging of traumatic stories from participants to elicit sympathy for potential funders; involving young people in “youth-led” initiatives and board meetings primarily to fulfill regulatory youth engagement criteria; utilizing innovation from participants without credit or compensation, essentializing participants as being “at-risk” and enabling deficit frameworks to be applied to their communities (this shows up in language and actions, regardless of patronizing attempts to acknowledge community empowerment); spending the least amount of money on youth (food, equipment, minimal honorariums) which indirectly communicates a message of devaluation and dependency; and failing to acknowledge how organizations can be

complicit in inequitable structures with a commitment to be accountable. These instances of harm echo epochs of economic exploitation and simultaneously exercise an experience of ethical violence, a violation of one's sense of integrity.

The great work, joy, and friendships that transpire within youth programs between all stakeholders is precious, but these beneficial components do not negate structural conditions and pressures that undermine the sector from reaching a higher potential in equity and ethics. In still too many cases, grant writers and administrators feel pressure to pedal the impoverishment, disposition and “risk” of youth to acquire funding, as managers feel pressured to collect evidence to “prove” program success according to the metrics defined by individuals outside of services and community. The mission drift occurring from organizations who are shifting their program's mandates to qualify for funding is an admonishment on the funding structures and policy pressures that create competitive, reductive and non-communally oriented solutions to structural challenges faced by communities. The work of negotiating these socio-political dynamics is in addition to the components of pre-existing workplace challenges, whereby youth workers figuratively and literally become human resources, with limited time to rest, heal, celebrate, and grieve depending on admiring allowances. For youth workers who may invest more of their personal time connecting with youth to shore up relational support, the personal and emotional efforts are often unseen, unrecorded and frequently disregarded from an institutional purview.

There is also the need to better balance professional conduct and appropriate oversight to protect young people while making room for nurturing connections between intersectional identities that can strengthen youth experiences through cultural and interpersonal bonds. By acknowledging the personal, emotional and relational labour of frontline workers offer, the restrictions on their engagement practices should be framed as helpful strategies that serve the interests of all stakeholders without ignoring practices of genuine care. Youth worker may be

restricted in the amount of honorarium or transportation tokens that they can provide for young people but simultaneously witnessing some organizations having no qualms about spending money on guest speakers, redundant research reports or fundraising galas to largely fund salaries of employees that reside outside of the communities they serve can produce questions of moral uncertainty. The framing of the “Non-Profit Industrial Complex” which will be explored in the third chapter refers to the economic devaluation of community and the disregard shown towards the knowledge that they hold and the ways they calculate the contributions of organizations.

While this study is not based on my own experiences of disposition in the youth sector or my personal experiences of social discrimination, I do resonate with the content and contexts of the participant’s interviews. In my earliest drafting of this dissertation, I began with theorizing the neocolonial implications of neoliberalism in a backwards youth sector, eventually realizing that while the concerns and frustrations that I experienced and that I continue to hear about from frontline workers is lamentable, this research project provides an opportunity to have a moral and ethical “check” on my own presumptions, by making a concerted effort to center the voice of youth workers and refrain from the temptation of delving into theoretical abstraction in this academic exercise. Ironically, as this research advocates for prioritizing frontline youth worker voice, it could easily transgress this responsibility by instead using youth worker voice in an attempt to validate my own worldview. While my interpretation of the interviews is certainly informed by my personal and political leanings, in my consistent reflection throughout the various revisions and reframing of this dissertation, I engaged in a process of (re)learning and began to imagine ways that the observations from this study could constructively apply to transformative opportunities in addition to discursive frameworks.

Though my work in the frontlines was deeply fulfilling, rooted in relational care and advocacy, I became increasingly discouraged by precarious labor conditions, exploitative

funding structures, and institutional pressures that prioritized funding over the fundamentals of humanism. A particularly revealing moment was when a contracted coworker's employment was expected to be renewed, but he was only informed of the decision to not extend his contract after the completion of his well-attended youth project. This practice, which is common in precarious youth work, deprived him of the ability to seek new career opportunities in time to sustain himself, reinforcing the violence of job insecurity and the systemic disposability of frontline workers (Clements, 2012). Around the same time, youth participants were suddenly pulled out of the program that I was leading to attend a fundraising activity without any warning, which led to an emotional disruption given the importance of the weekly youth session finally resuming after a camping activity has separated members of the group.

The disregard for my colleague's job stability while utilizing their talent and relationship with the youth to achieve a "successful" end to their program, while compromising the emotional reunion for youth participants for a fundraising instance without any collaboration with frontline staff stoked the unsettling tensions that I felt and navigated daily, even amidst the moments of laughter and excitement. These contradictions became increasingly untenable. The expectation that I would remain complicit in these practices, prioritizing institutional sustainability over the well-being of young people and the dignity of workers, created a profound moral dilemma. At this point, I resigned from the organization and eventually explore an opportunity as a research assistant with brand new initiative called the Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX), a provincially funded initiative (with the head office housed at York University) to provide free knowledge mobilization, capacity building and program evolution services to grassroots programs across Ontario, in partnership with academic and community-based partners.

Engaging in Capacity-Building and Systemic Advocacy

My decision to leave the sector in a full-time capacity was exclusively due to ethical incompatibility with the organization and my inability to fulfill that role while having the best interests of community in mind. This is a juncture I have come across more than once in various careers across the social services, and in this field of youth work, approximately 20 years since the inception of my community-based work, I continue a journey of conceptualization and learning as critical questions and discourse about our social conditions, struggles and hope persist. Following my full-time frontline youth work experience from 2011 – 2014, in early 2015, the YouthREX project provided a space to continue my communal and critical engagement for the next ten years, as the focus shifted from contributing to the regulation of program evaluation in Ontario (the initial focus of the Government project) to expanding shared knowledge and education grounded in equity and critical practice; until the government decided to discontinue funding in 2025.

At YouthREX, I worked to support youth workers through training, research, and systemic advocacy, engaging in projects that examined sectoral challenges and sought to amplify youth worker perspectives. My work included facilitating the Critical Youth Work Certificate across various cities in Ontario over the course of 5 years, contributing to community-based research through initiatives including "Beyond Measure" and "This is Youth Work" (Anucha et al., 2018), and delivering specialized training on social justice and equity frameworks. These experiences reinforced my understanding of how youth workers attempt to sustain critical engagement despite systemic constraints, deepening my commitment to examining the broader social, political, and economic forces that structure youth work in Central Ontario. Through direct engagement with frontline practitioners, organizational leaders, policymakers, and funders, I gained a comprehensive understanding of how power dynamics within the sector marginalize

youth workers, even as their labor remains central to service provision. These contradictions underscored the need for a critical interrogation of how youth work is structured, funded, and governed, ensuring that worker voices inform discussions on policy and practice reform.

Political Commitments, Advocacy, and Systemic Tensions

Beyond the professional and practical dimensions of my work, this research is also shaped by my political commitments to advocacy and systemic change. The tension between community-based youth work and the structural constraints imposed by nonprofit and academic institutions has been an ongoing source of moral distress and cognitive dissonance, especially when attempting to align social justice values with bureaucratic demands for efficiency and compliance. Throughout my career, I have found myself negotiating between loyalty to community-based advocacy and the demands of organizations that prioritize sustainability over meaningful engagement. These experiences have reinforced the importance of critical reflexivity, ensuring that my positionality is transparent and that my role as a researcher does not overshadow or distort the voices of the youth workers engaged in this study. The "This is Youth Work" project (Anucha et al., 2018) exemplified many of these contradictions, revealing how youth workers experience systemic pressures, institutional constraints, and ideological dissonance in their professional lives. This dissertation extends that conversation, offering an analysis that connects youth worker experiences to broader critiques of neoliberal governance, precarious labor, and systemic violence. By engaging in critical reflection and transparency, this study seeks to contribute to discussions about how youth work can be transformed to better align with the commitments of those who engage in the field. This dissertation interrogates the contradictions within the sector while simultaneously considering the possibilities for reimagining the youth sector in ways that center equity, ethics, and sustainability.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation contains eight chapters, each contributing to an in-depth exploration of systemic challenges, contradictions, and possibilities within the youth work sector. The current chapter has established the groundwork for a critical examination of youth work in Central Ontario, analyzing the ways systemic conditions either sustain or obstruct critical youth work practice. The second chapter provides a comprehensive review of literature on youth work, focusing on theoretical, historical, and policy-driven analyses of the field. The chapter defines youth work and the role of youth workers, acknowledging the contested nature of these definitions and the evolving discourse on professionalization, relational engagement, and social justice in practice. A key focus of this chapter is the impact of neoliberal policies and ideologies on youth work, exploring how market-driven principles, managerial oversight, and funding instability have reshaped the sector.

The third chapter explores the development and expansion of the Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC) as a framework for understanding the entrenchment of neoliberal logic within social service sectors, including youth work. This chapter also examines structural violence as theorized by Johan Galtung (1969), analyzing how systemic conditions in the youth sector perpetuate harm even in the absence of direct coercion. It further engages Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, exploring how his critiques of education and empowerment frameworks can be applied to youth work practice, particularly in relation to the themes of support and obstacles that workers encounter in their critical engagements.

The fourth chapter outlines the qualitative research methodology used in this study, detailing the design, participant recruitment, and data collection process. This research employs Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to systematically analyze interview transcripts from 25 full-time youth workers in Central Ontario, ensuring that the findings remain grounded in the lived experiences of practitioners while engaging with broader structural critiques. The fifth chapter

examines the core values that youth workers associate with critical youth work practice, including relational engagement, advocacy, and the ethics of care.

The sixth chapter presents the factors that sustain critical youth work practice. This chapter explores relational, advocacy-driven, and transformative practice, highlighting key supportive factors that support justice-oriented work. The seventh chapter critically engages with the obstructive factors identified by participants, analyzing how the experiences of youth workers intersect with broader systemic forces. This chapter provide a structured discussion of key tensions, contradictions, and ideological conflicts within the youth work sector. The eighth chapter explores the broader implications of the findings and offering recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. This chapter presents actionable strategies for addressing the systemic challenges identified in previous chapters, including policy interventions, organizational strategies, and advocacy directions aimed at sustaining critical youth work. The recommendations ensure that they are not isolated to theoretical proposals but grounded in the lived realities and insights of youth workers. This chapter concludes with a reflection on a poem by Jermaine Henry, using artistic expression to reinforce the themes of relational engagement, systemic resistance, and social justice that run throughout this dissertation. This study provides a conceptual model for reimagining the youth sector and advocates for a greater commitment to equity, care, and transformational impact by promoting discourse, policy development and strategic practices that support and sustain critical youth work.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Limitations in Current Literature

This chapter undertakes a comprehensive literature review to contextualize the study, exploring the multifaceted landscape of youth work and the systemic challenges confronting frontline practitioners, particularly within Ontario's evolving social service sector. By critically synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarship, this review identifies key themes, ongoing debates, and significant gaps in existing research, providing the necessary groundwork to position this study within the broader discourse on critical youth work praxis. The chapter is structured around three interconnected areas of inquiry, each addressing a critical dimension of the study.

First, it examines the historical development and diverse conceptualizations of youth work, both internationally and within Canada, tracing its ideological foundations and evolution within welfare state policies, nonprofit structures, and grassroots activism (Batsleer et al., 2020; De St Croix, 2018). Special attention is given to the emergence of critical youth work, which foregrounds relational practice, social justice, and youth empowerment as essential principles. This distinction is crucial, as it differentiates youth work as a professionalized social service function from critical youth work as a site of resistance to systemic inequities, recognizing that young people are not “clients” or “cases” but active agents of change, just as youth workers should not be structurally invisible as interchangeable service providers (Davies, 2005; Sapin, 2008).

Second, the chapter explores neoliberalism's impact on the youth sector, investigating how market-driven policies have restructured funding, working conditions, and professional identities, often undermining the transformative goals of critical practice (Baines, 2010a; De St Croix & Doherty, 2022). This discussion considers how privatization, standardization, and performance metrics have reshaped youth work, often forcing practitioners to navigate

contradictory institutional demands that prioritize efficiency over relational integrity (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014; Kwon, 2013). The literature will probe the ideological tensions between neoliberal managerialism and critical youth work praxis, particularly in relation to Ontario's policy landscape, where youth work remains precariously positioned between state intervention, nonprofit advocacy, and community-based resistance (Anucha et al., 2015).

Finally, the chapter integrates comparative insights from related care professions, including social work, early childhood education, and nursing, to illuminate cross-sectoral patterns of moral distress, workforce precarity, and the erosion of professional autonomy within the broader Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC) (Banerjee et al., 2015; Cortis & Eastman, 2015). These comparisons reveal common struggles across human services, such as the emotional toll of care labor, systemic undervaluation of relational work, and increasing pressures of bureaucratic accountability (Savicki, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020). Examining youth work within this broader care economy framework situates its challenges within a larger critique of industrialized service models, reinforcing the need for systemic change that prioritizes humanization over commodification.

By critically analyzing these themes, this chapter demonstrates that, despite a growing body of literature on youth work and its challenges, a significant gap remains concerning the specific supportive and obstructive factors encountered by frontline youth workers engaged in critical youth work practice in Ontario. Moreover, existing research often lacks explicit theoretical linkages, failing to adequately connect youth worker experiences with critical social theory, structural violence, and decolonial thought (Freire, 1970/2000; Galtung & Fischer, 2013). Addressing this gap, this study seeks to center youth worker voices, ensuring that their expertise and lived experiences are neither ignored, tokenized, nor subsumed within institutional discourses that depoliticize their struggles (Skinner, 2013). This review will lay the theoretical

foundation for the subsequent chapters, informing both the methodological approach and empirical findings by weaving together historical context, critical frameworks, and contemporary sectoral realities. Ultimately, it will underscore the urgent need for a reimagined, justice-oriented, and structurally supported model of youth work that resists the encroachments of neoliberal austerity and institutional complacency, advocating instead for a transformative praxis that reclaims the radical potential of the field.

Historicizing and “Defining” Youth Work

Defining Youth Work

Youth work is an inherently complex, contested, and multifaceted field, shaped by historical, political, and socio-economic forces that influence both its practice and professionalization. It encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, settings, and approaches, making a singular, universally accepted definition difficult to establish (Batsleer et al., 2020). However, at its core, youth work is understood as a practice that supports young people’s holistic development, addressing their personal, social, and educational needs while fostering agency, empowerment, and critical engagement with their communities and broader society (Davies, 2005; Sapin, 2008). A defining characteristic of youth work and a key distinction from formal education and social services is its voluntary nature (Sercombe, 1997). Unlike school-based learning or compulsory social interventions, youth work is predicated on voluntary participation, ensuring that young people engage in services by choice, not coercion (Mason, 2015; Rannala et al., 2024). This autonomy is essential to its relational and community-based ethos, which prioritizes authentic engagement, co-learning, and mutual respect between youth workers and young people (Jennings et al., 2006; Trimmer-Platman, 2014).

Moreover, youth work is relational and reflexive, emphasizing trust, rapport, and collaboration over hierarchical, service-driven interactions. Practitioners are often positioned as

mentors, facilitators, and advocates, helping young people navigate social, economic, and institutional barriers while fostering leadership, critical consciousness, and community participation (Borden et al., 2020; Hlagala & M. Dichaba, 2018). This relational focus distinguishes youth work from bureaucratic service models, which tend to prioritize intervention over collaboration and metrics over meaning (Powell & Steinberg, 2006a). In addition to empowerment and relationality, context responsiveness is a crucial feature of youth work. Unlike rigid, one-size-fits-all approaches, youth work is highly adaptive, shaped by local needs, socio-political realities, and cultural specificities (Powney et al., 1997). Literature emphasizes the utility in understanding youth work as a constellation of practices, values, and commitments united by a shared commitment to young people's well-being and social justice (Fyfe & Mackie, 2024; McMahon et al., 2024; Walker, 2003).

Despite this flexibility and adaptability, youth work has faced increasing standardization and bureaucratization, particularly under neoliberal governance models (Bessant & Emslie, 2014; De St Croix & Doherty, 2022). These forces have narrowed the scope of youth work, often reducing it to policy-driven interventions, employment preparation, and risk management, failing to recognize its broader role as a site of social transformation and collective empowerment (Kwon, 2013; Skinner, 2013). These tensions underscore the need to reclaim critical youth work praxis, ensuring that its historically grounded commitments to relationality, justice, and humanization are not eroded by bureaucratic rationalization and market-driven imperatives (Baldrige, 2020b; Renick et al., 2021).

The Evolution of Youth Work

Understanding contemporary youth work necessitates an engagement with its historical trajectory, as it has been shaped by colonial legacies, industrialization, social control agendas, and grassroots movements for justice (Barwick, 2006; Sutcliffe & Cooper, 2024). While

intergenerational mentorship and informal youth support systems have existed across cultures for millennia, modern youth work emerged in response to the socio-economic upheavals of the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly as industrialization, urbanization, and migration transformed the social landscape (Belton, 2009; Welshman, 1999). During the early industrial period, rapid urbanization and shifts in labor markets disrupted traditional family structures and intergenerational socialization, leading to the emergence of working-class youth cultures that were often criminalized and pathologized by state authorities (Powney et al., 1997; M. K. Smith & Erina Doyle, 2002). In response, philanthropic organizations, religious institutions, and social reform movements sought to intervene in the lives of young people, framing them as either potential citizens in need of moral guidance or threats to social order requiring containment (Powell & Steinberg, 2006a; Sutcliffe & Cooper, 2024).

Institutions such as the YMCA, Boys' and Girls' Clubs, and settlement houses played a pivotal role in shaping early youth work, introducing recreational programs, vocational training, and moral instruction designed to socialize young people into mainstream economic and civic life (V. Bowie, 2005; M. K. Smith & Erina Doyle, 2002). However, these initiatives were often deeply racialized and class-based, reinforcing assimilationist agendas and positioning marginalized youth, particularly racialized and immigrant youth, as subjects in need of reform and not agents of transformation (Ahmed & Carpenter, 2017). The post-war era saw a significant shift in youth work, particularly with the publication of the Albemarle Report (1960) in the UK, which recognized youth work as a legitimate professional field within the welfare state (M. K. Smith & Erina Doyle, 2002; Trimmer-Platman, 2014). This moment marked the expansion of state-funded youth services, elevating youth work's status but also introducing new tensions regarding professionalization, bureaucratization, and the balance between state control and grassroots autonomy (Powney et al., 1997; Seal, 2019).

In Canada, youth work remained fragmented, often falling under the jurisdiction of nonprofits, municipal initiatives, and faith-based organizations that often fall outside of state-sponsored welfare programs (Anucha et al., 2015). Ontario's policy landscape has reflected this tension, as successive governments have oscillated between funding expansions and austerity-driven retrenchment, leading to a precarious and under-resourced youth work sector (Baines, 2010a; Evans & Shields, 2014). The rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s marked a fundamental restructuring of youth work, as market-driven logics, competitive funding models, and performance-based evaluation metrics replaced earlier commitments to universal access, community-building, and relational care (De St Croix, 2018; Harvey, 2005). This shift reduced youth work's autonomy, pushing it further into the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC) and limiting its ability to function as a site of critical resistance against social injustice (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; Kwon, 2013). Despite these structural constraints, youth work has also been a space of contestation and transformation, particularly through youth-led movements, anti-racist organizing, and alternative educational initiatives (Wilson et al., 2020). Contemporary critical youth work practitioners continue to challenge the sector's complicity in neoliberal and colonial frameworks, advocating instead for a relational, justice-oriented, and humanizing approach that resists the coercive imperatives of managerialism, standardization, and depoliticization (McMahon et al., 2024).

Understanding Critical Youth Work

Critical youth work has emerged as a distinct and necessary counterpoint to traditional models of youth engagement, foregrounding an explicit commitment to social justice, anti-oppressive practice, and systemic transformation (Baldrige et al., 2017; Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013; Moris & Loopmans, 2019). In contrast to conventional approaches, which often prioritize individual adjustment, risk mitigation, and employability outcomes, critical youth work

recognizes that young people's struggles are structurally produced and politically conditioned (Jennings et al., 2006). Defying neoliberal frameworks that individualize social problems, critical youth work asserts that youth development cannot be meaningfully separated from broader issues of racial, economic, and social justice (Baldrige, 2020a). This section situates critical youth work within its historical and theoretical foundations, distinguishing it from standardized, depoliticized service models and illustrating how it functions as both a practice and a philosophy that seeks to bridge the gap between youth work, grassroots activism, and transformative education (De St Croix, 2018). By exploring its core principles, alignment with critical pedagogy, and ongoing tensions within neoliberal social services, this chapter underscores both the radical potential and the institutional challenges that define critical youth work in contemporary practice.

Defining Critical Youth Work

While youth work is often framed as a neutral practice of mentorship, skill-building, and engagement, critical youth work disrupts this presumption, highlighting the inherent political nature of working with young people (McMahon et al., 2024). Many dominant models of youth work operate within a risk-based paradigm, treating marginalized youth as problems to be managed instead of individuals embedded within inequitable society. By contrast, critical youth work challenges the notion that young people's "problems" originate solely from their personal circumstances, instead deconstructing how systemic inequalities, including racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and gendered violence, shape their lived experiences (Baldrige, 2020a). This critique is particularly urgent within the neoliberal social service landscape, where youth work has increasingly been co-opted by managerialism and performance-driven funding models (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014). Many youth-serving organizations operate under restrictive grant

conditions, which often dictate which youth are served, what interventions are prioritized, and how success is measured (Baines, 2010b; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007).

As a result, youth work often becomes a site of bureaucratic control rather than relational engagement, where workers are expected to meet institutional targets in lieu of facilitating transformative relationships. Critical youth work rejects this reductionist model, instead positioning itself as an emancipatory practice that centers youth agency, grassroots knowledge, and the dismantling of systemic oppression. In doing so, it aligns with broader anti-racist, feminist, and decolonial struggles, recognizing that youth work is committed to guiding young people toward stability and equipping them (in cooperative ways) to challenge the conditions that create instability in the first place (Moris & Loopmans, 2019).

Core Principles of Critical Youth Work

Critical youth work is guided by principles that distinguish it from standardized, interventionist models of youth services. Informed by an awareness of systemic inequities, this approach resists reductive frameworks that focus solely on individual behavior modification or economic integration while neglecting the larger structures that shape young people's lives. Instead, it emphasizes relational engagement, political consciousness, and a commitment to practice that is deeply embedded within the lived realities of the communities it serves. These principles ensure that critical youth work does not replicate the very power imbalances it seeks to challenge but instead fosters relationships and spaces where young people are recognized as central actors in shaping the world around them.

Relational and Reflexive Engagement. At the heart of critical youth work is a commitment to relationships built on trust, reciprocity, and mutual accountability. Unlike programs that situate professionals as authoritative figures imparting knowledge or guidance, this approach positions practitioners as co-learners, working alongside young people in ways that

recognize their agency, expertise, and lived experiences. Relational engagement extends beyond establishing rapport or being approachable; it is a fundamental ethic of practice that ensures youth work remains dynamic, responsive, and accountable to the individuals and communities involved (Ord, 2016; Trimmer-Platman, 2014). A key aspect of this relational approach is reflexivity, the ongoing practice of critically assessing one's own position within systems of power and the ways these structures influence interactions with young people. Reflexive practitioners acknowledge that their presence in youth spaces is not neutral; it is shaped by their backgrounds, privileges, and institutional affiliations, all of which affect how they are perceived and how they engage with young people's realities. Rather than assuming a detached or impartial stance, critical youth work demands an awareness of how power operates within these relationships, requiring practitioners to remain open to learning, adjusting, and being accountable to the youth they work with (Jennings et al., 2006; McMahon et al., 2024). This approach ensures that youth work is not reduced to service provision but remains a practice of solidarity, one that resists the impulse to manage or contain young people and instead supports them in shaping their own pathways, decisions, and futures.

Structural and Anti-Oppressive Analysis. A distinguishing feature of critical youth work is its insistence that young people's challenges must be understood in relation to the broader systems that shape their lives. This approach recognizes that racial, economic, and social inequalities are not incidental, but structural realities that influence access to resources, opportunities, and personal well-being. Without this lens, youth work risks reinforcing individualized narratives that hold young people responsible for navigating systems that were never designed with their full participation in mind. Where mainstream models often emphasize personal resilience, skill-building, or employability as markers of success, critical youth work interrogates why certain youth face greater barriers to stability and recognition. It resists

narratives that position young people as "at-risk" in ways that obscure the real risks posed by punitive social policies, racialized surveillance, and economic disenfranchisement. The role of the practitioner, while centered on helping youth navigate challenging systems, includes an opportunity to expose and challenge the conditions that necessitate adaptation in the first place.

Through political education, advocacy, and critical dialogue, young people are supported in making sense of their experiences within the context of broader struggles for justice and equity (Moris & Loopmans, 2019). This approach also demands a reckoning with the ways youth work itself can reproduce harm, particularly when tied to institutions that impose conditions on participation, restrict access to services, or coerce young people into compliance with state policies that do not serve their best interests. Critical youth work remains vigilant against these tendencies, continuously assessing whether the structures it operates within enable true empowerment or simply reinforce cycles of marginalization under the guise of care.

Community-Embedded and Context-Specific Praxis. While many programs rely on standardized models that aim to be universally applicable, critical youth work insists that effective engagement must be shaped by the unique social, political, and cultural realities of the communities it serves. Programs that prioritize consistency over context often fail to recognize the diversity of young people's experiences, imposing solutions that are out of step with their actual needs. A community-embedded approach rejects one-size-fits-all interventions, instead prioritizing relationships, local knowledge, and youth-led responses to the issues that affect them most directly (Lewis-Charp et al., 2006). This commitment to contextual practice also challenges the external imposition of "best practices" that originate in academic or institutional spaces detached from the communities in question. Rather than assuming that successful programs in one setting can be replicated elsewhere without adaptation, critical youth work values co-created solutions that emerge from the lived experiences of those most directly impacted. This approach

emphasizes adaptability and humility, recognizing that the most effective interventions are often those that grow organically from youth leadership and community collaboration (Renick et al., 2021). Rather than directing young people toward pre-established pathways of success, often defined by professional or institutional standards, this model of youth work affirms self-determined futures. Whether this takes the form of grassroots organizing, artistic expression, policy advocacy, or entrepreneurial endeavors, the goal is to support young people in building meaningful connections and strategies that reflect their own aspirations and collective priorities.

Transformation over Compliance. The final principle of critical youth work is a commitment to transformation that extends beyond individual growth to include systemic change. Many youth programs, particularly those operating within the nonprofit and public sectors, function within a framework of compliance, where success is defined by a young person's ability to meet external benchmarks, whether academic achievement, job readiness, or social conformity. While these markers may be relevant for some, they fail to account for the deeper changes necessary to create a world where youth do not need to prove their worth or legitimacy to access basic rights and resources (Jennings et al., 2006). Transformation in this sense is not about young people adjusting to the demands placed upon them but about shifting the conditions that make survival so precarious in the first place.

This includes challenging policies that criminalize racialized youth, interrogating the economic conditions that leave young people vulnerable to exploitation, and resisting institutional gatekeeping that limits access to decision-making power. It also means pushing against the constraints placed on youth work itself, where funding structures, bureaucratic oversight, and political considerations often undermine the very work practitioners seek to do. A commitment to transformation requires practitioners to remain clear-eyed about the tensions and contradictions within the sector. Many organizations claim a social justice mandate while

operating within systems that prioritize efficiency over care, risk management over relationship-building, and productivity over well-being. Critical youth work does not ignore these realities but actively works to shift them, advocating for more equitable models of funding, governance, and accountability that place youth, not institutional stability, at the center. This principle also extends to youth workers themselves, who often experience precarity, emotional exhaustion, and ethical strain as they attempt to balance professional responsibilities with their own commitments to justice. A truly transformative approach to youth work recognizes that practitioners, like the young people they work with, deserve conditions that honor their labor, protect their well-being, and support their ability to engage in the work in a sustainable way.

Critical Pedagogy and the Foundations of Critical Youth Work

The core principles of critical youth work are not static. By design, these principles require ongoing reflection and adaptation, shaped by the realities of the young people and communities involved. As outlined in the previous section, critical youth work resists prescriptive frameworks that impose a singular model of engagement, instead embracing an approach that remains dynamic, context-specific, and accountable. This flexibility ensures that youth work does not become rigid or formulaic but remains an evolving practice that responds to emerging challenges and shifting social conditions (Ord, 2016; Trimmer-Platman, 2014). The very nature of critical practice demands a willingness to engage in continuous questioning, not as an act of rejection or disengagement, but as a constructive process of refining and deepening approaches to youth engagement.

This emphasis on reflexivity and co-created practice aligns with the theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy, particularly the work of Paulo Freire, who argued that education is never neutral but always serves either to reinforce or to challenge systems of oppression (Freire, 1970/2000). Freire's critique of the banking model of education, where

knowledge is deposited into learners as if they are passive recipients rather than active participants, mirrors the limitations of traditional youth service models that position young people as problems to be solved rather than as agents of change (Baldrige, 2020b; Giroux, 2013). A critical pedagogical approach rejects deficit-based interventions that seek to correct young people's behavior or prepare them for economic participation without questioning the conditions that shape their lived experiences. Instead, it affirms that young people bring knowledge, insight, and expertise that must be valued within the process of engagement (Lewis-Charp et al., 2006; Renick et al., 2021).

Freire's concept of praxis, the ongoing cycle of reflection and action, is central to understanding how critical youth work operates as both a process and a practice. Rather than delivering fixed solutions, youth work guided by this perspective prioritizes dialogue, critical inquiry, and the co-construction of strategies that reflect the needs and aspirations of young people themselves. This means that even the guiding principles of critical youth work must be continuously re-examined to ensure they do not become rigid doctrines but instead remain responsive to the realities practitioners and young people encounter (Bamber & Murphy, 1999; Ord, 2016). The most effective interventions emerge not from adherence to external models of best practice but through deep relationships, mutual learning, and a commitment to rethinking approaches in collaboration with those directly affected.

The sectoral landscape in which youth work takes place often does not fully appreciate or support this kind of ongoing reflexivity. Program structures, funding imperatives, and institutional priorities frequently encourage stability, predictability, and adherence to predefined outcomes rather than processes of discovery, questioning, and transformation (Banks, 2010). Youth organizations often find themselves operating in a defensive position due to persistent limitations on resources, competition for funding, and the demand to justify their existence

through narrowly defined success metrics (De St Croix, 2018; Spolander et al., 2014). Within this environment, questioning dominant assumptions can be misinterpreted as unnecessary critique rather than as an essential element of strengthening the work (Baines et al., 2017; Mason, 2015). However, the ability to remain engaged is what sustains the relevance and integrity of youth work, ensuring that it does not become complicit in systems that manage or contain young people rather than exploring co-empowerment with them.

As this study progresses, the experience of youth worker's navigation of these tensions will be explored through the voices of practitioners themselves. Their insights will highlight how the principles of critical youth work are applied, adapted, and at times challenged in practice. There is no singular formula for this work, nor should there be, as critical youth work must be as varied and complex as the communities it serves. The next section will examine the structural challenges that youth workers encounter in sustaining this approach, addressing the contradictions between the commitments of youth work and the realities of the sector. This chapter sets the stage for the findings of this study, while the following chapter will explore the theoretical tools necessary for analyzing the ways youth workers engage with and respond to these structural dynamics in practice.

Challenges to Critical Youth Work

A deep examination of critical youth work within the existing social service sector can produce numerous contradictions, as youth workers and organizations committed to transformative practice must operate within systems that may constrain their work due to competing priorities. These challenges emerge through several key structural and ideological factors. First, funding mechanisms and short-term project cycles may confine program priorities and restrict youth worker autonomy and responsiveness, forcing organizations into compliance with state and philanthropic funding priorities that rarely align with justice-oriented youth work.

Second, the rise of managerialism has institutionalized bureaucratic oversight, performance metrics, and standardized interventions that erode practitioner autonomy and obstruct the deeply relational and context-specific nature of critical practice. Third, youth workers engaging in explicitly political, anti-oppressive, or decolonial approaches often face silencing or professional marginalization, as many organizations remain unwilling to engage in the forms of systemic critique that would jeopardize their access to resources and institutional legitimacy. These challenges do not eliminate the need for critical youth work, rather they shape the conditions under which it must be enacted, requiring youth workers to develop strategies to navigate, subvert, and resist these structural constraints.

Funding constraints represent one of the most pervasive challenges, shaping the financial sustainability of youth programs and the ideological parameters within which youth work is expected to function. Government grants and philanthropic investments increasingly demand measurable, short-term outcomes, reinforcing a preference for interventionist models that emphasize behavioral regulation, risk management, and employment readiness over critical consciousness, political education, or collective organizing (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). The expectation that youth programs provide data-driven proof of impact incentivizes organizations to prioritize funder-approved goals over the evolving and often intangible needs of young people themselves. Programs that focus on structural critiques of inequality or community-led resistance efforts struggle to secure funding in a sector that privileges depoliticized, market-driven solutions to social issues (Spolander et al., 2014). Many youth-serving agencies thus find themselves in a precarious position, forced to balance their commitments to critical practice with the operational necessity of aligning their work with funding mandates that limit the scope of their interventions. The reliance on competitive funding also fosters an environment in which

collaboration between organizations is undermined by the need to compete for limited resources, reinforcing fragmentation rather than collective capacity-building across the sector.

Managerialism further entrenches these constraints, imposing bureaucratic control over youth work in ways that limit practitioner agency and reconfigure the priorities of youth-serving organizations. The demand for standardization, efficiency, and accountability within the nonprofit sector has led to an increase in administrative oversight, performance monitoring, and outcome-based evaluation models that devalue the relational and context-specific nature of critical youth work (Cortis & Eastman, 2015). Youth workers are increasingly expected to document, quantify, and justify their interactions in ways that prioritize funder expectations over the lived realities of the young people they serve. This shift undermines the ability of practitioners to adapt their work in response to community needs, as decision-making authority is centralized within senior management and policy structures that remain disconnected from frontline practice (Pope & Jones, 2011). The rise of evidence-based programming further restricts flexibility, privileging interventions that can be measured through controlled evaluations while sidelining approaches that prioritize storytelling, lived experience, and alternative forms of knowledge production (De St Croix, 2018). These bureaucratic imperatives create a disconnect between the stated goals of youth work and the daily realities of practitioners, many of whom find themselves struggling to reconcile their commitments to justice-oriented practice with the institutional constraints that shape their working conditions.

Within this landscape, youth workers who attempt to engage in explicitly critical, anti-oppressive, or decolonial forms of practice often encounter institutional resistance. Many organizations, particularly those reliant on government contracts and corporate partnerships, avoid work that could be perceived as too radical or too critical of existing power structures. This aversion to politicized practice is often framed as a necessity for maintaining funding and

organizational stability, but in practice, it results in the marginalization of practitioners who seek to integrate discussions of race, colonialism, capitalism, and state violence into their work (Baines, Cunningham, et al., 2014). Youth workers who push against institutional norms may face disciplinary action, social isolation, or professional consequences, particularly if they attempt to organize collectively or challenge internal policies that reinforce managerial control. In some cases, the backlash is subtle, such as the quiet exclusion of certain topics from programming discussions, while in others, it is explicit, with organizations rejecting funding applications, terminating contracts, or severing ties with practitioners who refuse to conform to depoliticized models of youth engagement (Hamilton, 2022). These forms of silencing are not incidental but are a direct consequence of a sector that remains structurally dependent on state and philanthropic investment, both of which are deeply embedded within the very systems of inequality that critical youth work seeks to dismantle.

Despite these constraints, youth workers continue to find ways to sustain critical practice, often through informal networks, grassroots collaborations, and strategic subversions of institutional expectations. Many practitioners operate within what could be described as an “underground curriculum” of youth work, one in which radical conversations, transformative mentorship, and youth-led organizing occur outside of officially sanctioned program structures. Some navigate the sector’s contradictions by leveraging institutional resources for subversive ends, framing politically engaged programming in ways that meet funder criteria while ensuring that the core principles of critical praxis remain intact. Others work to create alternative spaces of engagement, organizing outside of formal institutions to provide young people with access to the kinds of political education and advocacy training that are often absent within mainstream youth programming (Jennings et al., 2006). These strategies illustrate the adaptability and resilience of

critical youth workers, who continue to push against the boundaries of what is institutionally permissible in order to create meaningful spaces for youth empowerment and collective action.

The challenges facing critical youth work are not incidental obstacles, but structural realities embedded within the broader political economy of social services. The very forces that have shaped the landscape of contemporary youth work, neoliberalism, managerialism, and the professionalization of care labor, have also constrained its potential as a site of resistance and transformation. This does not mean that critical youth work is impossible; it does mean that it must be actively defended, cultivated, and reimagined in ways that move beyond the limits imposed by existing systems. Youth workers who are committed to justice-oriented practice must therefore engage not only in frontline support but also in broader struggles for structural change, challenging funding structures, resisting bureaucratic standardization, and collectively organizing to reclaim youth work as a space for radical possibility rather than institutional containment. These efforts require a combination of individual resilience and collective action, as the sustainability of critical youth work ultimately depends on the capacity of practitioners, communities, and allied organizations to push back against the pressures that seek to depoliticize and neutralize their work.

Understanding Neoliberalism

Defining Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has restructured the political, economic, and social landscape of public services and social welfare, fundamentally altering how states engage with issues of social inequality, care provision, and economic policy. Emerging as the dominant global economic paradigm in the late twentieth century, neoliberalism is more than a set of economic policies, it is also an ideological framework that redefines the role of the state, reconfigures social responsibilities, and imposes market logic onto nearly all aspects of public life (Baines, 2010b;

Davies, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Mason, 2015). Its influence extends far beyond macroeconomic policy, actively shaping the structures and priorities of youth work, education, health services, and the broader care economy. At its core, neoliberalism advances four key ideological commitments: (1) the primacy of market-based governance, in which economic principles of competition and efficiency are applied to social services; (2) a shift from state responsibility to individual responsibility, where social issues such as poverty, unemployment, and youth marginalization are framed as personal shortcomings rather than structural inequalities; (3) the pursuit of fiscal austerity, prioritizing budget reductions, cost-cutting, and privatization over public investment in social welfare; and (4) the marketization of care, in which youth work and other relational practices are restructured to function as measurable, transactional services (Baines, Charlesworth, et al., 2014; Cunningham et al., 2016; Harvey, 2005). These interconnected mechanisms have redefined how youth work is practiced, funded, and conceptualized within broader social policy, embedding a framework that prioritizes economic returns and institutional stability over community-driven, justice-oriented approaches.

The expansion of market logic into social services has led to the widespread assumption that competition, privatization, and deregulation lead to more efficient and effective service delivery, positioning public spending as inherently inefficient while elevating private sector models of governance as inherently superior (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Jones, 2014). In practice, this ideological shift has resulted in the erosion of public investment in social programs, transferring responsibility for youth work and related services to nonprofit organizations, charities, and private entities that must compete for limited funding (Powell & Steinberg, 2006b). This restructuring has been accompanied by the imposition of corporate management principles onto social services, reinforcing a model where youth work organizations must operate as

businesses rather than as sites of collective care, advocacy, or political engagement (Baines, 2010b).

Embedded within this restructuring is the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility, the notion that success and failure are rooted in personal effort and decision-making rather than structural conditions (Woodman & Wyn, 2013). This framework effectively depoliticizes inequality, reframing systemic issues such as racial discrimination, economic precarity, and youth criminalization as the result of individual deficits rather than institutional violence (Zuberi, 2004). This logic permeates many youth programs, reinforcing interventionist models that position marginalized youth as “at-risk” individuals who require behavior modification, skill-building, or resilience training rather than addressing the structural realities that place them at risk in the first place.

Austerity measures, a core feature of neoliberalism, have further exacerbated these conditions by systematically defunding social services and reducing state intervention in welfare provision. The ideological justification for austerity is rooted in the belief that government spending on social welfare is excessive and unsustainable, despite empirical evidence demonstrating that chronic underfunding of youth services and social infrastructure leads to long-term economic and social costs (Mason, 2015). Within the youth sector, austerity has produced program closures, workforce precarity, and increased competition for dwindling resources, reinforcing a climate where funding allocation is based on immediate, quantifiable results rather than long-term community impact (Cunningham, 2016). These conditions force youth organizations to conform to rigid accountability frameworks that prioritize efficiency and cost-cutting over the relational and transformative work central to youth advocacy and empowerment (Jones, 2014; Powell & Steinberg, 2006a).

Another central mechanism through which neoliberalism reshapes youth work is the marketization of care, in which human-centered, relational practices such as social work, youth work, and early childhood education are restructured into transactional, performance-driven services. Marketization reframes youth programs not as community-based support systems but as products that must be evaluated based on their “return on investment”, leading to an emphasis on data collection, performance indicators, and compliance with standardized outcome measures (Jones, 2014; Mason, 2015). This approach is evident in grant application processes, where funding is increasingly tied to program scalability, efficiency metrics, and alignment with government priorities, rather than the needs identified by youth and communities themselves.

One of the most damaging consequences of this shift is the erosion of holistic, community-led approaches to youth work. Programs that focus on advocacy, political education, or systemic change struggle to justify their existence within frameworks that favor individualized, apolitical, and outcome-driven interventions. As a result, many youth-serving organizations are forced to adjust their programming to fit within neoliberal funding priorities, limiting their ability to engage in critical, justice-oriented practice. Neoliberalism’s restructuring of youth work is an administrative transformation and an ideological project that reconfigures the very purpose and function of care work, reinforcing an economic logic that privileges efficiency, competition, and individualism over community-building, solidarity, and collective liberation (Ahmed & Carpenter, 2017; Baldrige, 2014). Within this landscape, critical youth work must actively contend with these structural constraints, resisting the pressures to conform to market-driven, bureaucratic models that limit the radical potential of youth work as a transformative practice.

Neoliberal Transformations in Social Services

Neoliberal governance has fundamentally altered the structure and purpose of social services, including youth work, by embedding market logic, competitive funding structures, and managerial oversight into the sector. These transformations have reshaped how programs are delivered and evaluated, creating tensions between funding priorities, bureaucratic accountability, and the relational nature of frontline work (Baines, 2010b; Cortis & Eastman, 2015). As a result, the social service sector now operates within a constrained, efficiency-driven model that prioritizes cost-cutting and compliance over long-term community investment. One of the most significant impacts of neoliberal restructuring has been the withdrawal of direct state investment in youth services, shifting financial responsibility to municipal governments, nonprofits, and private entities under the guise of local responsiveness and innovation (Harrison & Weber, 2015). In practice, this devolution has led to unequal access to resources, where organizations in wealthier regions with stronger donor networks fare better than those serving historically marginalized communities (Skott-Myhre, 2005). The fragmentation of service delivery has also intensified competition between organizations, forcing them to justify their existence through quantifiable outcomes and economic metrics rather than holistic, community-driven goals (Bradbury et al., 2013).

Accompanying this funding shift has been the rise of managerialism, which imposes corporate-style governance structures, performance benchmarks, and administrative oversight onto nonprofit organizations and publicly funded programs. This model demands that youth-serving agencies operate with business-like efficiency, tracking service utilization, demonstrating measurable impact, and aligning programming with predefined success indicators (Jones, 2014). These metrics often fail to capture the long-term, relational, and advocacy-driven dimensions of youth work, pushing organizations toward standardized interventions that prioritize efficiency

over community needs (Emslie, 2019). For frontline practitioners, these systemic changes have produced increased administrative burdens, reduced autonomy, and growing ethical tensions. The expectation that youth workers conform to institutional reporting frameworks often detracts from direct engagement, as time spent on compliance takes precedence over mentorship, advocacy, and youth-led organizing (Pope & Jones, 2011). This shift has also contributed to sector-wide precarity, where many youth workers are employed under short-term contracts with limited benefits and job security, mirroring the unstable labor conditions experienced by the young people they support.

Beyond administrative constraints, neoliberal social policy has reinforced a shift in service priorities, steering organizations toward individualized, behavioral interventions that emphasize personal responsibility and workforce integration over structural change. This ideological shift aligns with broader trends in risk management and social control, where youth work is framed not as a site of empowerment but as a mechanism for preparing young people to function within existing economic structures. Programs designed to address systemic barriers, political education, or collective action often struggle to secure funding, as they do not conform to the economic return-on-investment models favored by policymakers and funders (Bradbury et al., 2013). These structural shifts have largely impacted how youth work is delivered and how it is understood, reinforcing a technocratic, results-driven approach that prioritizes measurable outputs over lived experiences (Harrison & Weber, 2015). As a result, the ability of youth-serving organizations to function as sites of justice-oriented practice has been significantly constrained. The professionalization and bureaucratization of youth work have narrowed its radical potential, leaving many organizations in a state of institutional compromise, where the work that is most urgently needed is often the least fundable, and the interventions that receive investment are those that align with state priorities rather than community-identified needs. The

transformation of social services under neoliberalism has witnessed changes in budgets, policy, and institutional settings, having a significance impact on the form and function of youth work itself. These conditions demand ongoing critical engagement, as youth workers, scholars, and community advocates continue to navigate the limitations imposed by a funding landscape that seeks compliance rather than systemic change.

The Social Return on Investment Model

The Social Return on Investment (SROI) model has emerged as a dominant framework for evaluating the effectiveness of social programs, including youth work, reflecting a broader shift toward economic rationalization and performance-driven funding (De St Croix, 2018; Mason, 2015). Embedded within neoliberal governance structures, SROI is based on the premise that social value can and should be quantified in financial terms, allowing funders and policymakers to assess programs based on their projected economic benefits, such as reductions in crime, improved workforce participation, or decreased reliance on public assistance (Jones, 2014). This approach reinforces an instrumentalist logic, where investment in social services is framed not as a matter of equity or public good but as a cost-saving strategy for the state. While SROI is presented as a tool for ensuring efficiency and accountability, it has been widely criticized for its reductive approach to evaluating social change, particularly in fields like youth work where relational, long-term, and community-defined impacts do not fit neatly into economic formulas. Proponents argue that the model legitimizes public and private investment in social programs by demonstrating their financial returns, yet the expectation that complex social interventions yield immediate, monetizable outcomes has resulted in a narrowing of focus within funded programs (Moore, 2013). Metrics favored by SROI frameworks tend to prioritize short-term, easily measurable indicators, such as program attendance, employment rates, or cost reductions in adjacent systems like criminal justice and healthcare, while marginalizing

outcomes that are harder to quantify, such as empowerment, critical consciousness, and community resilience (De St Croix, 2022).

This preference for economic measurability shapes which programs receive funding and which do not. Youth-serving organizations that emphasize political education, advocacy, or community mobilization often struggle to fit within the parameters of SROI-based evaluation, as their impacts cannot be readily expressed in financial gains or state savings. As a result, many organizations adapt their priorities to align with funder expectations, shifting their focus from youth-led, justice-oriented approaches to programs that emphasize risk reduction, workforce readiness, and behavioral adjustment. This is particularly evident in government funding structures that require organizations to demonstrate how their work reduces long-term costs to the state, rather than centering the voices and needs of young people themselves. An example of this logic can be found in Ontario's Ministry of Children and Youth Services (2013), which frames youth investment as a means of reducing future public expenditures rather than as an inherent social obligation:

When young Ontarians succeed, Ontario succeeds... Wiser, more informed investment choices in youth services will lead to a stronger overall economy and thriving society. By supporting positive youth development today, we are minimizing costs to our health care, justice, child protection and social assistance systems in the future. (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2013a, p. 5)

This framing positions youth work not as a field concerned with empowerment, equity, or social transformation, but as a mechanism for economic stabilization. While such policy rhetoric acknowledges the importance of investment in youth, it does so within a conditional framework, where funding is justified only insofar as it generates economic benefits.

Equity and well-being are framed as secondary to fiscal concerns, reinforcing a model in which program survival depends on its ability to align with government priorities rather than community-defined needs. Beyond its influence on funding priorities, the rise of SROI has contributed to the bureaucratization of youth work, placing increased pressure on organizations to produce data-driven proof of impact. This expectation shifts the role of frontline practitioners, who are often required to dedicate significant time to reporting and compliance, sometimes at the expense of direct engagement with young people. The emphasis on financial accountability over experiential knowledge and qualitative assessments often devalues the expertise of youth workers while eroding adaptability and a level of responsiveness that are central to relational and community-centered practice (Moore, 2013). While accountability in public spending is necessary, the SROI model reinforces an approach where the value of social programs is determined by their ability to produce measurable financial returns rather than their ability to foster social change. This has led to growing concerns that the increasing reliance on quantitative evaluation frameworks is shaping the very purpose and priorities of youth work itself, privileging outcome-driven service provision over holistic, process-oriented engagement. The challenge for organizations navigating this landscape is how to sustain meaningful, justice-oriented practice within a funding system that rewards efficiency, measurability, and alignment with state-defined objectives.

Navigating Neoliberalism in the Youth Sector

The restructuring of youth work in Canada reflects a broader shift in social services, where public investment has declined, funding mechanisms have become increasingly conditional, and organizations must operate within restrictive accountability frameworks (Baines, 2010b; Evans & Shields, 2014). The move toward market-oriented social policy has transformed how youth work is conceptualized, funded, and practiced, embedding competitive

tendering, targeted interventions, and performance-based evaluation models into its governance. While these structural changes have affected youth-serving organizations across Canada, their impact is particularly acute in Ontario, where successive waves of policy reform have deepened the reliance on market logic to justify youth investment.

The Impact of Neoliberalism

The rise of neoliberal policy frameworks in Canada since the 1980s has systematically redefined the state's role in social welfare, shifting from universal, state-funded programs to targeted, efficiency-driven service provision. This restructuring has been characterized by funding reductions, privatization, and the devolution of responsibility for social programs to non-governmental entities, reinforcing a model in which service provision is increasingly precarious, fragmented, and dependent on short-term funding cycles. For youth work, these shifts have produced several interrelated consequences. The introduction of competitive bidding processes for government contracts has intensified competition between youth-serving organizations, reducing collaborative capacity and incentivizing a focus on measurable outputs over holistic, long-term engagement (De St Croix, 2015). The expectation that programs demonstrate their impact through standardized, funder-approved metrics has narrowed the scope of practice, emphasizing behavioral interventions, employment training, and individualized service models at the expense of relational, community-driven, and preventative approaches.

This narrowing of focus is particularly evident in how youth are framed within neoliberal discourse. Increasingly, young people are conceptualized as "at-risk" individuals whose challenges stem from personal deficits rather than systemic inequities (Kwon, 2013). This deficit-based perspective has reinforced the prioritization of targeted interventions aimed at correcting behavior, increasing employability, and fostering self-sufficiency, while structural issues such as poverty, racial discrimination, and housing precarity remain secondary concerns.

The impact of this shift is two-fold: youth work becomes a tool for reinforcing individual responsibility, and the sector's ability to engage in critical, advocacy-based approaches that challenge systemic barriers is significantly weakened.

The broader political and economic rationale for these reforms is evident in policy frameworks that position youth investment not as a social necessity but as an economic calculation. The commodification of labor under neoliberal governance has also influenced how youth workers themselves experience precarity, as short-term funding models result in high staff turnover, contract-based employment, and unstable professional trajectories. These conditions place ongoing constraints on both the sustainability of youth programs and the ability of practitioners to engage in deep, relational work, reinforcing a system in which care labor is structurally undervalued.

Ontario Contexts

Ontario provides a particularly stark example of how neoliberal restructuring has shaped youth work, as the province has undergone successive waves of policy reform that have reinforced market-based approaches to social services. The introduction of austerity measures and program decentralization in the mid-1990s under the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris marked a significant turning point, as the province moved toward deep cuts to social assistance, the elimination of universal programs, and the transfer of responsibility for social services to municipalities (Keil, 2002). These reforms reshaped the youth sector by forcing organizations to align with new funding priorities, compete for limited resources, and justify their existence through cost-effectiveness rather than social impact (Bessant & Emslie, 2014). While subsequent governments have introduced targeted investments in youth programming, the overarching neoliberal framework established during the Harris era has remained intact. The Ontario Youth Action Plan (2012) reflects these ongoing tensions, as it includes funding for

certain youth initiatives while reinforcing the logic of evidence-based programming, metric-driven evaluation, and public-private partnerships (Hoskins & Meilleur, 2012). The increasing influence of managerialism within the youth sector has compounded these challenges, embedding corporate-style governance structures, compliance-driven reporting frameworks, and performance measurement expectations into service delivery. These pressures have created a service environment where frontline practitioners must prioritize funder requirements over the needs of the youth they serve, contributing to a sense of professional disempowerment and ethical strain. Organizations must demonstrate efficiency, document impact, and conform to best practices that align with state priorities, reinforcing a culture of surveillance and control that limits the autonomy of youth workers.

Case Study: The Provincial Youth Outreach Worker Program

Initiated in 2006, Ontario's Provincial Youth Outreach Worker (PYOW) program provides a compelling case study of the tensions between grassroots, community-driven approaches to youth engagement and the pressures of institutionalization, evaluation, and funding compliance. Initially developed through localized, community-based initiatives, PYOW emerged as a response to the need for direct, culturally relevant, and relationship-centered outreach to marginalized youth. However, as the program expanded and became integrated into larger funding structures, it increasingly faced the challenges of aligning critical, youth-centered practice with the bureaucratic expectations of funders and policymakers. A key site of tension within PYOW has been the adoption of the Stages of Change model as part of its evaluation and monitoring framework. Originally developed by James Prochaska and colleagues in the 1980s, the Stages of Change model was designed for clinical applications, particularly in smoking cessation and other health behavior interventions (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983). It conceptualizes behavioral change as a non-linear process, occurring through five distinct stages:

precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. While the model has therapeutic value, its adaptation to youth work settings raises important questions about how progress is defined, measured, and framed within a sector increasingly shaped by neoliberal accountability mechanisms.

The application of behavioral monitoring models such as Stages of Change in youth work operates within two contrasting interpretive frameworks. On one hand, the model offers a structured, adaptable way of supporting young people, recognizing that change is iterative, often occurring in a spiral rather than a strictly linear trajectory. When applied through a critical lens, youth workers can integrate the model into a holistic, relational practice that supports young people and actively challenges and reshapes the systems that create barriers to their success. This approach resists deficit-based interpretations, instead situating young people's choices and behaviors within broader structural conditions such as racial discrimination, precarious employment, and systemic underinvestment in youth services. On the other hand, when applied within rigid, outcome-driven evaluation frameworks, the model risks becoming a tool for quantifying youth progress in ways that reinforce deficit perspectives. Funders and policymakers often demand measurable indicators of success, which can pressure organizations to numerate young people's development as discrete progress points rather than centering relational, qualitative, and community-defined outcomes. The need to demonstrate improvement through predefined behavioral categories aligns with Social Return on Investment (SROI) models, where the legitimacy of programs is assessed based on their ability to demonstrate economic efficiency and measurable social impact.

This evaluation culture fosters a broader challenge within youth work: the expectation that programs "prove" their legitimacy to funding bodies embedded within neoliberal governance. The language of metrics, efficiency, and progress tracking does not always align

with the principles of community engagement, relationship-building, and grassroots organizing. The “butts in seats” mentality, where programs must demonstrate high participation numbers to justify continued funding, often ignores the depth of engagement, trust-building, and long-term transformation that critical youth work seeks to achieve. As a result, youth-serving organizations must navigate the contradiction of needing to conform to funding priorities while trying to sustain a practice rooted in the lived realities and aspirations of young people (Moore, 2013). Beyond its evaluative tensions, PYOW’s evolution, from a grassroots initiative to a structured, government-funded program, illustrates a broader pattern in the institutionalization of community-led youth work. As programs scale up and receive stable funding, they often undergo shifts in structure, governance, and accountability mechanisms. These shifts do not necessarily erase the radical or community-centered elements of the work, but they introduce new layers of organizational constraint that require ongoing negotiation.

A future study focusing on how PYOW workers and management navigate these tensions through an organizational ethnography would provide valuable insights into the everyday realities of balancing frontline engagement with institutional compliance. While the Stages of Change model and similar behavioral frameworks can be used in nuanced and reflexive ways, their integration into funding-dependent youth work settings raises important questions about power, measurement, and accountability. The challenge for practitioners lies in resisting the instrumentalization of their work, ensuring that youth support balances the relational and justice-oriented practice and be cautious of models that apply predefined behavior modification metrics. There should therefore be equal caution in ensuring that “success” in programs is not solely aligned with reach and the numbers of interactions or engagements without qualifying those instances through the lens young people, community and youth workers.

The Impact of Precarity, Standardization, and Professionalization

The restructuring of youth services in Ontario has reshaped how programs are funded and evaluated and altered the working conditions, autonomy, and professional pathways of youth workers. These transformations reflect broader trends across the nonprofit and care sectors, where short-term employment, competitive funding structures, and the professionalization of frontline work have deepened precarity, standardized practice, and institutionalized barriers to entry (Baines, Cunningham, et al., 2014; Walker, 2003). One of the most immediate consequences of these changes has been the casualization of youth work as a profession. Many frontline practitioners are employed under temporary contracts with limited job security, benefits, or career stability, a trend that mirrors the broader shift toward contract-based employment in public services. This economic precarity is compounded by funding-dependent hiring practices, where staffing decisions are dictated by grant cycles rather than organizational or community needs. As a result, youth workers often move between contracts, organizations, and sectors, disrupting continuity in youth programming and eroding the long-term relationships that are critical for effective engagement.

The expectation that youth-serving organizations conform to standardized program models and metric-driven evaluation frameworks has further restricted practitioner autonomy and flexibility. Many youth workers experience a tension between their professional commitments to relational, youth-centered practice and the institutional demands for performance measurement and funder compliance. The increasing reliance on data-driven reporting structures means that youth work is often framed through quantitative impact assessments, where success is defined by attendance numbers, behavioral modifications, or employment outcomes, rather than by more qualitative, community-defined measures of empowerment, engagement, or personal development. This emphasis on measurable outputs over

process-oriented work has reinforced the bureaucratization of youth services, where youth workers are expected to document, justify, and align their work with external accountability standards rather than responding to the lived realities of the young people they serve. This shift has profound implications for the integrity of the profession, as it privileges programmatic efficiency over relational depth, reducing the ability of youth workers to adapt their practice in response to evolving community needs.

The professionalization of youth work has also introduced new barriers to entry, particularly for grassroots organizers and practitioners with deep community ties but limited formal credentials. While professionalization is often framed as a means of enhancing accountability and service quality, it has in many cases resulted in the exclusion of those with lived experience and cultural awareness in favour of credentialed professionals who may be less embedded in the realities of marginalized communities. Many Indigenous, Black, and racialized youth workers, for example, bring critical, situated knowledge of systemic barriers and culturally responsive practices, yet they may be structurally excluded from leadership roles or career advancement due to credentialing requirements that prioritize formal education over experiential expertise (Trimmer-Platman, 2014). This exclusionary aspect of professionalization has reinforced hierarchical structures within youth-serving organizations, where decision-making authority is concentrated among funders, executives, and policy administrators rather than among frontline workers and youth themselves. This dynamic creates a disconnect between those designing youth programs and those directly engaging with young people, limiting opportunities for participatory decision-making and community-led approaches. Moreover, the expectation that youth workers conform to rigid professional codes and institutional protocols can create ethical tensions, particularly when these guidelines conflict with the need for flexibility, advocacy, and radical care in navigating youth experiences of systemic marginalization.

These structural constraints have direct implications for cross-sectoral comparisons, as many of the challenges facing youth work practitioners mirror those experienced in related care professions such as social work, early childhood education, and nursing. Across these fields, workers contend with the tension between relational care and bureaucratic efficiency, the impact of labor precarity on professional sustainability, and the ways professionalization can both legitimize and constrain practice (Cortis & Eastman, 2015). The next section will expand on these intersections, highlighting how youth work fits within a broader landscape of care professions that are increasingly shaped by neoliberal governance, professional gatekeeping, and tensions between standardization and autonomy.

Cross-Sector Comparisons in Frontline Work

The challenges faced by youth workers are not unique to the sector but are embedded within broader structural conditions affecting frontline care workers across social services, education, and healthcare. Examining youth work alongside social work, early childhood education (ECE), and nursing offers a crucial lens for understanding shared systemic barriers, ethical tensions, and workforce constraints (Savicki, 2017). Despite differences in professional mandates, these sectors all contend with high levels of precarity, managerial oversight, and labor undervaluation, reinforcing how care work is systematically devalued within market-driven governance structures (Vachon, 2013). One key distinction, however, is that social work, nursing, and ECE have been subject to longer histories of professionalization and unionization, while youth work remains relatively fragmented and inconsistently formalized (Skott-Myhre, 2005). This has implications for how youth workers negotiate professional identity, sectoral legitimacy, and advocacy for improved working conditions (Urban, 2022). The absence of widespread formalization means that youth workers often occupy ambiguous professional

positions, lacking standardized training pathways, regulatory protections, or clear career trajectories (Vachon, 2013; White et al., 2020).

A cross-sectoral comparative approach reveals both shared vulnerabilities and field-specific tensions, underscoring how the legacy of sexism and neoliberal restructuring has intensified precarious employment, emotional labor, and professional constraints across the care economy (Richardson et al., 2023). Examining the literature from each sector provides critical insights into the broader political, economic, and institutional forces shaping frontline work, while also highlighting the absence of structural analysis in many existing studies, particularly regarding neoliberalism, structural violence, and critical pedagogy. The following sections engage each sector separately, mapping their intersections with youth work while identifying key gaps in the existing literature.

Social Work

Social work provides an essential comparative framework for understanding how state-funded service sectors manage frontline labor, professional ethics, and systemic contradictions. Historically grounded in both advocacy and institutional care models, social work shares many of the same tensions as youth work regarding the conflict between relational, justice-oriented approaches and the increasing demands of bureaucratic efficiency and risk management (L. M. Healy, 2008; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). A dominant theme in the social work literature is the rise of managerialism and standardized service delivery, which has significantly constrained professional discretion and increased administrative burdens (Baines et al., 2017). Much like youth workers, social workers struggle to navigate top-down directives that emphasize quantifiable outcomes over holistic, community-responsive practice (Barwick, 2006). These constraints are particularly visible in areas such as child protection services, housing support, and

mental health interventions, where frontline workers must balance client advocacy with institutional compliance.

The Managerialization of Social Work and Ethical Tensions. The literature highlights how market-driven service models have reshaped social work into a risk-averse, efficiency-driven sector, privileging bureaucratic accountability over professional judgment (Baines et al., 2017; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). This shift mirrors the pressures faced by youth workers, many of whom report feeling trapped within narrowly defined intervention models that do not account for the complexities of young people's lives (Savicki, 2017). The tension between professional ethics and institutional mandates is well-documented in social work research, particularly concerning moral distress, worker burnout, and the erosion of advocacy roles (Sercombe, 1997; Svensson, 2012). Scholars argue that as social work has become increasingly bureaucratized, its capacity for social change has been undermined, reinforcing a service model that prioritizes administrative efficiency over transformative engagement (C. Morley, 2014). This reflects a key challenge in youth work as well, where programs must conform to funder-defined success metrics rather than addressing the broader social determinants of youth marginalization.

Social Work in the Ontario Context. In the Ontario context, critiques of social work go beyond managerial constraints and funding precarity to examine its historical role in settler colonialism and racial governance (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). Social work, particularly in child welfare and poverty intervention, has long operated as an arm of state control, regulating and surveying Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities under the guise of social service provision (Thobani, 2007). Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong (2019) challenge the notion that social work reform is sufficient, instead advocating for a fundamental reimagining of the profession's structures, functions, and institutional ties:

Social work as a profession in Canada functions as a technology of settler colonial expansion... Those seeking to seriously unsettle social services must challenge the supremacy and expert status given to social work as a profession in order to engage in meaningful and tangible work to disrupt settler colonialism and participate in the process of decolonization alongside Indigenous peoples and to respect their refusal of unsolicited help in their processes of resurgence. (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019, p. 452)

This critique underscores the limitations of professionalization as a solution to the systemic challenges facing social work, as regulatory frameworks often serve to reinforce institutional power rather than disrupt systemic injustice (Trimmer-Platman, 2014). Similar critiques have emerged in youth work literature, where the push for professional legitimacy risks replicating bureaucratic constraints without addressing the underlying inequalities that shape the sector.

Implications for Youth Work. The social work literature provides critical insights into the broader conditions shaping youth work and other care professions, particularly regarding the tension between state control and professional autonomy. While social work has gained greater formal recognition, it has done so at the cost of increased oversight and neoliberal governance structures that limit its ability to function as a transformative practice (Van Heugten, 2011). For youth work, the question remains: how can the sector advocate for recognition, resources, and worker protections without replicating the same bureaucratic constraints that have limited social work's radical potential? While social work has benefited from labor protections, advocacy networks, and a defined professional identity, it has also been co-opted into neoliberal service delivery models that prioritize compliance over justice-oriented interventions (Verhage et al., 2023). The next sections extend this comparative analysis to early childhood education and

nursing, further exploring how professionalization, bureaucratization, and systemic devaluation shape frontline labor across the social service sector.

Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education (ECE) offers a critical comparative lens for understanding the structural constraints facing youth work, particularly regarding the undervaluation of care labor, the tensions of professionalization, and the increasing bureaucratic oversight of relational practice (*Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a Democratic Education*, 2020; Moloney, 2010). Similar to the youth work profession, ECE is a heavily gendered sector, where frontline workers, predominantly women and disproportionately racialized, engage in emotionally and physically demanding labor while contending with systemic devaluation and economic precarity (Langford et al., 2017). The devaluation of this labor force is further compounded by historical erasures that have marginalized the contributions of Black and Indigenous women within both the education and care sectors. Canadian Scholar, Njoki Wane, notes that mainstream feminist movements, shaped primarily by European middle-class women, have historically overlooked the racialized oppression faced by women of African ancestry, leading to the emergence of African Canadian feminism as a response to this exclusion (Wane, 2007). The erasure of African Canadian women's labor from dominant narratives reinforces broader patterns of educational invisibility, wherein their histories and contributions are absent from the curriculum, effectively positioning their work as undervalued and peripheral.

The parallels between youth work and ECE are particularly evident in the ways neoliberal restructuring has shaped funding models, workforce conditions, and the push toward standardization. Much like youth programs, ECE initiatives must often demonstrate economic returns on investment, leading to metric-driven funding allocations that privilege efficiency over relational depth (Noonan, 2020). However, an intersectional analysis of ECE reveals that this

neoliberal push disproportionately impacts racialized workers, who are more likely to occupy precarious positions within the field. Theories of resistance and collectivism, central to Black Canadian feminism, offer an alternative framework for understanding how African Canadian women navigate and resist these structural constraints (Wane, 2007). Historically, Black women in Canada have engaged in collective organizing to challenge racist, sexist, and Eurocentric structures that shape their professional and social realities. This legacy of resistance is particularly relevant in the context of ECE, where racialized educators often find themselves at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, expected to provide culturally responsive care while being structurally excluded from decision-making processes that shape the sector.

The literature on ECE highlights persistent patterns of precarity, increasing professional regulation, and ongoing struggles for recognition, many of which mirror the challenges facing the youth sector (Sumsion et al., 2016). However, the neglect of racialized perspectives in these discussions obscures the specific barriers faced by African Canadian women and other racialized educators. Integrating an African Canadian feminist lens into the analysis of ECE reveals how racialized care labor remains systematically devalued, not only through economic structures but through discursive erasures that frame care work as unskilled, invisible, or secondary to more 'legitimate' professions.

Workforce Precarity and the Devaluation of Relational Care. Despite mounting research demonstrating that investment in early childhood education yields long-term social and economic benefits, ECE remains one of the lowest-paid and least secure sectors of care work (Heckman, 2011; Melhuish et al., 2015). Studies in the UK, Australia, and now more recently in Canada document how ECE workers, particularly in nonprofit and community-based settings, face high turnover, short-term contracts, and limited career stability, much like frontline youth workers (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). Ontario's early childhood workforce has been particularly

affected by temporary contracts and unstable funding models, a trend that mirrors the experiences of Ontario's youth workers (Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario & Ontario Coalition For Better Child Care, 2022; Langford et al., 2016). Even as the province has expanded its investment in early learning, many ECE practitioners remain in low-wage positions with minimal job security, demonstrating how sectoral reforms often fail to disrupt the fundamental undervaluation of care work (Moss, 2019). This precarious labor structure is compounded by gendered assumptions about care work, where early childhood educators (and youth workers) are expected to perform intensive relational and emotional labor without the corresponding financial or institutional recognition (Taggart, 2011). Scholars argue that the persistent framing of ECE as "women's work" reinforces the idea that care is a natural, low-skill occupation rather than a profession requiring specialized expertise and training (*Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a Democratic Education*, 2020; Friendly et al., 2021).

The humanization of the sector must be prioritized to disrupt problematic dynamics of devaluation, underrepresentation and tokenism. As a Black male in youth and community work, I navigate stereotypes of being perceived as a threat and a solution. The Socially Engineered typecast of "at-risk" Black youth has been projected upon me in my younger years, just as the assumptions about being an adult Black male has implications of either being perceived as a "good" or "bad" role model. In this context, my involvement in social services cannot be depoliticized, as I must constantly be aware of the importance of Black male representation, the structural factors that continue to exploit and tokenize Black men (inside and outside of social services), and the need to advocate and activate an intersectional lens to deconstruct and decolonize the work, even at the expense of an expansive emotional labour. The implications for Black, Indigenous and racialized women and gender diverse youth workers who do not share my male privilege can complicate dynamics even more; especially in contexts where white privilege

may create contexts where some women feel empowered and others may feel structurally disempowered. The devaluation and disposability experienced by some of the hardest workers in the sector certainly demands more attention as the ethics of care must be extended to frontline workers.

Managerialism and the Standardization of Early Childhood Education. Like social work and youth work, ECE has undergone significant managerial restructuring, embedding corporate oversight, risk management protocols, and efficiency mandates into service delivery (Cortis & Eastman, 2015; Woodrow & Press, 2007). This shift has led to a significant reduction in the autonomy of early childhood educators, who are often required to adhere to standardized curricula, developmental assessment tools, and centrally imposed regulations that limit their ability to adapt their practice to the needs of children and families (Fenech et al., 2010). The Ontario government's Early Learning Framework exemplifies these trends, promoting evidence-based best practices, measurable developmental outcomes, and competency frameworks for educators (The Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). While such initiatives can support sectoral recognition and policy investment, they also risk reinforcing rigid, top-down models of education that prioritize compliance over critical pedagogy (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008). This emphasis on standardization and accountability mirrors similar shifts in youth work, where programs must conform to predefined success metrics rather than prioritizing community-defined outcomes (Banks, 2010; De St Croix, 2018). Scholars have noted that both ECE and youth work are increasingly subject to data-driven decision-making, where performance indicators determine funding eligibility rather than qualitative assessments of care and relational depth.

Lessons from ECE for Youth Work. ECE's trajectory provides both insights and warnings for youth work's ongoing struggles with professionalization and recognition. On one hand, ECE advocacy has secured higher educational requirements, stronger professional identity,

and greater policy visibility (Oberhuemer, 2015; Vincent & Braun, 2013). On the other hand, it has also introduced greater bureaucratic control, credentialing barriers, and an increasing emphasis on regulatory compliance (Moloney, 2010). Ontario's struggles to improve workforce conditions in ECE offer a cautionary example, as efforts to formalize and professionalize the field have not necessarily translated into higher wages, stronger labor protections, or increased professional autonomy (Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario & Ontario Coalition For Better Child Care, 2022). Similarly, youth work's push for greater recognition must be carefully balanced to avoid replicating the same managerial oversight and exclusionary professionalization seen in ECE (Banks, 2010). A key critique emerging from ECE literature is that professionalization efforts have often failed to challenge the underlying devaluation of care work. While increased formalization has secured some wage gains and career pathways, it has not disrupted the neoliberal logic that ultimately treats care as a fiscal investment rather than as an essential public necessity. The next section will extend this comparative analysis to nursing, further exploring how moral distress, bureaucratic constraints, and the intensification of care labor manifest across human service fields.

Nursing

The nursing sector provides another instructive comparative lens for understanding the systemic constraints facing youth workers and other frontline care professionals. While nursing is often viewed as a highly professionalized and regulated field, it has been subject to many of the same neoliberal pressures that have shaped youth work, social work, and early childhood education, particularly regarding workforce precarity, bureaucratic oversight, and the emotional toll of care labor (Banerjee et al., 2015; Cortis & Eastman, 2015; L. M. Healy, 2008). Despite its recognition as a cornerstone of public healthcare, nursing, like youth work, is increasingly structured through performance-driven funding models that prioritize efficiency, risk

management, and standardization over relational, patient-centered care (McVittie et al., 2015; Steinlin et al., 2017).

The comparative analysis of nursing and youth work is particularly relevant given the intensification of emotional labor in both fields. Like youth workers, nurses are expected to provide care, emotional support, and crisis intervention under constrained institutional conditions that limit their ability to exercise professional discretion (Barford & Whelton, 2010; De St Croix, 2013). The nursing literature extensively documents the impact of neoliberal reforms on patient care, highlighting how staffing shortages, administrative burdens, and rigid hospital protocols constrain nurses' ability to engage meaningfully with patients and exercise that Armstrong has referred to as “Moral Wisdom” to deepen perspective and empathy (Armstrong, 2006; Berry & Curry, 2012; Duffield & O’Brien-Pallas, 2003). These challenges resonate strongly with youth work, where practitioners must navigate bureaucratic constraints while maintaining meaningful, trust-based relationships with people (Jones, 2014; Pope & Jones, 2011).

Nursing and the Neoliberal Implications of Moral Distress. The professionalization of nursing has not shielded the sector from the growing influence of corporate management models, which emphasize efficiency, cost containment, and standardized care protocols (Banerjee et al., 2015; McVittie et al., 2015). Theorists argue that the rise of evidence-based medicine (EBM) and performance-driven accountability measures has significantly altered the nature of nursing work, often at the expense of patient-centered care. The imposition of bureaucratic oversight and standardized patient care models has led to a widespread feeling of compassion fatigue and moral distress among nurses, who often find themselves unable to provide the level of care they believe is necessary due to institutional constraints (Steinlin et al., 2017). Moral distress is a concept accredited to philosopher Andrew Jameton who applied this term to someone who “knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the

right course of action,” particularly in the context of care services (Fourie, 2017, p. 578; Jameton, 1984). Jameton (1993) references Judith Wilkinson’s definition as "the psychological disequilibrium and negative feeling state experienced when a person makes a moral decision but does not follow through by performing the moral behavior indicated by that decision" (Jameton, 1993, p. 543). However, Wilkinson does advance conversations about nurses agency, coping methods and moral actions that have advanced discussions in the field (Wilkinson, 1987).

The phenomenon of moral distress has been extensively documented in the healthcare literature, where nurses report frustration with restrictive protocols that prioritize hospital efficiency over individualized patient needs (Coetzee & Klopper, 2010). The parallels to youth work are striking, particularly regarding the erosion of professional autonomy under funding-driven service models. Just as nurses are expected to adhere to strict patient care protocols that limit relational engagement, youth workers are often required to fit their interventions into funder-mandated service models that do not allow for flexibility or community-driven adaptations (Baines, Charlesworth, et al., 2014; Jones, 2014). Ironically, the market-driven practices that are increasing encroaching on value-driven objectives often fail to optimize efficient and effective outcomes, as a demoralized workforce who find themselves at odds with organizational mandates indicates a breakdown of sustainable praxis. Rather, organizations must address various factors of disconnected praxis (described in the following chapter as Apraxis) in order to align moral, ethical, equitable, efficient, accountable, enjoyable, impactful, and sustainable youth work. Without a political choice to make these critical adjustments, the sector will continue to burnout its greatest opportunities for success.

Workforce Precarity and Emotional Burnout. Despite its professionalization, nursing remains a high-burnout profession, with many frontline workers experiencing chronic stress, workplace violence, and excessive administrative burdens (Banerjee et al., 2015). Scholars argue

that neoliberal restructuring in healthcare has resulted in increased patient loads, reduced staffing, and reliance on temporary contract workers, contributing to high turnover rates and workforce instability (Armstrong, 2006; Cortis & Eastman, 2015). The conditions of workforce precarity and emotional exhaustion described in nursing studies are highly relevant to youth work, where short-term contracts, grant-dependent employment, and limited job security create similar challenges for practitioners (De St Croix, 2018; Mason, 2015). Both fields also experience high levels of emotional labor, with frontline workers expected to absorb institutional failures while maintaining composure and professionalism in high-stress environments (Kind et al., 2020; Steinlin et al., 2017). Nursing literature further highlights the gendered nature of workforce precarity, where women, particularly racialized and migrant nurses, are disproportionately affected by labor devaluation, workplace hierarchies, and job insecurity (Mann-Feder & Savicki, 2003). These structural inequities closely mirror those documented in ECE and youth work, where racialized and community-based practitioners often face systemic exclusion from leadership roles despite their deep experiential expertise (Baldrige, 2020a; Gharabaghi, 2017; Langford et al., 2017).

Moral Distress and Ethical Tensions in Nursing and Youth Work. As discussed, moral distress occurs when practitioners feel unable to act in accordance with their ethical obligations due to systemic constraints (Corley et al., 2005). According to Epstein & Hamric, this obstruction to one's ethical obligations can be identified as a "violation of core values." Through instances of insufficient staff availability, power hierarchies, inadequate administrative support, pressure from austerity measures, a lack of agency, and most notably in the context of this research, "policies and priorities that conflict with care needs" and communal wellbeing, this aspect of systemic design presents the most notable opportunity for improvement (Epstein & Hamric, 2009, p. 2). Studies document how nurses frequently experience ethical dilemmas when

they are forced to prioritize efficiency over patient well-being, leading to psychological strain, professional disillusionment, and burnout. A study by Corley et al. identified the severity of moral distress and nurse retention, advocating for more ethical organizational environments to support the wellbeing of frontline workers, especially for “African American nurses who experience greater moral distress intensity” who require more equitable supports (Corley et al., 2005, p. 388). The consequences of moral distress in social services are not limited to an elevation in risk factors for patients and service users, it also compromises career opportunities and a sense of safety and satisfaction for frontline staff, exacerbating social marginalization (Delgado-Ron et al., 2024). This concept is highly applicable to youth work, where practitioners often face conflicts between their professional values and the realities of institutional funding and policy constraints (Mason, 2015). In an extensive literature review of 152 papers on moral distress by Georgina et al., a wide number of social service fields have identified moral distress as an urgent concern, with some theorists framing moral distress as an affront to moral integrity and “epistemic injustice,” due to the disenfranchisement of practitioner voices in decision-making contexts (G. Morley et al., 2019, p. 658). Youth workers frequently report feeling powerless in the face of systemic inequities, particularly when they are expected to implement risk-based intervention models that do not account for the broader social determinants of youth marginalization (De St Croix, 2018; Jones, 2014).

Lessons from Nursing for Youth Work Advocacy. Despite the structural constraints imposed on nursing, the profession has leveraged its strong professional identity, union representation, and public legitimacy to advocate for improved labor conditions and systemic reforms. Nursing unions have played a key role in securing labor protections, advocating for patient-to-staff ratio regulations, and challenging austerity-driven hospital policies. These efforts illustrate how professionalization can be used as both a protective mechanism for workers and a

strategy for sector-wide reform. For youth work, the key lesson is that sector-wide advocacy must go beyond professional recognition to include broader labor protections, funding stability, and critical engagement with systemic inequities (Banks, 2010; Skott-Myhre, 2005). The nursing sector demonstrates that professionalization alone does not insulate workers from neoliberal pressures, reinforcing the need for a critical, justice-oriented approach to youth work reform (Van Heugten, 2011). The next section will conclude this comparative analysis by synthesizing findings across all four sectors, youth work, social work, ECE, and nursing, highlighting the gaps in existing literature and the need for a structural critique of neoliberal governance in the care economy.

Cross-Sector Implications

The comparative analysis of youth work, social work, early childhood education (ECE), and nursing underscores the deep structural challenges shaping frontline care work. Across all four sectors, the literature highlights persistent workforce precarity, increasing bureaucratic oversight, and the tension between professionalization and autonomy (Savicki, 2017). Despite context-specific variations, these fields share a common struggle: the devaluation of relational, justice-oriented labor within neoliberal governance frameworks. The literature on social work and nursing provides key insights into how professionalization has secured recognition and labor protections, but at the cost of increased bureaucratic control and standardized service models (Verhage et al., 2023). In contrast, youth work remains largely unformalized, which has contributed to ongoing fragmentation, job insecurity, and limited collective advocacy. The analysis of ECE highlights the dangers of professionalization without structural change, demonstrating how credentialing efforts do not necessarily disrupt the broader economic and ideological forces that devalue care work (*Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a Democratic Education*, 2020).

While comparative studies have documented the challenges facing workers across these professions, there remain critical gaps in the existing literature that this study seeks to address. Most notably, few studies explicitly connect these workforce struggles to broader critiques of structural violence, neoliberalism, and the systemic barriers that obstruct critical practice. Many accounts document the effects of burnout, moral distress, and workforce instability. Unfortunately, these accounts fail to interrogate the root causes of these conditions, particularly their connections to capitalism, colonialism, and state control over care work. Thus, while nursing and social work have successfully navigated professionalization pathways to secure legitimacy, these fields have also been co-opted into neoliberal service delivery models that prioritize compliance over justice-oriented intervention. The challenge for youth work is to go beyond replicating professional trajectories to critically examine the structural factors that have shaped their development, ensuring that any push for recognition does not inadvertently reinforce the same bureaucratic constraints that have undermined critical social service work (Vincent & Braun, 2013).

This comparative analysis lays the groundwork for the next chapter, which situates this study's approach within a broader theoretical framework that critically engages with the political, economic, and ideological structures shaping social services. Specifically, this study advances an analysis that centers the Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC), which will be explored further in Chapter 3, as a key explanatory model for understanding how neoliberal governance, capitalist marketization, and colonial legacies shape the conditions of frontline workers (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). This framework moves beyond surface-level descriptions of burnout and precarity, instead questioning how these conditions are actively produced and maintained by broader socio-political structures (Galtung, 1969; Harvey, 2005).

Reflections on the Research Gaps

While social work and nursing have achieved professional recognition, labor protections, and collective bargaining power, they have also been increasingly subject to bureaucratic oversight, standardization, and managerial surveillance, restricting the capacity for critical, relational engagement (Banks, 2010). The case of early childhood education highlights the limits of professionalization without structural change, as increased credentialing and regulatory oversight have not necessarily led to improved wages, job security, or sectoral autonomy (*Transforming Early Childhood in England: Towards a Democratic Education*, 2020; Langford et al., 2017). Many studies on youth work conditions focus on burnout, job retention, and workforce professionalization but fail to interrogate the root causes of precarity within larger neoliberal policy shifts (Jones, 2014). While research on social work and nursing has extensively examined moral distress and ethical tensions, youth work scholarship has not fully engaged with these concepts as structural, rather than individualized, experiences (Epstein & Hamric, 2009; McCarthy & Deady, 2008). Due to a lack of engagement with critical pedagogy and theories of structural violence in explaining how youth work is systematically obstructed from fulfilling its potential for social transformation, a system of continuous improvement has yet to take hold (Freire, 1970/2000; Galtung, 1969). A particularly significant gap in the literature is the failure to center the voices and expertise of frontline youth workers themselves.

Existing studies often examine policy interventions, program evaluations, and best practices without sufficiently engaging the practitioners navigating the contradictions of youth work firsthand (Moore, 2013). This omission reinforces a research-to-policy model that excludes those most affected by service structures from shaping their own working conditions. By failing to account for youth workers' lived experiences, sectoral analysis remains incomplete, limiting the possibility of meaningful reform (Trimmer-Platman, 2014). This study directly addresses

these research gaps by applying a structural, justice-oriented framework that situates youth work within the broader political economy of care professions, ensuring that the analysis moves beyond individual professional trajectories toward an interrogation of systemic power relations. The next chapter introduces the theoretical models that will frame this analysis, demonstrating how youth work's marginalization is not accidental, but structurally produced within a neoliberal governance framework that instrumentalizes care labor while systematically constraining its critical, justice-oriented potential.

Insights and Implications for Theorization

This literature review has provided a critical foundation for understanding the systemic contradictions, institutional challenges, and ideological constraints shaping youth work and its position within the broader care economy. The review has demonstrated that youth work's ongoing marginalization is not just a result of professional immaturity or sectoral underdevelopment, but a reflection of deeper structures of economic and political power that define how care work is governed, funded, and regulated (Baines et al., 2017). The findings from this review underscore the urgency of moving beyond individualized, service-delivery models toward a more holistic, justice-oriented practice that critically engages with the structural conditions shaping youth work (Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 2013). The dominant discourse on youth work too often focuses on workforce challenges in isolation, failing to connect these conditions to broader patterns of labor devaluation, racialized and gendered care work, and the ideological barriers that prevent transformative interventions.

While youth work shares many common struggles with social work, nursing, and ECE, the literature reveals that these other professions have pursued sectoral recognition through professionalization, often at the cost of increased regulatory control and bureaucratic constraints (Verhage et al., 2023). The professionalization of social work and nursing has provided greater

legitimacy and labor protections, yet it has also resulted in heightened surveillance, the standardization of practice, and the erosion of professional. The experiences of ECE practitioners provide an important cautionary example, demonstrating that workforce formalization does not necessarily translate into higher wages or improved labor conditions, particularly when systemic inequities in the valuation of care work remain unchallenged (Fenech et al., 2010). This dissertation argues that addressing youth work's workforce challenges requires a more structural approach, moving beyond professionalization debates toward an engagement with the broader political economy of social services.

The next chapter introduces the Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC) as a key analytical framework, providing a lens through which to understand how social service labor is structured, controlled, and constrained by state, nonprofit, and corporate interests. This framework challenges mainstream policy narratives that treat youth work's challenges as isolated workforce issues rather than as systemic consequences of neoliberal governance and market-based social service funding. Alongside the SSIC, the following chapter will engage with Critical Pedagogy and the concept of Praxis, positioning youth work as a site of contestation between institutional compliance and radical, justice-oriented intervention. The analysis will explore how youth workers navigate the tensions between professional obligations, critical resistance, and the structural limitations imposed by funding bodies and service mandates (Vincent & Braun, 2013). Furthermore, this study integrates Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence, arguing that the systemic barriers imposed on youth work practitioners, underfunding, risk-management constraints, and ideological barriers to critical practice, constitute a form of institutional harm that actively obstructs transformative intervention (McCarthy & Deady, 2008; Rogowski, 2015). By applying these theoretical perspectives, this study moves beyond existing debates on professionalization, workforce retention, and service

delivery models, instead interrogating how youth work's constraints are systematically produced and maintained by broader structures of power. This ensures that the analysis goes deeper than descriptive outputs, endeavouring to be more politically engaged, foregrounding the need for structural change rather than individual adaptation to existing conditions (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007). This theoretical framework provides a necessary intervention into the literature, challenging existing studies that fail to connect youth work's struggles to broader critiques of neoliberalism, capitalism, and colonial legacies. The following chapter will establish the conceptual tools required to critically analyze the structural conditions shaping youth work, ensuring that this study remains focused on the root causes of workforce marginalization.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks

Theorizing the Roots of Youth Sector Violence

This chapter establishes the conceptual foundations necessary to scrutinize the systemic forces shaping the practice of youth work within the broader landscape of social services. Building upon the discussion of neoliberal governance and critical youth work in Chapter 2, this chapter expands the analytical scope by introducing the Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC) as a necessary framework for understanding the ways state, nonprofit organizations, and private interests collectively regulate, fund, and manage social services. The SSIC operates as a structural mechanism that extends beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC), incorporating state-funded institutions, privatized care models, and market-driven social service reforms that impose systemic constraints on frontline youth workers and the communities they serve. The NPIC, as originally conceptualized by INCITE! (2007), critiques the entanglement of nonprofit organizations with state and corporate interests, revealing how funding dependencies create a buffer zone that absorbs dissent and limits transformative change. By design, this framework intentionally highlights how nonprofit organizations, despite their stated social justice mandates, often function as mechanisms of social control rather than sites of systemic resistance. The SSIC expands this critique by recognizing that youth work does not occur exclusively within nonprofit structures but is shaped by a complex web of state, philanthropic, and corporate interests that prioritize efficiency, compliance, and market-oriented service delivery over relational, justice-oriented practice (Kwon, 2013).

This chapter further situates the constraints imposed by the SSIC within the broader theoretical framework of structural violence (Galtung, 1969, 1990). Structural violence, as it applies to youth work, manifests through chronic underfunding, bureaucratic oversight, employment precarity, and racialized, gendered, and class-based exclusions within the sector

(Farmer, 2004). The application of this framework allows for an examination of how systemic inequities are embedded in the institutional logics governing youth work, shaping the conditions of employment and the quality and scope of services provided to marginalized communities. To counteract these systemic barriers, this chapter engages with critical pedagogy and praxis as theoretical tools, drawing from the work of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux. Critical pedagogy emphasizes political education, consciousness-raising, and collective action as strategies for resisting systemic oppression in youth work, challenging deficit-based narratives that frame marginalized youth as "problems" to be managed rather than as agents of transformative change (McCready, 2007, 2012). Additionally, intersectionality and Black feminist thought further deepen this analysis, illuminating how racialized, gendered, and queer youth workers and service recipients navigate multiple layers of oppression and marginalization within the SSIC (Collins, 2000; Nathani Wane, 2009).

This chapter is structured into five sections. The first section introduces the NPIC as a regulatory mechanism that constrains grassroots activism within nonprofit governance structures. The second section expands this critique by developing the concept of the SSIC, demonstrating its broader implications for youth work and social service delivery. The third section applies Galtung's theory of structural violence to analyze the systemic barriers youth workers encounter within the SSIC, revealing how neoliberal governance sustains conditions of harm, precarity, and moral distress. The fourth section explores critical pedagogy and praxis as frameworks for resistance, detailing how youth workers sustain justice-oriented practice within an otherwise restrictive system. The final section synthesizes these theoretical perspectives, setting up the analysis of empirical findings in Chapter 4.

The Nonprofit Industrial Complex

The concept of the NPIC emerged from activist and academic critiques of how nonprofit organizations function as intermediaries between the state and marginalized communities, often absorbing dissent and reinforcing institutional power rather than challenging systemic inequalities (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007). The origins of the NPIC critique lie in its exposure of how social justice movements become co-opted through nonprofit governance structures that prioritize bureaucratic stability, risk management, and funder priorities over grassroots organizing and radical transformation. This section explores the NPIC's limitations in addressing structural inequities, arguing that while it provides an important critique of nonprofit dependency on state and corporate funding, it does not fully account for the broader governance structures that regulate social services. The NPIC is characterized by its role in containing radical political movements within bureaucratic service delivery models that prioritize state-sanctioned reforms over systemic change (Y. Smith, 2017). As Andrea Smith (2017) argues, "organizations might give up their nonprofit status, but this did not necessarily improve organizing if they did not challenge the capitalist assumptions behind their work" (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007, p. X). Smith's insight highlights how nonprofit organizations, despite being framed as sites of progressive intervention, operate under conditions that limit their capacity to address root causes of inequality. Building on that insight, the following critique demonstrates how the professionalization of social justice work, driven by managerial oversight and funder accountability measures, further constrains the political agency of nonprofit organizations, leading to a depoliticization of activism and advocacy.

Paul Kivel (2000) introduces the concept of the "buffer zone" to describe how even nonprofit organizations can function as regulatory mechanisms that maintain social stability while preventing systemic upheaval (Kivel & Johnstone, 2007, p. 122). The buffer zone operates

in three keyways: by providing limited relief to marginalized communities to prevent widespread unrest, by offering an illusion of progress that maintains faith in the existing system, and by professionalizing activism in ways that align with institutional priorities rather than grassroots demands. In the youth work sector, this manifests through funding models that prioritize individualized behavioral interventions (including risk prevention and employability programs) over systemic advocacy and community mobilization. The nonprofit sector, while often perceived as an alternative to state institutions, remains deeply embedded within the logic of neoliberal governance, absorbing oppositional energy while sustaining the underlying structures of inequity (Rodríguez, 2017). While the NPIC provides a valuable critique of nonprofit governance, it remains insufficient for fully capturing the structural constraints that shape youth work. The SSIC expands this analysis by recognizing that social services do not function exclusively within nonprofit structures but are shaped by an interlocking system of state institutions, privatized service models, and neoliberal funding mechanisms. As a result, youth workers encounter systemic barriers that are not solely the result of nonprofit dependencies but are reflective of broader socio-political arrangements that regulate care, employment, and service provision. This broader perspective necessitates a shift toward analyzing the SSIC as a means of understanding how youth work is systematically constrained by overlapping economic, political, and institutional forces. The next section expands on this critique by introducing the Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC) as a theoretical framework that builds upon and extends the NPIC critique, demonstrating how youth work is regulated across nonprofit, state, and private-sector institutions.

The Social Service Industrial Complex

Defining the SSIC

The Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC) extends beyond the limitations of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC) by interrogating how the governance of social services is embedded in a broader network of state institutions, public-private partnerships, philanthropic organizations, and corporate actors that collectively regulate and constrain youth work. While the NPIC critique has primarily focused on how nonprofit organizations absorb radical energy and depoliticize activism through their reliance on state and corporate funding, the SSIC encompasses a larger structural apparatus that extends these constraints across multiple sectors of social service delivery, operating as a mechanism of control, containment, and regulation. The SSIC is an industrialized system of care governance that is deeply enmeshed within neoliberal, colonial, and racialized frameworks of social control. It is structured through a combination of bureaucratic oversight, funding mechanisms, and managerialist policies that prioritize compliance, efficiency, and outcome-based performance metrics over holistic, justice-oriented care work (Spolander et al., 2014). This institutional design ensures that social services, including youth work, do not function as sites of radical intervention or collective empowerment but instead operate within the parameters of state-defined legitimacy, reinforcing existing power relations and mitigating the potential for systemic change.

Within the SSIC, state agencies, philanthropic foundations, and corporate funders dictate the priorities of service provision, often shaping the nature of interventions through funding conditions that emphasize depoliticized, crisis-oriented responses rather than preventative or transformative action. For example, many social service programs and youth-serving organizations are compelled to align with risk management frameworks that define success in terms of individual behavioral change, such as workforce readiness, employability training, or

crime prevention, rather than addressing structural determinants of marginalization, such as systemic racism, economic precarity, and generational trauma (Dei & Kempf, 2013). A core function of the SSIC is to ensure that social services remain legible to the state and funders through processes of professionalization, standardization, and bureaucratic control. This logic extends beyond the nonprofit sector, shaping government-funded agencies, private social enterprises, and hybrid service models that blend public and private sector governance. Unlike earlier welfare-state models that framed public services as a form of collective responsibility, the SSIC is structured through the neoliberal logic of market competition, where organizations must constantly prove their value through data collection, impact measurement, and funding applications that align with state priorities rather than community-defined needs.

At its core, the SSIC represents a shift from relational models of care toward a regulatory and bureaucratic model of social service governance. The professionalization of youth work within this system has introduced barriers to entry that privilege credentialism, managerial expertise, and administrative oversight over lived experience, grassroots organizing, and relational expertise in working with marginalized communities (Baines, 2010b). This dynamic affects frontline workers and may dictate terms of engagement for youth, who must navigate social service systems that define them as clients, risks, or deficits to be managed rather than as active participants in their own communities. By expanding beyond the NPIC critique, the SSIC framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of how neoliberalism, colonialism, and racial capitalism shape the governance and funding of youth work. It exposes the ways power, regulation, and market logics intersect to constrain the possibilities for radical care work and social transformation. This conceptual expansion is essential for understanding why youth work, despite its roots in social justice and relational engagement, remains structurally constrained within institutions that prioritize containment over liberation.

The next section examines how the SSIC is sustained through neoliberal governance mechanisms, particularly through marketization strategies that commodify social services and reinforce hierarchies of power within the care economy.

The Industrial Complex Framework

The Social Service Industrial Complex must be understood as part of a broader network of industrial complexes that function as systems of state governance, economic extraction, and institutional regulation. The concept of an industrial complex has been extensively theorized in critical scholarship, demonstrating how institutions that claim to exist for public welfare, including prisons, education, healthcare, and social services, become embedded within structures that prioritize state control, corporate profit, and bureaucratic expansion over genuine social transformation. The Social Service Industrial Complex operates within this logic by reinforcing state oversight of social services while maintaining an outward appearance of humanitarian intervention that obscures its deeper role in the containment, regulation, and management of marginalized communities (J. B. Davis & Klaes, 2003). The expansion of social services under neoliberalism has not resulted in a redistribution of power or resources that enables greater autonomy for communities but has instead reinforced mechanisms of surveillance, professionalization, and institutionalized dependency on funding models that prioritize measurable outcomes over substantive social change. The logic of industrial complexes, as seen in the criminal justice, medical, and education sectors, is rooted in the continuous expansion of bureaucratic institutions that serve to justify their own existence. The Social Service Industrial Complex follows this trajectory, ensuring that the provision of youth work remains accountable to funding agencies and government oversight structures rather than to the communities that these programs claim to serve (Gilmore, 2007).

The critical scholarship on the Prison-Industrial Complex provides important insights into how state institutions operate under the guise of public service while reinforcing mechanisms of exclusion and racialized control. Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have extensively analyzed how the prison system functions not as a space of rehabilitation but as an industry sustained by the expansion of punitive policies, private contracts, and state surveillance, ensuring that carceral institutions remain central to social and economic regulation. The Social Service Industrial Complex mirrors this framework, structuring youth work within systems that emphasize behavioral regulation, risk management, and workforce preparation rather than investing in meaningful, community-driven approaches to social justice (A. Y. Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007). Youth work is increasingly tied to criminal justice initiatives, including gang prevention programs, behavioral modification interventions, and state-funded mentorship programs designed to integrate young people into pre-existing socio-economic hierarchies. These programs do not challenge the structures that produce social exclusion but instead reinforce a model of intervention that prioritizes individual compliance with state-sanctioned expectations. This dynamic has been well-documented in the study of how risk assessment frameworks disproportionately target Black and Indigenous youth for intervention, ensuring that youth work remains entangled with broader carceral systems that criminalize poverty, racialized identities, and nonconformity to dominant cultural norms.

The Medical-Industrial Complex provides another critical point of comparison, highlighting how healthcare systems, much like social services, have been transformed into industries governed by principles of profit and efficiency rather than care and well-being. The privatization of healthcare has resulted in the exclusion of those who cannot afford access to medical services, reinforcing social hierarchies that determine who is deemed deserving of care. The Social Service Industrial Complex operates within a similar framework, where organizations

that align with government and corporate funding priorities receive financial support, while those that advocate for systemic change, alternative healing practices, or community-led care are systematically underfunded or defunded altogether. The professionalization of care work within both the “Medical Industrial Complex” and social service sectors has created an internal hierarchy that privileges those with institutional credentials and policy expertise over those with lived experience in the communities they serve (Relman, 1980). The increasing bureaucratization of youth work has resulted in a system where professionals are expected to function as administrators of state-mandated programs, spending more time on compliance reporting and impact measurement than on direct engagement with young people. The structures of professionalization in youth work mirror the exclusionary nature of medical expertise, where Indigenous and Black healing practices are dismissed in favor of Western models of diagnosis and treatment. The devaluation of non-Western, culturally responsive approaches to care reflects the colonial logics embedded within the Social Service Industrial Complex, ensuring that services remain aligned with state and corporate governance structures rather than with the self-determined needs of marginalized communities

The restructuring of public education under neoliberalism offers additional insight into how youth work has been shaped by industrial complex frameworks. The education system has been reshaped through policies that emphasize standardization, high stakes testing, and workforce preparation over critical pedagogy, social justice, and holistic development. The Social Service Industrial Complex follows a similar trajectory, where funding priorities dictate the focus of youth work, ensuring that programs emphasize individual responsibility and economic self-sufficiency while actively discouraging approaches that center political education, grassroots organizing, or collective action. This shift reflects the broader function of industrial complexes as mechanisms for state regulation, where care and education are transformed into

industries that reinforce neoliberal governance rather than sites for radical social transformation. The expansion of the Social Service Industrial Complex has not led to an increase in community autonomy or access to more equitable and just social services. Instead, it has reinforced a structure where service provision is dictated by bureaucratic imperatives, where professionalization creates barriers to grassroots engagement, and where funding mechanisms ensure that organizations remain in competition with one another rather than collaborating for systemic change. The industrial complex framework provides a crucial lens for understanding how youth work has been integrated into broader systems of regulation and containment, ensuring that the sector remains accountable to institutions of power rather than to the people it claims to serve.

The function of the Social Service Industrial Complex as a mechanism of state governance and economic extraction is further reinforced through the outsourcing of social services to private actors, embedding profit-driven logics into care work. The increasing privatization of youth work, including the contracting of nonprofit organizations to deliver state-mandated services, mirrors the broader neoliberal restructuring of public institutions. The presence of market-driven policies within the social service sector ensures that organizations must continuously justify their existence through measurable outputs, competitive grant applications, and compliance with state oversight structures. This system does not prioritize care, empowerment, or self-determination but instead ensures that youth work remains structurally dependent on the very forces that create the conditions for marginalization in the first place. The analysis of the Social Service Industrial Complex within the broader landscape of industrial complex frameworks demonstrates how social services function not as neutral or benevolent institutions but as systems of governance that regulate, contain, and manage populations under neoliberal and colonial logics. Understanding these intersections is essential for developing

critical strategies for improving the personal and professional conditions within youth work, ensuring that practitioners are equipped to challenge the systemic constraints imposed upon their labor and the communities they serve. This discussion provides the necessary foundation for the following section, which explores structural violence as an analytical framework for understanding how systemic barriers limit the transformative potential of youth work and social services.

Structural Violence

The conceptualization of structural violence provides a crucial lens for examining the systemic and institutional barriers embedded within the social service sector, including the nonprofit and social service industrial complexes. While the frameworks of the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC) and the social service industrial complex (SSIC) illustrate how youth work is governed by intersecting systems of funding, policy, and institutional constraints, Johan Galtung's (1969, 1990) theorization of structural violence extends this analysis by foregrounding how institutional arrangements may systematically produce harm and inequality, even in the absence of direct or overt aggression. This theoretical model makes visible the enduring mechanisms that sustain conditions of poverty, underfunding, racialized disparities, and precarious employment within youth work, highlighting the structural forces that perpetuate these harms rather than attributing them to individual actors or isolated policy failures. The dehumanization inherent within these structures does not operate through direct acts of violence but through an insidious normalization of inequity, where service providers and recipients alike are conditioned to accept systemic limitations as immutable realities. The NPIC and SSIC, rather than actively resolving social inequalities, function in ways that maintain and regulate the very conditions they claim to address. These systems obstruct transformative interventions and depoliticize youth work through bureaucratic frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes,

risk aversion, and managerial control over relational, justice-oriented practices (Baines, 2010a; Pizzigati, 2013). In this sense, structural violence manifests as both an absence, the systematic deprivation of resources, autonomy, and sustainable working conditions, and as a presence, in the form of institutional surveillance, policy restrictions, and funding mechanisms that actively constrain the scope of critical practice.

Defining Structural Violence

The notion of structural violence as formulated by Galtung (1969) captures the unseen yet pervasive harms that institutions and policies inflict on marginalized populations. Unlike direct violence, which is visible and intentional, structural violence is embedded in the very fabric of social and economic systems, operating through mechanisms that create preventable suffering and limit life chances without overt aggression. Within youth services, these systemic harms are manifest in funding precarity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and policy mandates that often contradict the principles of care and advocacy (Farmer, 2004). One of the most salient manifestations of structural violence in youth work is the chronic underfunding of services, a condition that disproportionately impacts racialized and low-income communities. This is not a matter of administrative oversight but a form of structural harm that systematically restricts access to services and erodes the financial security of youth workers themselves. When funding cycles are short-term, conditional, and reliant on demonstrating predefined 'outcomes,' the result is a work environment characterized by precarity, burnout, and an inability to engage in sustained, meaningful relationships with young people. Furthermore, the expectation that youth workers must continually justify the legitimacy of their work within neoliberal metrics of efficiency and impact reinforces the very inequalities these services purport to address. Beyond financial instability, the structural violence of managerial control further constrains youth workers by enforcing rigid accountability measures, intensive documentation requirements, and

risk-averse protocols that hinder relational and community-centered approaches. The emphasis on quantifiable deliverables often leads to the moral distress of practitioners, who find themselves navigating tensions between institutional expectations and the needs of the young people they serve (Cribb, 2011; De St Croix, 2018). In many cases, youth workers are required to comply with funding mandates that contradict the principles of critical, justice-oriented practice, forcing them into a position where they must either disengage from advocacy or risk professional repercussions.

The Intersection of Structural and Cultural Violence

Galtung (1990) extends the framework of structural violence by introducing the concept of cultural violence, which refers to the ideological and discursive processes that legitimize and normalize structural harm. Cultural violence functions as the ideological scaffolding that makes structural violence appear natural, necessary, or even beneficial. Within the field of youth work, prevailing narratives around “at-risk” youth, “undeserving” populations, and the supposed inefficiency of grassroots initiatives serve to justify austerity measures, funding restrictions, and punitive interventions (Baldrige, 2020b; Wilson, 2011). By framing marginalized youth as inherently problematic or deficient, social service systems reinforce the logic that limited funding and restrictive programming are rational responses to social conditions rather than intentional mechanisms of control and containment. The narratives that underpin cultural violence are often deeply racialized and rooted in colonial legacies. The framing of Indigenous and Black youth as deviant or as requiring surveillance and intervention reflects a historical continuity of paternalistic and punitive state responses to racialized populations (Dei & Jaimungal, 2018; Memmi, 2006). This framing informs the design and implementation of youth policies and shapes public perceptions, influencing which populations are deemed “worthy” of investment and which are treated as expendable. In this way, cultural violence serves to obscure

the systemic nature of structural harm, redirecting attention away from institutional failures and onto individual behaviors.

When cultural violence renders structural violence invisible, youth workers themselves may internalize these constraints as inevitable, depoliticizing their own practice and limiting the possibility of collective resistance. The normalization of funding scarcity, managerial oversight, and bureaucratic inefficiencies can lead to a form of resignation, where practitioners accept the logic of the system rather than actively challenging it (Tascón & Ife, 2020). Understanding structural and cultural violence in tandem allows for a deeper analysis of the ways the SSIC perpetuates systemic harm while simultaneously obscuring its own complicity. By framing youth work within these broader structures of power, it becomes possible to challenge the discursive and material conditions that constrain critical practice and to imagine alternative models that center justice, relationality, and community well-being over compliance and institutional self-preservation.

Critical Praxis

In response to the systemic constraints imposed by the Social Service Industrial Complex and the structural violence embedded within social service delivery, critical praxis emerges as an essential framework for resistance and transformation in youth work. Drawing from the foundational insights of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, this section explores how critical pedagogy fosters political consciousness and how youth workers engage in praxis to navigate, resist, and subvert the constraints imposed by neoliberal governance. The theoretical foundation of critical praxis is rooted in an understanding that education and social services are not neutral spaces but are instead sites of ideological struggle, where dominant narratives of individual responsibility and behavioral compliance must be actively challenged through collective engagement, political education, and transformative action. By employing principles of a critical

praxis, theoretical discourses and practices within youth work are consistently assessed for their proximity to power dynamics and commitments to social justice. Through praxis, the violence implicated by the limiting of potential and capacity through the frameworks of Structural Violence, Apraxis, and BeneViolence are counterbalanced through a paradigm of humanization. This humanizing movement, which critiques modes of structural oppression and invests in human liberation, confronts systems of hierarchy which tend to discredit the voice of service users and frontline staff. By deconstructing dehumanizing institutions and ideologies, the open discipline of critical praxis invites participants to question whether the promised efficiencies of capitalism and neoliberalism are as valuable or relevant as they purport to be. One general question of critical praxis might ask, “if society is designed to serve the social good, why does a system that exploits the many for the benefit of the few persist?” and if the inquiry were turned towards the youth sector context, it might be curious about “why service users and frontline staff can feel alienated in a sector designed for their interests?” These are the critical questions that work to align ideas and action.

Paulo Freire and the Role of Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire’s contributions to critical pedagogy offer a framework through which youth work can be understood as a political act rather than a neutral profession. Critical pedagogy extends beyond an equitable teaching methodology and encompasses the integration of theory and action to work towards humanism and shared communal wellbeing. Freire’s critique of the “banking model of education,” in which learners are treated as passive recipients of knowledge, has direct parallels to the ways many social service interventions construct youth as subjects to be managed and regulated rather than engaged as critical actors. Additionally, Freire emphasizes education being a tool for liberation while using mutual dialogue as a lever for challenging, and changing the systems of power, oppression, and inequality. Within neoliberal frameworks, youth

work is often structured around compliance-oriented programs that emphasize risk prevention and individual responsibility while neglecting the structural factors that shape young people's realities. Freire's insistence on praxis, the dialectical process of reflection and action, provides an alternative model through which youth workers can support young people in recognizing and challenging the systems that constrain them. Central to Freirean pedagogy is the concept of conscientization, the process through which individuals develop critical awareness of their social conditions and their capacity for transformation (Freire, 1970/2000).

While the concept of praxis is insightful for informing critical practice, it is important to avoid romanticizing notions of the concept as Doug Nicholls has cautioned, stating "Youth work thinking has ghettoised itself by forgetting its own relationship with other social activities. A pseudo-identification with the word 'praxis' has developed. This is supposed to inherit the Freirean and Gramscian notions of combining theory and practice in social action for change (Nicholls, 2012, p. 167)." While the notion of "ghettoizing" conceptual frameworks is troubling, there is some relevance to being concerned with "pseudo-identification" with the concepts of informed action if the deconstructive aspects are depoliticized. This is why the concept of critical praxis is important to integrate in this discourse to avoid reifying the Gramscian "hegemonic" ideologies that maintain status quo structures even if they profess to be progressive.

In the context of youth work, young people must be encouraged to be active participants in naming, analyzing, and responding to the systemic injustices they encounter. This process requires a shift away from hierarchical service delivery models toward dialogical approaches that position youth and practitioners as co-learners engaged in a shared struggle for social change (Jennings et al., 2006). The emphasis on dialogue is particularly significant given the ways traditional social services often reproduce paternalistic relationships between workers and youth. By centering dialogue and co-creation, youth work rooted in critical pedagogy, and therefore

critical praxis, challenges the hierarchical power dynamics that pervade social services and affirms young people's capacity to shape their own futures (Ord, 2012, 2016).

Henry Giroux and the Neoliberal Assault on Social Services

Expanding on Freire's foundation, Henry Giroux provides a critical analysis of how neoliberal policies have restructured education and social services, hollowing out public institutions and subordinating care work to market imperatives. Giroux (2014) argues that neoliberalism operates not only as an economic project but as a pedagogical force as well, shaping how individuals understand their place in society and what forms of knowledge are valued. Within youth work, the prioritization of employability programs, behavioral modification initiatives, and outcome-driven service models reflects this ideological shift, positioning young people as economic units to be optimized rather than as full human beings with complex needs and political agency. For Giroux, public institutions such as education and youth services should function as democratic spaces that foster critical thought and civic engagement rather than sites of control and regulation. However, under neoliberal governance, these institutions have increasingly been reduced to mechanisms for social discipline, where youth are prepared for precarious labor markets rather than empowered to challenge systemic inequities (Giroux, 2013). This shift has direct consequences for youth work, as funding structures and institutional priorities often compromise workers' ability to engage in advocacy, political education, or community organizing.

When youth services are designed to produce measurable socio-economic outputs, including job placements or reductions in "risky" behaviors, they become sites of (hegemonic) social reproduction rather than transformation. Giroux's critique extends to the ways neoliberalism constructs care work as both essential and disposable. While youth services are often framed as necessary supports for marginalized populations, they are also subject to chronic

underfunding, precarity, and bureaucratic oversight that limit their effectiveness. This contradiction reflects what Giroux describes as a broader neoliberal strategy of dismantling public institutions while simultaneously expanding punitive and surveillance-based interventions in marginalized communities. In this context, youth work that aligns with Giroux's vision must resist co-optation into neoliberal service models and instead prioritize approaches that foster critical agency, relational care, and structural transformation.

The Role of Praxis in Critical Youth Work

Within the constraints of the Social Service Industrial Complex, youth workers engage in various forms of critical praxis to resist dehumanizing institutional structures while simultaneously providing meaningful support to young people. Critical praxis, as conceptualized by Freire, requires tangible acts of resistance, creativity, and solidarity that disrupt oppressive conditions. In youth work, this praxis takes multiple forms, including the development of informal networks of care, challenging bureaucratic constraints, and the cultivation of spaces where young people can collectively challenge the conditions that shape their lives. One of the central tensions in critical youth work is the need to navigate the contradictions of working within institutions that often reproduce harm while striving to create spaces of support and transformation. According to McMahon et al., critical youth work praxis demonstrates a “commitment to social justice praxis that involves the capacity to combine critical awareness, critical analysis and critical action” even if these critical values have to be performed through acts of resistance (McMahon et al., 2024, p. 56). Youth workers frequently employ what James Scott identifies as "hidden transcripts," subversive acts that challenge dominant power structures without overtly confronting institutional authorities (Massoumi & Morgan, 2024; Scott, 2019). These hidden transcripts manifest in off-the-record mentoring, the provision of services beyond official mandates, and the creation of informal spaces where youth can engage in political

education and collective organizing. While these strategies may not always lead to immediate structural change, they represent important forms of resistance that sustain critical youth work within the constraints of the SSIC.

Beyond individualized acts of resistance, critical praxis in youth work also necessitates engagement with broader movements for social justice. This means moving beyond service provision and actively participating in advocacy, policy change, and community organizing that address the root causes of marginalization. Participatory action research, youth-led organizing, and coalition-building efforts all represent methods that youth workers can use to connect everyday struggles to larger systemic transformations (Baldrige, 2020b). By linking relational care with collective action, critical youth work resists the fragmentation imposed by neoliberal service models and affirms the possibility of structural change. Sustaining hope and commitment in the face of systemic constraints is a core challenge for youth workers engaged in critical praxis. The conditions of precarity, burnout, and institutional pressure can make resistance feel futile, leading some workers to disengage or retreat into compliance with bureaucratic norms. However, as Freire and Galtung emphasize, hope is not a passive state but an active commitment to struggle, even in the face of adversity. Critical praxis in youth work, therefore, requires both individual resilience and the cultivation of collective strategies for sustaining engagement, fostering solidarity, and resisting co-optation into oppressive systems.

By positioning critical pedagogy and critical praxis as central to the struggle against the constraints of the SSIC, this section affirms that youth work is not a neutral or apolitical endeavor but a site of ideological contestation. The neoliberalization of youth services imposes structural limitations, but it does not eliminate the potential for resistance and transformation. Through relational care, political education, and collective action, youth workers can disrupt the logics of compliance and containment, creating spaces where young people can reclaim agency

and work towards a more just and liberatory future. In the analysis and discussion of this research, critical praxis will be aligned with critical approaches identified by youth workers in Central Ontario in the ways that they find reaffirmation and support in the work they engage. Likewise, within the data analysis, obstacles to critical youth work will be viewed through the lens of dehumanization or structural violence in the sense of youth workers being blocked from either exercising the fullness of their practice/praxis (reciprocity/holistic supports) or their own experiences of structural marginality (silencing/discrimination). Ginwright & Cammarota have embraced the concepts of praxis for critical youth work, advocating for “social justice youth development” to actively incorporate a lens of contextualized critical consciousness, or “conscientização” according to Freire, to promote structural transformation, humanization and agency in the sector (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 87).

“Drawing on Freire’s understanding of “cultural workers,” youth workers engaged in economically and politically disenfranchised communities work alongside students to identify and make sense of injustices in an oppressive society. As cultural workers, youth workers often create spaces and opportunities for young people to process and critique the social and political problems they encounter. In this way, “Community-based Education Spaces” (CBES) become critical spaces in which youth and adults foster relationships that facilitate opportunities to build a sense of consciousness and understanding about the world in which they live, and act upon it (Baldrige et al., 2017, p. 381). The philosophical and pedagogical variety within community-based programs make it untenable to assume a universal counterhegemonic framework that always engage youth with strength-based approaches. The heterogeneity of youth work makes oversimplification of the motives and operations of the sector impractical; however, there are deep connections between shared experiences and philosophical values that create an opportunity

for future studies to explore how youth workers are uniquely positioned in the current climate of neoliberal dominance and pedagogical resistance to receive greater supports and recognition.

Conceptualizing Apraxis and BeneViolence

The contradictions shaping youth work cannot be fully understood without a precise language to name the systemic conditions that limit its potential. The dissonance experienced by youth workers, the tensions between ethical commitments, institutional mandates, and funding constraints, are not isolated frustrations but structural patterns embedded within the sector's governance. However, without a shared vocabulary to articulate these dynamics, practitioners are often left navigating these contradictions in isolation, struggling to challenge the conditions that shape their work. Developing a conceptual framework to critically analyze the disconnection between intent and implementation, between care and control, and between transformation and containment is essential for creating a more just and sustainable field of practice. Two terms that capture these structural contradictions are Apraxis and BeneViolence, both of which provide critical tools for understanding the forces that govern youth work under neoliberalism. Apraxis refers to the persistent disconnect between critical knowledge and institutionalized practice, describing how youth workers, despite possessing the expertise, relationships, and ethical commitments necessary for transformative engagement, are systematically obstructed from enacting meaningful change. The structures that govern the field, bureaucratic oversight, funding imperatives, and performance metrics, sever reflection from action, reducing youth work to a service-delivery model that is increasingly detached from its justice-driven roots

BeneViolence, on the other hand, describes how well-intentioned interventions, policies, and institutional structures that purport to support marginalized groups often function as mechanisms of control and systemic harm. Rooted in colonial and neoliberal logics, BeneViolence operates through the contradiction of care and containment, where programs

framed as protective or empowering reinforce cycles of dependence, regulation, and exclusion rather than enabling genuine autonomy (Blackstock, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This pattern is evident in youth policies that claim to address systemic inequalities yet reinforce surveillance, punitive interventions, and institutional self-preservation as primary objectives. These frameworks offer a means of moving beyond fragmented critiques of youth work's precarity, burnout, and institutional incoherence toward a more precise analysis of the systemic conditions that shape the sector. By naming Apraxis and BeneViolence as defining characteristics of contemporary youth work, these concepts create a foundation for collective resistance, policy transformation, and the redefinition of youth work as a space of ethical, relational, and justice-driven engagement rather than institutional containment.

Apraxis: The Disintegration of Theory and Action

Across the landscape of youth work, practitioners articulate a profound dissonance between the principles that shape their engagement and the institutional structures that dictate how their labor is recognized, measured, and constrained. The term Apraxis gives form to this condition, capturing the persistent disconnection between critical knowledge and institutionalized practice, between the political and ethical imperatives that animate youth work and the bureaucratic systems that distort and delimit its possibilities. While critical pedagogy has long championed the fusion of reflection and action in the pursuit of social justice (Freire, 1970/2000), youth work remains riddled with contradictions that sever professional intent from institutional reality. Apraxis finds its conceptual roots in apraxia, a neurological disorder that disrupts an individual's ability to carry out purposeful movement despite possessing the physical capacity to do so. This neurological parallel reflects a deeper structural dysfunction in youth work: practitioners are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and relationships necessary to enact transformative change, yet their work is confined within funding models, policy frameworks, and

managerial constraints that render their expertise unrecognized, undervalued, and structurally obstructed. The issue is not merely burnout or moral exhaustion but a systemic incapacity to integrate the relational, pedagogical, and advocacy dimensions of youth work into institutional practice.

Interviews with youth workers illustrate multiple layers of fragmentation that define their professional reality. Many describe a sector where funding priorities dictate practice, where institutional metrics fail to capture the depth of their work, and where decision-making processes exclude the very communities, they serve. The disconnect between their training, knowledge, and ethical commitments and the reality of practice produces a persistent contradiction. Their sense of purpose is not diminished, but it is structurally undermined by managerialism, neoliberal accountability, and institutional self-preservation. These forces impose constraints that reposition youth workers from critical facilitators of engagement to agents of service delivery, where their labor is repurposed to align with institutional mandates rather than relational depth or community responsiveness (Wilson et al., 2011). The issue is not solely that institutions impose limitations; rather, the way legitimacy is defined within these structures' privileges easily quantifiable outcomes over the complexity of relational and advocacy-driven engagements. Youth work, reduced to an instrumentalized service model, becomes detached from broader movements for social change. The emphasis on measurable outputs and compliance-driven programming reflects a shift in institutional priorities, where stability is prioritized over transformation, containment over mobilization, and bureaucratic efficiency over meaningful intervention.

These contradictions are further compounded by the sector's chronic instability, high turnover, and the absence of sustained professional infrastructure. While education, social work, and healthcare share similar patterns of undervaluation and bureaucratic constraint, youth work

remains uniquely marginalized due to its fragmented governance and lack of dedicated advocacy bodies (Spolander et al., 2014). The result is a sector where knowledge remains siloed, workers experience their roles as precarious, and institutional incoherence prevents meaningful long-term planning. The disconnection between structural supports and the realities of practice ensures that youth workers operate in a constant state of negotiation, where their expertise is simultaneously required and disregarded. Naming Apraxis as a defining condition of youth work is essential because, despite widespread recognition of these contradictions, there is no shared conceptual framework through which to articulate, challenge, and disrupt them. The field remains fractured, with youth workers struggling to navigate institutional constraints while lacking the structural mechanisms to advocate for change. The absence of a coherent discourse surrounding these challenges limits the ability to mobilize collective responses, leaving practitioners to navigate their frustrations in isolation. The consequence is a sector where turnover remains high, transformative work is continually obstructed, and institutions remain insulated from accountability to the very communities they claim to serve (Karabanow, 1999).

This condition is not accidental but embedded in the design of youth work within neoliberal social service frameworks. The extraction of passion, creativity, and commitment from youth workers, without the structural support to sustain their labor, ensures that institutional priorities take precedence over ethical practice. The institutional logics that govern youth work do not merely constrain engagement but actively neutralize its transformative potential, reshaping programs to align with risk management and behavioral compliance rather than empowerment and justice (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). Moving beyond Apraxis requires structural accountability, professional autonomy, and the integration of critical knowledge into practice. The goal is not to professionalize in the traditional sense but to redefine professional legitimacy on terms that reflect the political, ethical, and pedagogical commitments that animate

youth work as a field of radical possibility rather than institutional containment. A sector that prioritizes the integration of theory and action must actively resist bureaucratic co-optation, embedding relational, anti-oppressive, and justice-oriented practice as the foundation of its work. Without these structural shifts, youth work will continue to function as a site where transformative aspirations are continually obstructed, and the full potential of both practitioners and the young people they support remains unrealized.

BeneViolence: The Structural Contradictions of Care

BeneViolence, as a conceptual framework, first emerged in my master's work (Cromwell Simmonds, 2007) as a critical interrogation of the insidious contradictions embedded in cultural narratives, policies, and institutional practices that simultaneously claim to support marginalized groups while enacting systemic harm. Initially developed as an analytical tool to examine the psychological violence of contradictory messaging in media and public discourse, the concept has since evolved to capture the structural dimensions of harm within the Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC). This framework expands upon Johan Galtung's (1969) foundational work on structural violence by incorporating an explicit analysis of the ways acts of care, benevolence, and humanitarian intervention are weaponized to reinforce hierarchies of power and sustain systemic inequities. Paulo Freire's (1970/2000) critique of false charity provides an important theoretical anchor for BeneViolence. Freire argues that charity, when divorced from a radical analysis of power and structural transformation, functions as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo. It offers temporary relief from oppression while reinforcing the conditions that necessitate that relief in the first place. This cycle of dependency and pacification is not an incidental byproduct of social services but an intentional function of institutions that claim to serve the public while ultimately maintaining the existing order. BeneViolence, then, extends this critique by demonstrating how contemporary neoliberal governance and colonial

legacies shape the contradictions of care work, ensuring that social services operate as instruments of containment, regulation, and surveillance rather than as vehicles for liberation.

The history of colonial governance provides an early and enduring model for BeneViolence. The rhetoric of civilizing missions, which justified conquest and subjugation under the pretense of benevolence, is one of the clearest historical examples of harm masquerading as care. Tacitus' account of the Roman general Agricola's campaign in Britain exemplifies this contradiction. The speech attributed to Calgacus before the Battle of Mons Graupius describes the Romans as a force that "plunders, butchers, and ravishes, and calls it by the lying name of empire. They make a desert and call it peace" (Tacitus, as cited in Fraser, 2005). The logic embedded in this passage remains a powerful descriptor of how state and institutional violence is routinely reframed as necessary for security, stability, and progress. Colonial governance relied on direct forms of domination and the strategic deployment of care-based interventions designed to pacify resistance and legitimize control. The establishment of residential schools, for example, was framed as an effort to "save" Indigenous children while functioning as a tool for cultural erasure and state control (Blackstock, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The moral justification of such interventions served to obscure their violent underpinnings, a pattern that persists in contemporary iterations of social policy, particularly in the criminal justice and child welfare systems. The policing of racialized and economically disenfranchised communities is another example of BeneViolence at work. Framed as public safety measures, these interventions disproportionately target Black and Indigenous youth, reinforcing cycles of criminalization under the guise of protection and rehabilitation (Muhammad, 2019).

BeneViolence is thus an essential colonial tool, one that operates through a contradictory logic in which care is inextricably tied to control. The same mechanisms that provide social

supports also enforce compliance, ensuring that services do not disrupt but rather reinforce the broader economic and racial hierarchies of settler colonial states. In the contemporary landscape of social services, BeneViolence is structurally embedded within the SSIC, which operates under the neoliberal imperative to manage social problems rather than to address their root causes. The commodification of care, driven by funding models that prioritize efficiency, performance metrics, and bureaucratic oversight, ensures that interventions remain transactional rather than transformational (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). Within this framework, youth work and social services are expected to provide relief from systemic harms without challenging the structures that produce them. The contradictions of BeneViolence are particularly evident in the experiences of frontline youth workers, who often enter the field driven by commitments to justice, advocacy, and relational care, only to find themselves constrained by institutional mandates that demand compliance with neoliberal performance indicators (Baines, 2017). The misalignment between youth workers' values and the metrics used to evaluate their work creates a persistent Apraxis, where theory and practice are disconnected, and meaningful engagement is displaced by bureaucratic obligations (Freire, 1970/2000).

This dynamic produces what many youth workers describe as onerous work, tasks that feel misaligned with their purpose, ethics, and professional identity, yet are required to maintain funding and institutional legitimacy. As one youth worker expressed, "The work that actually matters doesn't count. What counts are the reports, the forms, and the meetings that serve the funders, not the youth" (Interview, 2023). The demand to prioritize quantifiable outcomes over meaningful engagement reflects the broader crisis of BeneViolence, in which the appearance of care is maintained while the deeper relational and systemic work necessary for true social transformation is undermined. Beyond its structural and institutional manifestations, BeneViolence also operates as a form of psychological violence, wherein the contradictions

embedded within the SSIC create deep emotional and cognitive dissonance for practitioners and service users alike. The expectation that youth workers should labor out of passion and altruism while being denied fair compensation, career stability, or adequate mental health support exemplifies this form of violence (Mackenzie, 2020).

BeneViolence is also at play in the ways that systemic failures are reframed as individual shortcomings. When programs fail to achieve their intended outcomes, the blame is often placed on practitioners or service users, rather than on the structural conditions that limit their effectiveness. This logic mirrors historical colonial narratives that pathologized Indigenous and racialized communities, framing them as inherently deficient while simultaneously denying the role of systemic violence in producing their marginalization (Battiste, 2013).

The normalization of BeneViolence within social services obscures the structural contradictions of the SSIC and depoliticizes the experiences of those working within and impacted by these systems. By framing social problems as technical challenges to be managed rather than as political struggles rooted in historical and economic injustice, BeneViolence ensures that the status quo remains intact (Wilson, 2008). Naming BeneViolence is a critical step toward resisting its function within the SSIC. Without a shared language to articulate these contradictions, practitioners, service users, and advocates are left to navigate them in isolation, unable to effectively challenge the systemic forces that produce them. The concept of BeneViolence offers a diagnostic tool for understanding how harm is reproduced under the guise of care and encourages a reimagining of social services beyond the constraints of neoliberalism and colonial governance.

Intersectionality and Decolonization

The preceding discussion established critical pedagogy and praxis as foundational frameworks for resisting the structural constraints embedded within the Social Service Industrial

Complex (SSIC). However, an examination of youth work that does not account for the intersecting forces of race, gender, sexuality, and class risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to challenge. This section introduces intersectionality and Black feminist thought as indispensable analytical tools for understanding how multiple systems of oppression interact within the SSIC, influencing both the labor of youth workers and the experiences of the young people they serve. Drawing from the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, this analysis highlights how Black feminist critiques of social institutions, power structures, and systemic exclusions deepen the understanding of structural violence in the youth sector. Intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding the ways race, gender, and class co-constitute forms of disadvantage that shape employment conditions, funding mechanisms, and service delivery within youth work. Rather than treating these as separate axes of oppression, an intersectional analysis reveals how they function simultaneously to determine access to leadership roles, economic security, and institutional power.

Black feminist thought extends this analysis, arguing that social service institutions, including those within the SSIC, have historically been shaped by racial capitalism and colonial paternalism. These institutions are not neutral; they have been structured to reinforce hierarchies that continue to devalue the labor of racialized, gendered, and queer workers while systematically marginalizing the youth they serve.

Intersectionality and Structural Barriers in Youth Work

Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality underscores the necessity of examining how overlapping forms of oppression create distinct experiences for workers and service recipients in the youth sector (Crenshaw, 1994). The SSIC, as previously outlined, operates within neoliberal, capitalist, and colonial logics that regulate social services and reproduce systemic inequities. These logics do not impact all workers and service users in uniform ways.

Racialized, Indigenous, and gender-diverse youth workers experience systemic disadvantages that structure their opportunities, job security, and access to professional advancement. One of the most salient manifestations of intersectional oppression within youth work is the persistent job precarity and racialized labor segmentation that defines the sector. Research has consistently shown that Black, Indigenous, and racialized youth workers are disproportionately concentrated in frontline roles with high emotional and relational demands but limited financial compensation and job security (Nalani, 2023). These positions are often framed as "entry-level" despite requiring extensive community engagement, crisis management skills, and cultural competencies that white, managerial staff frequently lack. Moreover, diversity and inclusion policies within the SSIC have largely failed to address these inequities, as they frequently operate as performative gestures that reinforce the very hierarchies they claim to disrupt (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1994). Structural barriers also manifest in funding disparities that disadvantage Black, Indigenous, and community-led organizations. The SSIC, like its counterpart in the Nonprofit Industrial Complex (NPIC), privileges white-led, bureaucratic models of service provision over grassroots, community-centered initiatives. This results in funding structures that systematically under-resource organizations working at the intersections of race, gender, and class, despite their deep-rooted commitments to marginalized communities. The exclusion of racialized and gender-diverse youth workers from decision-making spaces further entrenches these disparities, ensuring that funding priorities remain dictated by white, managerial leadership insulated from the realities of frontline work.

Social Service Perspectives from Black Feminist Thought

Black feminist thought provides a necessary framework for understanding how systemic exclusions within the SSIC are not accidental but structurally embedded. Patricia Hill Collins argues that institutions of care are not neutral mechanisms for delivering support but are shaped

by histories of racial capitalism, gendered labor divisions, and colonial paternalism. Within youth work, these structures dictate who is positioned as an authoritative voice in the sector and restricts whose knowledge, leadership, and approaches to care are validated and rewarded. One of the critical contributions of Black feminist thought to the analysis of youth work is its emphasis on the politics of recognition and inclusion. While mainstream youth service institutions have increasingly adopted the language of equity, diversity, and inclusion, these initiatives frequently fail to address the deeper power imbalances that structure the sector. Black feminist scholars critique how racialized and gender-diverse youth workers are often included in symbolic ways, through diversity panels, strategic hiring quotas, or token leadership positions, without substantive shifts in resource distribution or institutional decision-making. This tokenistic inclusion does little to challenge the material inequalities that define the SSIC, ultimately reproducing the very exclusions these initiatives purport to address. Beyond critique, Black feminist thought also offers a vision for reimagining youth work through community-centered, relational, and justice-oriented frameworks. Njoki Wane highlights how decolonial and Indigenous frameworks challenge so-called Western paradigms of care and service provision, offering alternative models rooted in relational accountability, humanisms, non-binary framings and collective well-being (Nathani Wane, 2009). Wane's work offers significant contribution to Black Feminist theory within the Canadian context (Wane, 2007). These models resist the bureaucratic, depersonalized approaches that dominate the SSIC, advocating instead for interventions that prioritize community self-determination, intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and holistic approaches to youth engagement.

The Impact of Intersectional Exclusion

The intersectional exclusions that define the SSIC do not solely impact youth workers; they also shape the experiences of young people navigating social services. Black, Indigenous,

and queer youth face distinct barriers that are frequently erased within mainstream youth work frameworks. Lance McCready's research on Black queer youth, for instance, illustrates how educational and social service systems routinely fail to recognize the intersecting realities of race, sexuality, and gender identity, leading to systemic neglect, over-surveillance, and exclusion from meaningful support networks (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). The over-surveillance of Black and Indigenous youth within social services is a direct consequence of the SSIC's institutional design. Racialized youth are more likely to be positioned as "at-risk" subjects in need of correction, discipline, or intervention rather than as young people with agency and autonomy. This framing perpetuates cycles of criminalization and state intervention, ensuring that youth work remains complicit in broader systems of racialized policing and surveillance.

Similarly, the erasure of queer and gender-expansive youth from mainstream youth programs reflects the limitations of traditional service models that fail to account for intersectional identities. When youth work is framed through heteronormative and cisnormative paradigms, it renders the needs of trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse youth invisible, resulting in service models that alienate rather than affirm. Black feminist thought challenges these exclusions by centering the lived experiences of those most impacted by systemic violence, pushing for service models that are explicitly anti-racist, queer-inclusive, and rooted in community-defined priorities. This section has demonstrated that youth work is shaped by interlocking systems of oppression that operate along racialized, gendered, and economic lines. However, intersectional exclusions reveal the urgent need for alternative models of youth work that center relationality, collective resistance, and transformative justice. The following section examines how youth workers actively resist, subvert, and challenge systemic constraints through critical praxis. By engaging in coalition-building, grassroots advocacy, and radical care, youth

workers push beyond the limitations of the SSIC, working to create emancipatory frameworks of support that align with social justice principles.

Between Decency and Decolonization

The conditions under which youth work is conducted reflect the broader contradictions embedded within social services, shaped by competing imperatives of institutional efficiency, social justice, and the lived realities of both youth and workers. The sector operates within a terrain where the pursuit of decent work coexists with the need for decolonization and a structural critique that challenges its complicity in reproducing neoliberal governance. These competing forces necessitate an ongoing critical praxis that resists depoliticization and insists on centering the experiences of youth workers and young people, rather than institutional mandates that often function to contain and neutralize transformative potential. Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965) provides a necessary framework for how hierarchical social structures impose psychological and material constraints that distort both the oppressed and the oppressor. Memmi's analysis illuminates how systems of domination impose constraints upon the colonized and also warp the morality and volition of the colonizer, requiring an internal justification for their dominance that ultimately erodes their own humanity. Within the context of youth work, this dynamic finds expression in the structural positioning of both youth workers and the young people they serve, where the social service industrial complex (SSIC) recreates conditions of dependency, hierarchy, and surveillance under the guise of support (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). The professionalization of youth work, while often framed as a strategy for improving service quality and worker conditions, can also reproduce hierarchical relations that alienate workers from their own ethical commitments. Institutional frameworks that prioritize efficiency and control function to delegitimize grassroots knowledge, positioning formal credentials as the primary markers of expertise while minimizing the insights gained through

lived experience and relational engagement (Baines, 2011). This mirrors Memmi's description of the colonized subject who, even when granted minor forms of institutional inclusion, remains structurally constrained by a system that demands compliance rather than autonomy. Within the SSIC, youth workers who challenge institutional priorities by advocating for structural change or refusing to conform to depoliticized models of service delivery are often marginalized, dismissed, or outright penalized for their refusal to adhere to managerial expectations.

The implications of this dynamic extend beyond youth workers to the young people they serve, as programs that emphasize compliance, behavioral modification, and risk management replicate colonial logics of control. Indigenous youth, for example, are disproportionately subjected to interventions that fail to account for the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism, imposing Western frameworks of development that invalidate Indigenous knowledge systems (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). Similarly, Black and racialized youth workers report experiences of being tokenized within organizations that claim to champion diversity but exclude them from decision-making processes, reinforcing broader structures of racial capitalism that exploit marginalized labor while denying substantive agency (Wilson, 2011). These dynamics highlight how the SSIC functions not merely as a site of service provision, but as a mechanism for reproducing social hierarchies under the guise of care. Decolonization, as Tuck and Yang emphasize, is not a metaphor for general inclusion but a material and ideological process that demands the dismantling of colonial power structures and the re-centering of Indigenous and other marginalized knowledges (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Within youth work, this necessitates a rethinking of service models and the epistemological foundations that guide policy, evaluation, and professional training. Decolonizing youth work means rejecting frameworks that define success through so-called "Western" paradigms of individual achievement and instead embracing relational, community-centered approaches that affirm cultural and historical

specificity (Coulthard, 2014). This requires confronting the ways dominant models of youth work prioritize neutrality and professionalism over political engagement, discouraging workers from challenging systemic injustice in favor of maintaining institutional legitimacy (Spolander et al., 2014).

Decolonization is not merely an ethical commitment but a structural necessity, as the continued operation of youth work within settler colonial logics has material consequences for both workers and young people. Programs that rely on punitive funding models, for example, frequently divert resources away from community-led initiatives and toward institutional structures that prioritize bureaucratic accountability over meaningful engagement (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). Decolonizing youth work thus requires a redistribution of power that moves beyond tokenistic inclusion to fundamentally altering the conditions under which decisions are made, ensuring that those most impacted by policy decisions are at the center of shaping them. Memmi's analysis of dehumanization connects with Johan Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence, which describes how social and economic systems constrain individuals' ability to fulfill their potential, creating conditions of harm that are often normalized within institutional frameworks. Youth work, when stripped of its relational and advocacy-driven dimensions, risks becoming a site where structural violence is both administered and obscured. Programs that emphasize crisis intervention without addressing root causes, for example, reinforce a cycle in which youth are repeatedly engaged in short-term supports without access to long-term structural change (Karabanow, 1999).

This connects directly with Freire's (1970/2000) concept of humanization as a political and educational imperative, in which individuals are not passive recipients of aid but active participants in their own liberation. Humanization in youth work requires more than just well-intentioned efforts, it demands a recognition that denying workers the conditions to engage in

critical practice constitutes a form of structural violence that limits both their potential and the transformative capacity of the field itself (Ruíz, 2024). If youth work is to serve as a space of liberation rather than containment, it must actively resist the pressures of managerialism, depoliticization, and neoliberal efficiency that constrain its potential. The push for decent work within the sector, while necessary, must be critically examined to ensure that it does not become a mechanism for reinforcing neoliberal co-optation. Professionalization, when narrowly defined, risks entrenching bureaucratic oversight and limiting entry into the field, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds who may not have access to formal credentials but possess extensive community knowledge (Borden et al., 2020). Efforts to improve job security, wages, and working conditions cannot come at the expense of critical engagement, as a depoliticized workforce that is structurally secure but ideologically constrained will not serve the interests of either youth workers or the communities they support (Walker & Larson, 2006). A critical youth work framework must therefore balance the push for improved labor conditions with a commitment to ensuring that these advancements do not reinforce exclusionary professional hierarchies.

In Defence of Youth Work

The discussion around improving conditions in youth work cannot be limited to professionalization and job security alone. While these concerns are relevant, they do not resolve the structural issues that have led to the devaluation and precarious nature of youth work in the first place. Professionalization, when pursued through rigid credentialing and standardization, often creates barriers that exclude those with lived experience while reinforcing hierarchies that privilege institutional knowledge over community-rooted expertise (Baines, 2011). The issue is beyond gaining recognition within existing frameworks, extending to questioning how those frameworks determine the legitimacy of knowledge and labor within the field. The priority must

be to decrease dehumanizing work. The structural conditions under which youth work operates, short-term contracts, funding precarity, and heavy administrative oversight, can create inefficiencies while fundamentally constraining the ability of youth workers to engage in meaningful, relational, and justice-oriented practice (Nicholls, 2012). The care work embedded in youth work has long been undervalued, particularly as it is disproportionately performed by racialized and working-class individuals who are expected to bear the emotional burdens of the role while being structurally excluded from decision-making power. The assumption that professionalization is the solution to these issues overlooks the fact that many highly professionalized sectors, including social work and education, continue to grapple with precarity, austerity, and bureaucratic oversight that limits professional autonomy (Walker & Larson, 2006). Simply increasing qualifications does not eliminate the structural constraints that dictate how services are delivered, who is considered a legitimate practitioner, and how interventions are framed. Without a critical interrogation of the professionalization process, efforts to integrate youth work more seamlessly into the existing social service industrial complex risk reinforcing the very inequalities that have long marginalized youth workers and the young people they serve.

In this model, funding is increasingly tied to measurable outputs, forcing youth workers to conform to performance indicators that do not reflect the relational and community-based nature of their work (Wilson et al., 2011). Programs that once centered mentorship, empowerment, and advocacy are now required to justify their existence through quantifiable success metrics that often fail to account for the complex realities of young people's lives (Goggin, 1994). This shift is not just a bureaucratic change; it is a fundamental redefinition of youth work itself. The prioritization of efficiency and compliance over care and relational depth has led to the erosion of trust between youth workers and the communities they serve, as interventions become increasingly dictated by institutional mandates rather than the needs

identified by young people themselves (Nicholls, 2012). The casualization of labor within the sector further exacerbates this issue, ensuring that workers remain in a state of precarity, unable to challenge these constraints without risking job loss. In response to these challenges, the “In Defence of Youth Work” campaign emerged as a critical intervention, pushing back against the bureaucratization and depoliticization of youth work. The campaign positioned itself against the increasing managerialism in the field, arguing that youth work must remain a space for relational, participatory, and justice-oriented engagement rather than a mechanism for behavioral control. The campaign’s open letter laid out several fundamental principles, including:

1. Ensuring voluntary participation, resisting coercive interventions that impose compliance over agency.
2. Rejecting the reliance on standardized outcome measures, recognizing that relational engagement cannot be reduced to quantifiable metrics.
3. Embedding intersectionality within youth work, addressing the ways that race, gender, class, and disability shape both youth and worker experiences.
4. Resisting top-down managerialism, ensuring that youth workers retain autonomy over their practice rather than becoming enforcers of institutional mandates.

The campaign highlighted the contradictions within contemporary youth work, emphasizing that the increasing regulation and professionalization of the sector were being used to legitimize neoliberal restructuring rather than genuinely improving conditions for workers and young people (Nicholls, 2012).

The demand for decent work must be accompanied by a critical analysis of how youth work is structured, funded, and evaluated. Securing better wages and job stability is necessary, but without addressing the conditions that have made youth work precarious in the first place,

these reforms risk reinforcing the status quo rather than transforming it. Donna Fusco's work on professionalization underscores the risks associated with pursuing sectoral legitimacy within institutional frameworks that prioritize regulation, standardization, and oversight over practitioner autonomy (Fusco, 2012). Professionalization efforts that impose credentialing requirements without recognizing lived experience as a valid form of expertise disproportionately exclude racialized and working-class youth workers, further entrenching existing hierarchies in the sector (Wilson et al., 2011). A meaningful defense of youth work must include:

1. Resisting exclusionary professionalization models, ensuring that experiential knowledge is valued alongside formal education.
2. Redesigning funding structures to prioritize long-term, relationship-based work over short-term, metric-driven programming.
3. Embedding youth worker voices in decision-making, decentering funders and policymakers to make more space for those directly engaged in frontline work and young potential service users.
4. These reforms must be driven by a recognition that youth work must be integrated into existing institutional frameworks and fundamentally reimagined as a space of critical engagement, advocacy, and empowerment.

The exclusion of frontline knowledge from academic and policy discourse reflects the broader structural violence that has shaped youth work as a field. The dominance of grey literature in shaping discussions of youth work points to the extent to which institutional gatekeeping has marginalized the perspectives of those most directly engaged in the work (Nicholls, 2012). The sector will actively create space for alternative knowledge production when they accomplish the following:

1. Ensuring policy and practice are informed by those with lived expertise, rather than dictated solely by institutional research priorities.
2. Prioritizing community-based research methodologies, embedding youth and workers as co-researchers rather than passive subjects of study.
3. Recognizing grey literature as a legitimate and necessary contribution to sector-wide conversations, amplifying the voices of those directly engaged in youth work.

The defense of youth work requires more than securing better employment conditions; it demands a fundamental restructuring of how the sector is governed, funded, and conceptualized. Professionalization, when aligned with justice-oriented principles, has the potential to create a more equitable field. However, if pursued without structural transformation, it risks reinforcing the very inequalities it claims to address.

The future of youth work depends on ensuring that the struggle for better working conditions does not come at the cost of critical engagement, political consciousness, and the fundamental values that define the field. A justice-oriented approach must reject the pressures of standardization and managerial oversight, ensuring that youth work remains a space of empowerment rather than containment. The contradictions of youth work reflect broader systemic efforts to control, regulate, and manage marginalized populations while positioning care work as both essential and disposable. In Canada, the nonprofit sector has been historically weaponized as a tool for colonial governance, managing Indigenous and racialized communities under the guise of benevolence while maintaining state authority over social welfare (Coulthard, 2014). This colonial logic continues to shape funding priorities, restricting grassroots, community-led approaches while reinforcing dependency on institutional structures that uphold bureaucratic hierarchies (Baines et al., 2017). Despite these constraints, youth workers continue

to cultivate alternative spaces of care, resistance, and solidarity. Relational work remains the foundation of critical youth work practice, creating possibilities for transformation even within oppressive systems (Collins, 2000).

Youth Worker Agency and Praxis

The structural realities outlined throughout this chapter demonstrate the pervasive impact of the Social Service Industrial Complex and the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, revealing the ways systemic constraints obstruct the potential for truly transformative youth work. While these frameworks have provided a necessary critique of how funding mechanisms, bureaucratic oversight, and neoliberal policies shape and restrict youth work, this research does not focus solely on the weight of these barriers. Instead, it also examines how youth workers enact agency, resist structural constraints, and cultivate spaces of humanization within and beyond these oppressive systems. The purpose of this section is to explore how youth workers engage in acts of resistance, critical praxis, and relational care, working within these institutional limitations while simultaneously challenging them through intentional strategies of subversion, advocacy, and collective action.

Navigating Structural Constraints

The limitations imposed by the Social Service Industrial Complex do not define the entirety of youth work, as the individuals within this sector are not passive recipients of these systemic conditions. Youth workers continuously engage in acts of critical praxis, using reflection and action to push back against bureaucratic rigidity and repressive policies that dehumanize young people and service providers alike. Drawing from Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, this study frames youth work as an ongoing process of critical consciousness, where workers recognize the forces that shape their profession and actively intervene in ways that support the communities they serve. Critical praxis allows youth workers to challenge the ways

neoliberalism may depoliticizes their labor and reframes care as an individualized, transactional service rather than a collective, justice-oriented endeavor (Freire, 1970/2000). The research undertaken in collaboration with YouthREX and previous studies on frontline experiences within the sector has highlighted the ways in which youth workers bend the rules, find creative ways to work outside rigid policies, and refuse to reduce their relationships with young people to case management and risk mitigation. Challenges the framing that critical youth workers mainly act as lone agents resisting bureaucratic control, the current study situates critical youth workers within a larger collective effort to challenge parts of the youth sector that can be dehumanizing for both service users and staff.

The Transformative Potential of Critical Youth Work

The narratives of youth workers reveal that while institutional structures often limit the scope of their practice, they also carve out spaces of resistance through everyday acts of solidarity, relational care, and community advocacy. Youth workers consistently work beyond the limitations of bureaucratic mandates by developing informal networks of support, fostering mentorship outside of institutional expectations, and engaging in advocacy efforts that challenge unjust policies. These transformational acts do not emerge in isolation but are part of a broader movement to reclaim youth work as a site of justice, care, and empowerment. Black feminist thought provides an essential analytical tool for understanding how these acts of resistance take shape, particularly in the ways that Black and Indigenous youth workers navigate and challenge the racialized and gendered exclusions embedded within the Social Service Industrial Complex (Collins, 2000; Nathani Wane, 2009). The knowledge and experiences of racialized youth workers offer alternative frameworks of care that resist the depoliticized, bureaucratic models that dominate mainstream service provision. This study highlights how these workers create counter-spaces, environments where youth and workers alike can engage in critical dialogue,

collective action, and forms of healing that are not confined to institutional parameters. The intersection of Black feminist thought and critical pedagogy reveals that transformation does not solely occur through large-scale policy changes but also within the everyday interactions, relationships, and alternative forms of organizing that youth workers develop in response to systemic constraints. These approaches challenge the framing of youth work as a purely service-oriented profession and instead position it as an essential part of broader struggles for social and economic justice.

As this chapter draws to a close, it is necessary to reaffirm that the intent of this study is not to frame youth workers as disengaged professionals who either comply with or resist institutional constraints in isolation. Instead, it centers the ways they actively negotiate and transform the conditions of their labor through critical praxis, relational care, and community-rooted forms of resistance. Structural violence, as theorized by Galtung, reveals how the constraints imposed on youth work function as a form of harm, but it also provides the necessary framework for identifying the points at which intervention and transformation can occur. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and the broader traditions of critical pedagogy demonstrate that transformation is not achieved through isolated defiance but through the sustained engagement with processes that foster collective consciousness and systemic change. This research situates youth work within an ideological struggle between the forces of neoliberalism, which seek to depoliticize and bureaucratize care, and the counterforces of humanization, which insist on justice, dignity, and community as foundational principles of the profession. The participants in this study articulate the challenges they face and the way they actively create new possibilities for youth work, demonstrating that the field remains a contested yet deeply hopeful space. By examining how these themes manifest in the lived experiences of youth workers, further exploring the ways they sustain their commitment to justice, relationality, and critical

engagement despite the systemic pressures they encounter, the final chapters of this dissertation will build upon this theoretical foundation.

Having critically examined the structural conditions that shape youth work, this chapter has framed these dynamics through the lenses of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, the Social Service Industrial Complex, structural violence, critical praxis, intersectionality, and Black feminist thought. These theoretical constructs provide the necessary foundation for understanding how systemic barriers are produced, sustained, and resisted within the field of youth work. The Social Service Industrial Complex, as an extension of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, has been shown to regulate youth work through bureaucratic oversight, funding dependencies, and neoliberal policy imperatives, effectively constraining the transformative potential of relational, community-centered practice. Structural violence, as conceptualized by Galtung, has been used to illuminate how these constraints produce harm, limiting the agency of youth workers and eroding the capacity of social service institutions to serve as spaces of empowerment and advocacy. However, this chapter has not solely focused on how these systems obstruct youth work but has also centered the ways youth workers enact resistance, praxis, and humanization through the commitment to critical practice. Critical pedagogy, rooted in the work of Freire, provides a necessary framework for understanding how youth workers navigate and challenge these constraints, engaging in acts of conscientization that enable both themselves and the young people they serve to critically analyze and transform their social realities. This chapter has also drawn on Black feminist thought to expand this analysis, highlighting how racialized, gendered, and queer youth workers experience systemic exclusion while simultaneously developing alternative models of care that resist neoliberal and managerialist logics.

By infusing these theoretical perspectives into dialogue, this chapter has underscored that the constraints imposed by the Social Service Industrial Complex are not neutral but are deeply

political, shaped by historical legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, and patriarchal governance. The systemic barriers experienced by youth workers, whether through job precarity, underfunding, or bureaucratic surveillance are manifestations of structural violence that actively suppress the potential for relational and justice-driven practice. Within this context, the role of critical praxis is to actively reimagine and reshape youth work as a space of humanization, solidarity, and collective struggle.

The Role of Humanization as a Counterbalance to Structural Violence

A central argument of this chapter has been that the ideological dominance of neoliberalism, as embedded in the governance of youth work, necessitates a counterbalance rooted in humanization. If neoliberalism functions through mechanisms of control, austerity, and depoliticization, then the response must be a reinvestment in the principles of care, dignity, and community. The analysis of structural violence has illustrated how youth work is constrained by systemic forces that restrict the ability of practitioners to fully realize their roles as educators, mentors, and advocates. However, it has also demonstrated that within these constraints, there exist radical possibilities for transformation through the everyday enactment of critical pedagogy and relational care. The emphasis on humanization within this chapter is grounded in the foundational work of both Galtung and Freire, who argue that oppression is not solely a material condition but also an epistemological and ontological struggle. Structural violence manifests in the form of economic precarity or institutional barriers and is deeply embedded in cultural narratives, policy discourses, and professional norms that define what constitutes legitimate youth work. Critical pedagogy, as articulated by Freire, insists that transformation occurs not through grand ideological revolutions but through the everyday acts of engagement, reflection, and relationality that create new spaces of possibility. In this sense, the transformational potential

of youth worker critical practice is not about working around constraints but about reasserting the fundamental humanity of both themselves and the young people they work with.

Linking Theory to the Empirical Analysis of Youth Work

This theoretical framework provides the conceptual grounding for the empirical analysis that follows in the next chapters. The research undertaken in this dissertation does not approach youth work from a purely structural perspective that views workers as passive subjects within an oppressive system. Instead, it positions youth workers as active agents who both experience and challenge systemic constraints in ways that reveal the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities within the field. The application of these theories to the empirical data will examine how youth workers articulate their roles, navigate institutional pressures, and conceptualize the meaning of critical youth work in their specific local contexts. This study is grounded in the lived realities of youth workers in Central Ontario, a region that provides a rich site for analyzing the intersections of neoliberalism, racial capitalism, and state regulation in youth services. By applying the theoretical lenses developed in this chapter, the forthcoming analysis will explore how youth workers make sense of their positions within the Social Service Industrial Complex, identifying both the sustaining and obstructing factors that shape their work. The concept of structural violence will be operationalized to examine how systemic barriers impact worker well-being, professional autonomy, and service delivery, while critical praxis will be used to explore the ways youth workers cultivate strategies of resistance and care within constrained environments. Intersectionality and Black feminist thought will be central to analyzing the differentiated experiences of youth workers, demonstrating how race, gender, and class shape the distribution of opportunities, precarity, and power within the sector. This approach ensures that the research does not reproduce a universalized narrative of youth work but instead attends to the specificities of how oppression and resistance manifest in contextually distinct ways.

This chapter has established the necessary theoretical groundwork for the dissertation, weaving together multiple critical perspectives to analyze the systemic forces that shape youth work while also foregrounding the agency of practitioners in resisting and transforming these conditions. The discussion of the Social Service Industrial Complex has provided a structural analysis of how youth work is governed, while the examination of structural violence has illuminated the material and ideological constraints that limit the field's transformative potential. Critical pedagogy and Black feminist thought have expanded this analysis by offering theoretical tools for reimagining youth work as a space of resistance, relational care, and social justice.

As the dissertation moves into the empirical analysis, these theoretical frameworks will serve as the foundation for interpreting the narratives and experiences of youth workers, ensuring that their voices are situated within broader socio-political structures while also highlighting the everyday acts of resistance that challenge these constraints. The next chapter will outline the methodological approach used to investigate these dynamics, detailing the research design, participant selection, and data analysis strategies that will be employed to apply these theoretical insights to the lived realities of youth workers in Central Ontario.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Participant Profiles

The methodological framework of this study is designed to critically examine the experiences of frontline youth workers in Central Ontario, recognizing that their professional realities are shaped by intersecting economic, political, and institutional structures. Youth work exists within a sector that is simultaneously framed as a site of social good while being systematically constrained by funding limitations, managerialist policies, and neoliberal governance that privileges market-driven logics over relational, community-based care. This study seeks to illuminate how youth workers make sense of their roles, articulate their challenges, and develop strategies to sustain their practice within these structural constraints. By grounding this research within a qualitative framework, the study prioritizes the voices and lived experiences of youth workers as the central unit of analysis. The study applies an interpretive approach that acknowledges knowledge as socially constructed and contextually situated, recognizing that youth work cannot be understood in isolation from the broader Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC) that governs service provision. The methodological design of this research is informed by critical interpretivism, an epistemological stance that centers meaning-making processes while remaining attuned to the power relations embedded in institutional structures. This approach ensures that analysis goes beyond describing youth worker's narratives by critically engaging with how these narratives speak to broader systemic conditions and complexes.

The study employs qualitative semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words while providing space for deeper engagement with emergent themes. Thematic analysis serves as the primary analytical method, guided by the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2023, 2024), ensuring that themes emerge inductively from participant

narratives while also being situated within broader theoretical and structural contexts. To enhance the consistency and transparency of the analytical process, systematic coding methods are applied, allowing for a structured yet flexible approach to identifying patterns within the data. This first section of this chapter outlines the research philosophy, positioning the study within the tradition of critical interpretivism and discussing its implications for data collection and analysis. The second section presents the research design, including participant sampling, recruitment, and data collection strategies. The third section details the analytical method, outlining the reflexive coding process employed to interpret the data, providing a detailed account of the six phases of thematic analysis used to interpret the findings before addressing the study's limitations, validity, and ethical considerations.

Research Questions, Philosophy and Reflexivity

This study examines how youth workers in Central Ontario identify critical principles of their practice and the external factors that sustain and obstruct these efforts. Recognizing that youth workers operate within a broader social, economic, and institutional context that shapes their experiences in the field, the research inquiry is designed around two questions.

Research Question 1

How do frontline youth workers practice critical youth work?

This question examines what youth workers themselves articulate as the most meaningful and rewarding aspects of their practice. This study seeks to foreground the ways youth workers understand the benefits of their engagement, including the relationships they build with young people, the fulfillment they derive from co-learning and co-empowerment, and the broader sense of purpose they associate with their roles. These elements are critical to understanding what sustains youth workers, particularly given the broader structural challenges they face. Even when working within precarious or demanding conditions, many youth workers continue to engage in

the field because they identify personal, ethical, and relational rewards that make the work meaningful. This question allows for an exploration of these benefits and how they intersect with the broader conditions of the sector.

Each of these research questions is addressed within the broader structure of the dissertation, ensuring that the analysis remains grounded in the lived experiences of youth workers while also engaging with the theoretical and structural dimensions of the field. The primary research question provides the foundation for an examination of both the Supportive and Obstructive factors shaping youth work, with the findings organized accordingly to reflect both elements. The first secondary question allows for a discussion of how youth workers enter the profession, providing important context for understanding their perspectives on the sector.

The second secondary question shifts attention toward the benefits that sustain youth work practice, ensuring that the study does not focus solely on structural limitations but also attends to the relational and personal dimensions of the work. By structuring the study in this way, the research ensures that youth workers' voices remain central, capturing both the challenges they face and the ways they articulate the significance of their work. The following section will outline the analytical methods employed in this study, detailing how Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to interpret participant narratives within a structured, systematic framework.

Research Question 2

What are the factors that support and obstruct critical youth work practice in Central Ontario?

This question examines the conditions that shape the professional experiences of frontline youth workers, identifying both the systemic constraints that make it difficult to sustain critical youth work practice and the factors that allow workers to remain engaged despite these

constraints. The analysis considers the role of funding models, policy structures, and institutional cultures in shaping what is possible within the field, while also attending to the elements that youth workers identify as central to their ability to continue in their roles.

Research Philosophy

Grounded in critical interpretivism, an approach that recognizes knowledge as constructed through social processes, embedded in historical and structural contexts, and shaped by relations of power (Pozzebon, 2004), the methodology for this research process is designed to emulate the strategies for dismantling an oppressive systemic, as described above in the analysis of Freire's critical pedagogy. Unlike positivist paradigms that seek objective truths through detached observation, critical interpretivism assumes that knowledge is always mediated by discourse, ideology, and subjectivity. Indeed, "interpretivism admits the possibility of local knowledge, potentially humbling and decentering scholarly expertise" which is an important stance to take in regarding the insights from frontline youth workers in Central Ontario (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2015, p. 443). This study does not aim to uncover universal truths about youth work but instead seeks to explore how youth workers construct meaning within the constraints of the Social Service Industrial Complex. Critical interpretivism aligns with this study's commitment to centering participant narratives while maintaining an awareness of how these narratives are shaped by broader social and political forces.

The epistemological stance of this research process rejects the notion that youth work can be understood solely through policy documents, statistical indicators, or managerial frameworks that reduce care work to measurable outputs. Instead, it insists on an analysis that foregrounds the relational, ethical, and political dimensions of frontline youth work, recognizing that workers operate within systems that simultaneously enable and constrain their ability to provide meaningful support to young people. This approach draws upon traditions of critical social

research that emphasize the role of knowledge production in interrogating structural inequalities. As Kincheloe and McLaren argue, research is never neutral but is always entangled with power relations that shape what is considered legitimate knowledge (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). By adopting a critical interpretive stance, this study positions youth worker narratives not as isolated experiences but as reflections of the broader systemic conditions that regulate, restrict, and structure care work. At the core of this epistemology is the recognition that knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants, rather than passively extracted from subjects (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The research process is therefore inherently relational (even in the context of anonymous secondary data analysis), requiring a reflexive engagement with the ways the researcher's positionality, experiences, and interpretive frameworks shape the analysis.

Reflexivity is particularly critical in this study, given my own trajectory within the youth sector and my ongoing engagement with the institutional contradictions that define social service work. My path toward this research has been shaped by an intertwining of personal, professional, and political experiences across approximately two decades in the youth sector. These experiences range from frontline youth work to research and capacity-building efforts, positioning me both as an insider and a critical observer of the sector. This dual role requires ongoing reflection to balance my positionality, ensuring that my analysis remains grounded in participants' experiences while being critically engaged with broader structural realities.

This study's methodological approach is also informed by traditions of qualitative inquiry that emphasize the importance of deep, contextualized engagement with participant narratives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The decision to employ semi-structured interviews reflects a commitment to allowing participants to guide the discussion. Thematic analysis is chosen as the primary method of interpretation because it provides a structured yet flexible means of identifying patterns within participant narratives while allowing for engagement with broader

theoretical and structural concerns (Braun et al., 2022). By adopting critical interpretivism as the guiding research philosophy, this study ensures that its methodological approach remains attuned to the complex realities of youth work while maintaining a critical engagement with the systemic structures that shape the profession. This framework provides the necessary analytical tools to examine how youth workers articulate their challenges, navigate institutional constraints, and engage in forms of resistance and adaptation within the Social Service Industrial Complex. The next section will outline the analytical methods employed in this study, detailing how thematic analysis was used to interpret participant narratives within a structured, systematic framework.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is central to this study's methodological framework, not as a performative acknowledgment of researcher subjectivity but as a practice embedded in every stage of analysis. In the introductory chapter, I provided an account of my personal, professional and scholarly trajectory, outlining the ways my relationship to the field informs my engagement with this research. That discussion generally situated my position within the broader structures under examination, while this section further develops the methodological significance of reflexivity and demonstrates the importance of a critically engaged approach to inquiry. The essence of critical inquiry and interpretivism is reconsideration of "taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs.... To propose an understanding of ourselves and others in a new and better way, including novel ways of thinking (Pozzebon, 2004, p. 285)." My own experience is one of many and even in my own role as a frontline youth worker, there was no singular and simplified working dynamic that could be applied across time and place. The benefit of my insight is more attuned to appreciating the significance of the dynamism and urgency of this study and the need to complicate narratives associated with youth work.

Through my reflections and the countless conversations with diverse stakeholders across the sector, there are deeply embedded problems of efficiency and equity across social services which demand strategic investigations and investments in reaffirming humanizing practices. To this end, my experiences with dehumanization and my desire to see the fuller potential of critical community-engaged youth and social service work being realized resonates on the individual, interpersonal, institutional and industrial levels. My research journey, as stated in the opening acknowledgement, has been unconventional, but taking a position of curiosity amongst unchartered personal pathways is well suited for a critical study (re)searches answers to iterative inquiry.

Reflexivity as a Methodological Opportunity. Reflexivity operates as a methodological necessity in qualitative research, particularly in critical scholarship that challenges the illusion of objectivity in knowledge production. Feminist, decolonial, and interpretive scholars have long argued that research is never neutral; it is shaped by power relations, epistemological commitments, and the political conditions in which it is conducted (Harding, 1996; Pinnick, 1994). The process of interpretation does not occur outside of these structures, nor is it separate from the lived realities of the researcher. Reflexivity, in this study, is not limited to acknowledging how my own experiences shape the research questions and analytical choices, it extends to a deeper engagement with how knowledge is constructed, contested, and negotiated within the broader field of youth work research.

As stated, this research employs Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, which recognizes interpretation as central to qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This approach departs from traditional thematic coding frameworks that seek to minimize researcher influence by prioritizing inter-coder reliability. Instead, it embraces the researcher's role in meaning-making, emphasizing that themes are not passively extracted but actively developed through

sustained theoretical engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This methodological stance ensures that the findings are not treated as objective truths but as the result of an interpretive process that remains accountable to the complexities of participant narratives (Edgley, 2024). The role of reflexivity in this study extends beyond an individual practice of self-awareness. It functions as a methodological tool that attempts to safeguard against the uncritical reproduction of dominant discourses that frame youth workers through depoliticized service models (Hasford et al., 2016). Within the broader landscape of youth work research, many studies have been shaped by funding imperatives, policy mandates, and institutional logics that position frontline practitioners as service providers rather than as political actors engaged in relational and justice-oriented work (Portelli & Konecny, 2013). The work of Angela MacDonald-Vemic and John Portelli presented key insights into the Ontario context of neoliberalism's impact on educators, which has great relevance for the context of youth work as well, particularly with the legacies carrying over from policy and the Mike Harris years (MacDonald-Vemic & Portelli, 2020). The critical review and reflexivity practices of research ensures that studies do not reproduce those frameworks but instead foregrounds participant narratives within their historical, political, and economic contexts.

Reflexivity in Relation to Structural Analysis. Beyond its function as a methodological stance, reflexivity serves as an entry point for examining how research itself is shaped by the institutional conditions in which it takes place. The production of knowledge is never detached from the broader political landscape; the questions that are asked, the narratives that are prioritized, and the frameworks that are applied all reflect power dynamics that extend beyond the immediate context of the study (Haraway, 1988). This research does not seek to operate outside of those dynamics but instead engages them directly, recognizing that youth work is shaped by policies, funding models, and professionalization discourses that dictate the conditions

under which practitioners engage in their work. By integrating reflexivity as a methodological practice, this study ensures that participant accounts are analyzed with attention to the systems that structure them. The following section, Analytical Methods, outlines how data is coded, synthesized, and interpreted in ways that remain attuned to the complexities of youth work practice while maintaining the methodological rigor required for a critical qualitative study.

The Research Design

The data analyzed in this dissertation originates from the Ontario Youth Compass (OYC) study (2021–2022), a project developed by the Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) in collaboration with the York Research Chair in Youth and Contexts of Inequity, led by Dr. Uzo Anucha. YouthREX was established to support youth-serving organizations across Ontario by providing evaluation resources, knowledge-sharing platforms, and professional development services. The OYC was designed to capture the experiences of both youth and youth workers, focusing on the barriers, challenges, and opportunities they encounter within the social service sector. As a member of the research team, I was directly involved in this initiative, contributing to its broader efforts to elevate the voices of youth workers in Ontario.

This research draws upon the qualitative component of the OYC dataset, which was designed to examine structural conditions shaping youth work while maintaining an equity-based approach that ensured the inclusion of marginalized perspectives. The OYC aimed to generate insights that could inform program delivery, sectoral policy, and advocacy efforts, positioning its findings within ongoing efforts to reshape youth work in Ontario. Data collection for the study was structured across five Ontario regions (Central, Eastern, Southwestern, Northeastern, and Northwestern) but this dissertation focuses specifically on Central Ontario, which includes the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which comprises Toronto and the regional municipalities of Durham, Halton, Peel, and York, as well as areas such as Dufferin County, Simcoe County,

Waterloo Region, and Wellington County. This focus allows for an in-depth analysis that contextualizes findings within the specific policy and funding landscapes affecting youth workers in this region. The development of the OYC's interview guides and survey instruments was informed by YouthREX's longstanding engagement with frontline workers, ensuring that research tools were grounded in the realities of youth work practice. This process strengthened the relevance of the study, as data collection was not imposed from an external research lens but was shaped through continuous dialogue with those working within the sector.

Participant Sampling

Following research ethics approval, the Ontario Youth Compass study launched data collection on November 15, 2021. Recruitment was conducted through YouthREX's knowledge mobilization platforms, including a newsletter reaching over 6,000 subscribers, social media engagement, and direct outreach via email. The study employed a convenience sampling strategy, complemented by targeted digital outreach to expand participant reach, particularly among communities that had not previously engaged with YouthREX's services. Youth workers participating in the Ontario Youth Compass study were required to confirm their engagement with youth aged 12 to 29 in nonprofit settings. The initial survey gathered responses from 423 participants, but after screening for eligibility, 356 valid surveys were retained for analysis. Participants who had completed the survey and expressed interest in participating in qualitative interviews were then invited to take part in one-on-one telephone interviews, providing a deeper exploration of their professional experiences.

To align with the focus of this dissertation, the original OYC dataset was further refined to include only full-time youth workers with at least one year of professional experience in Central Ontario. The decision to center full-time practitioners was informed by the recognition that they navigate distinct economic, institutional, and professional challenges compared to part-

time workers, volunteers, or those engaged in youth work as part of academic placements. Participants whose engagement in youth work was primarily linked to educational programs or temporary roles were excluded to maintain a focus on those most immersed in the sector's structural conditions. Additionally, within the OYC study, four distinct interview guides were used for qualitative data collection, with only the third guide specifically designed for youth workers. This interview guide explored themes such as entry into the field, professional challenges, well-being, and critical perspectives on sectoral conditions. The selection of participants for this dissertation was further refined based on alignment with this interview guide, ensuring that the dataset remained cohesive and analytically relevant. A final post-screening process was conducted to verify participant eligibility and eliminate potential misclassifications. This involved cross-checking demographic details, employment history, and responses to ensure consistency. Participants who had inaccurately identified as youth workers, or whose engagement with youth was ambiguous, were removed. After this final verification process, 25 interview transcripts were selected for analysis.

Data Collection

The Ontario Youth Compass study combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies, disseminating surveys online through SurveyMonkey to provide broad sectoral insights while also conducting semi-structured interviews to explore individual experiences in greater depth. The qualitative component of the OYC study consisted of key informant interviews with both youth and youth workers, designed to complement survey data with detailed narrative accounts. These interviews were conducted by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University, a professional research body contracted to ensure consistency and anonymity in data collection. By utilizing ISR staff, who had no direct affiliation with YouthREX, the study minimized potential biases that could arise if participants were interviewed by those already embedded in the sector.

All interviews were conducted via telephone, a decision shaped by public health and safety considerations during the COVID-19 pandemic. While phone interviews limited non-verbal communication cues, they enhanced participant accessibility, allowing youth workers to engage in the study while managing their professional responsibilities. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, depending on participant engagement and topic complexity. A structured informed consent process was followed to ensure participant autonomy, confidentiality, and ethical protection. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any point. Honoraria were offered as a recognition of the time and expertise participants contributed to the study.

Data Processing and Preparation

Following the completion of data collection, a comprehensive data-cleaning process was undertaken to ensure the accuracy and consistency of interview transcripts. This involved verifying demographic details to confirm that participants met the study's eligibility criteria while cross-referencing survey responses with interview data to maintain internal consistency. Each transcript was carefully reviewed for incomplete or contradictory responses that could indicate misclassification, ensuring that only those who fit the study's parameters were included in the final dataset. Standardization of transcription formatting was also implemented to facilitate a seamless coding and thematic analysis process. These measures ensured that the dataset remained analytically rigorous, reflecting a selection of participant narratives that aligned with the study's methodological commitments. The following section details the interpretive strategies employed in coding and synthesizing these narratives, ensuring that thematic patterns were developed through a process that maintained both methodological depth and reflexive engagement.

Demographic Findings

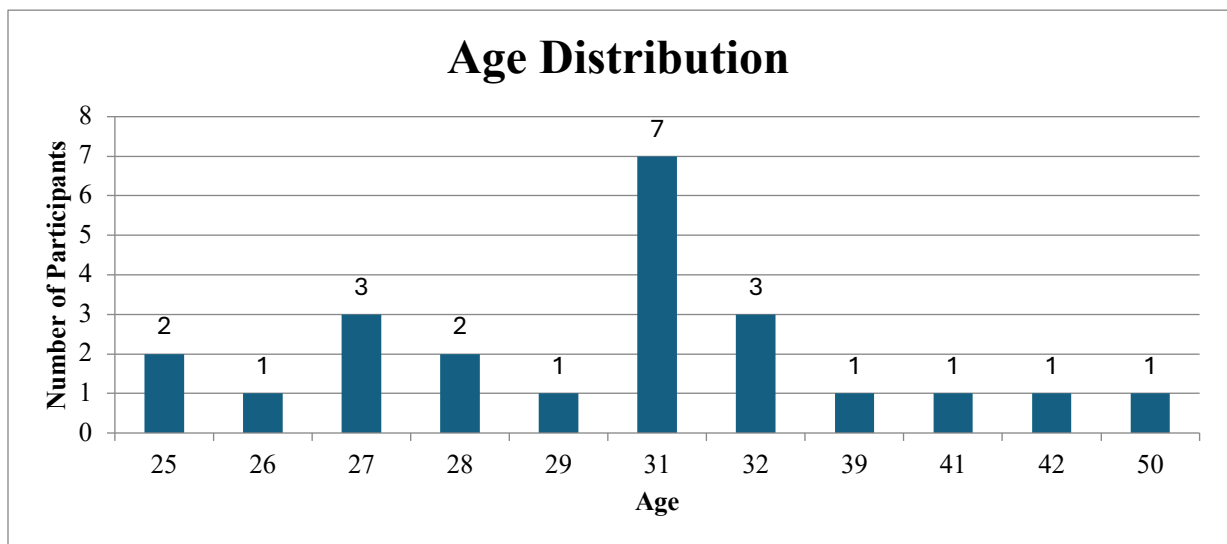
The diversity of the participants in terms of age, gender, race, and educational background is not just a backdrop; it is a key component that may shape their experiences, perspectives, and contributions to the field. These demographic factors influence how youth workers engage with their roles, how they navigate challenges, and how they leverage opportunities within the sector. Examining the participants' profiles allows for the exploration of intersectional identities that impact their professional lives. The combination of different social identities, whether related to race, gender, sexual orientation, or educational background, interacts in complex ways to influence the participants' approaches to youth work. By understanding these demographics, we can better grasp the nuances of the study's findings, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in the real-life contexts of those who work on the frontlines with youth, though these factors should not be considered to be overly deterministic. Rather, the diversity within the participant group sheds light on the various backgrounds that contribute to the richness of the field, bringing in a multitude of perspectives that can address the complex and multifaceted needs of young people. This understanding is critical for developing strategies that are inclusive and responsive to the diverse populations that youth workers serve.

Age Distribution

The age distribution of the 23 participants who provided their age information reveals interesting trends and raises questions about the longevity and sustainability of careers in frontline youth work. The age group with the most representation in this study is the 27-32 age range, where approximately 70% of the participants fall. Specifically, 16 out of the 23 respondents belong to this age group. This concentration indicates that the late 20s and early 30s are critical periods in the careers of youth workers, where many are fully engaged in frontline roles.

Figure 1

Age Distribution



After the age of 32, the number of youth workers declines, with a noticeable absence of participants in the 33-39 age range. This gap suggests that the intake of new youth workers may be low after this age, or that individuals may be leaving the sector or transitioning out of frontline roles during this period. While the small sample size of 23 youth workers is not sufficient to represent the sector overall, the trends observed may echo a significant dynamic that warrants further research. The reduction in participants engaging in the youth sector as frontline workers in their mid-30s could signal a shift where some youth workers reassess their career paths. The absence of respondents in this age group may reflect the challenges of sustaining a career in youth work as individuals approach midlife, where factors such as financial stability, job security, and personal responsibilities may become pressing. This point is not to exclude the reality that many young people are highly (or completely) independent with familial and caregiving responsibilities of their own. On the other hand, some participants have been engaging in youth work for many decades and have indicated that they have no intention of leaving the sector. Future research should also be directed at frontline youth workers who

represent a long-term commitment to the work, even if their experience contains ebbs and flows through various organizations, sectors, and occupations.

While this study focuses exclusively on individuals who identify as full-time frontline youth workers, it is important to note that this is not a complete view of the entire youth sector. Some individuals in the larger study that this data originates from, who identified primarily as "youth," participated in a separate survey, which is not part of this analysis. Future research may explore the experiences of these younger participants or those who transition into other roles within the youth sector, even if they do not primarily identify as frontline youth workers but as youth who also do program-related work. If these participants were included, the number of younger youth workers might climb substantially, but it would not impact the decline we see in participant numbers of adult youth workers. There may be a range of factors that account for the participant age trend, including the ways that participants were solicited and opted into the data collection process itself; nevertheless, these trends deserve more exploration. If the "aging out" trend is accurate, the age distribution may suggest that some frontline youth workers leave direct frontline roles as they age, potentially transitioning to other positions within the sector or exiting the sector entirely. This diversity in career trajectories underscores the need to understand why youth workers may choose to leave frontline work and what factors contribute to their retention or departure, which this study will interrogate further through a thematic analysis of the transcribed interview data.

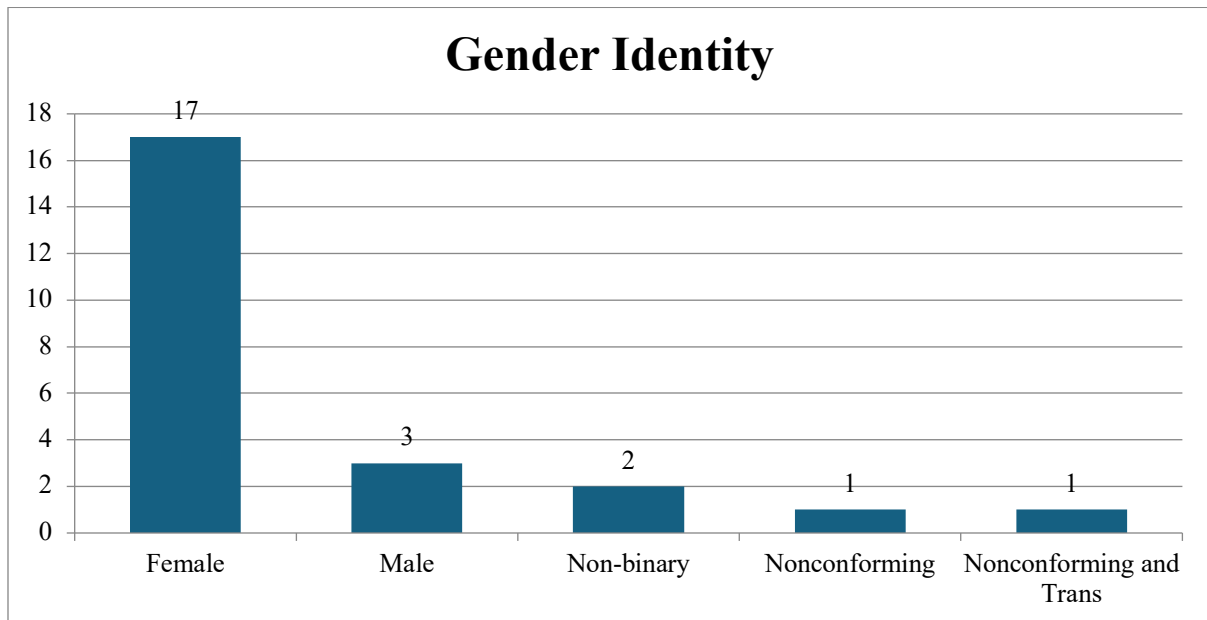
Gender Identity

The gender distribution in this study demonstrates a predominance of female participants, who make up 68% of the sample, while male participants account for only 12%. The sample also includes participants identifying as non-binary, nonconforming, and trans, comprising 16% of

the group. This distribution is reflective of the broader patterns observed in caregiving and support professions, where women are often more represented.

Figure 2

Gender Identity



The implications of this gender distribution for the study are significant. The predominance of female participants may influence the findings, particularly in areas related to work-life balance, career sustainability, and professional experiences within the youth work sector. Given that gender plays a critical role in shaping professional identities and experiences, the perspectives of male participants, being less represented, may not be as fully explored in this study. The presence of non-binary and nonconforming identities within the sample allows for an examination of intersectional identities and their impact on experiences in youth work. The inclusion of these participants is critical for understanding the nuances of gender beyond the binary framework, particularly in a sector that often emphasizes inclusivity and support for diverse populations. However, the relatively small number of these participants suggests that while their experiences provide valuable insights, they may not be fully representative of all non-

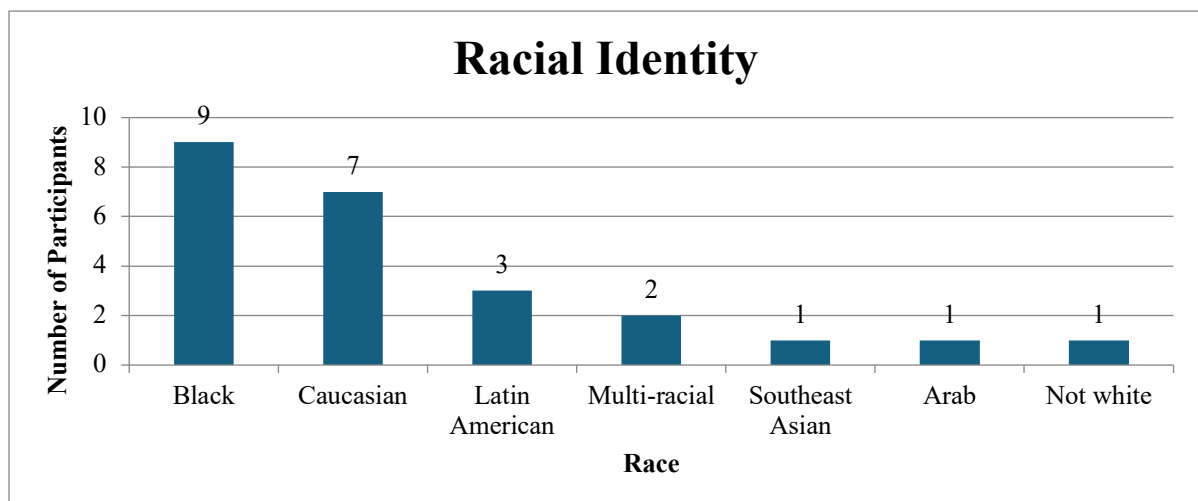
binary or nonconforming youth workers. The gender distribution in this study, therefore, highlights the need to consider how gender intersects with other aspects of identity, such as race, age, and socioeconomic status, in shaping the experiences of youth workers. The overrepresentation of female participants may emphasize certain gendered experiences, while the perspectives of male, non-binary, and nonconforming participants might reveal different challenges and opportunities within the sector. This distribution suggests that further research could be valuable in exploring how gender identity, in its various forms, influences the professional trajectories and workplace experiences of youth workers in more depth.

Racial Identity

Out of the 25 participants in this study, 24 provided information about their racial or ethnic background. The largest group is composed of Black participants, representing 36% of the sample, followed by Caucasian participants at 28%. The chart shows that Latin American participants, who include those identifying as Latina and Latino, make up 16% of the sample. Multi-racial individuals account for 8%, with smaller groups including Southeast Asian, Arab, and those identifying as "Not white," each comprising 4% of the sample.

Figure 3

Racial Identity



The significant representation of Black participants in this study suggests a strong engagement in youth work, potentially driven in part by a commitment to addressing systemic issues affecting Black communities. The ongoing tensions around anti-Black racism have catalyzed the development of many youth-focused initiatives. However, these efforts have not fully mitigated the pervasive effects of systemic anti-Black racism and the impacts of inequity on both Black youth and youth workers, as reflected in the data. These concerns include overrepresentation in child services due to heightened surveillance, underrepresentation in staffing and leadership roles, and normalized marginality and silencing attempts (Gharabaghi, 2017). Although this research does not specifically focus on racial dynamics, the findings indicate a need for further exploration in this area, particularly given that the majority of participants come from larger urban centers, where racial diversity tends to be more pronounced.

The substantial presence of Caucasian participants highlights the potential dynamics between the largest racial groups, which may influence decision-making processes and the overall inclusivity within the youth work sector. The notable representation of Latin American participants, comprising 16% of the sample, suggests an active engagement of this community in youth work. The racial diversity among participants underscores the necessity for a critical examination of how race intersects with professional experiences and access to opportunities within the sector. This examination is essential to ensure that all racial groups are equitably supported and represented, and that the sector evolves to address the needs of a diverse youth worker population, particularly in urban centers where these dynamics are most acute.

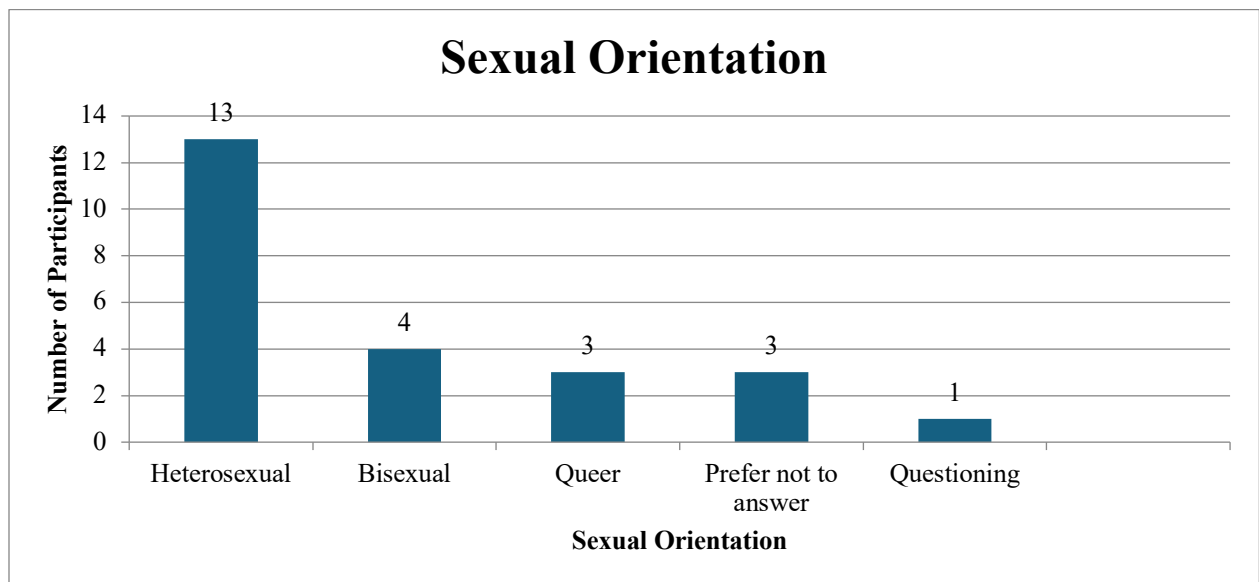
Sexual Orientation

Out of the 25 participants in this study, 24 responded to the question about their sexual orientation. The data reveals that 54.2% of respondents identify as heterosexual, while

approximately 42% identify as bisexual, queer, or are questioning their orientation. Rather than assuming inclusivity in the sector as increasing involvement from diverse communities, this data may reflect an emerging recognition among youth workers of the need to address these gaps. Youth workers who identify as non-heterosexual or who are questioning their orientation might be particularly aware of the challenges faced by individuals with similar identities. Their presence in the sector could indicate a drive to create more inclusive spaces and programs, especially in major urban centers like Toronto, where diverse communities are more prevalent. These workers may be working to address the needs of marginalized populations, including those with intersecting identities that have traditionally been overlooked in social services.

Figure 4

Sexual Orientation



As youth workers engage in these spaces, there may be opportunities for their voices to influence the development of programs that better serve populations who have historically been underserved. The data suggests that youth workers with diverse sexual orientations might be actively contributing to the sector's efforts to combat social marginalization. By acknowledging

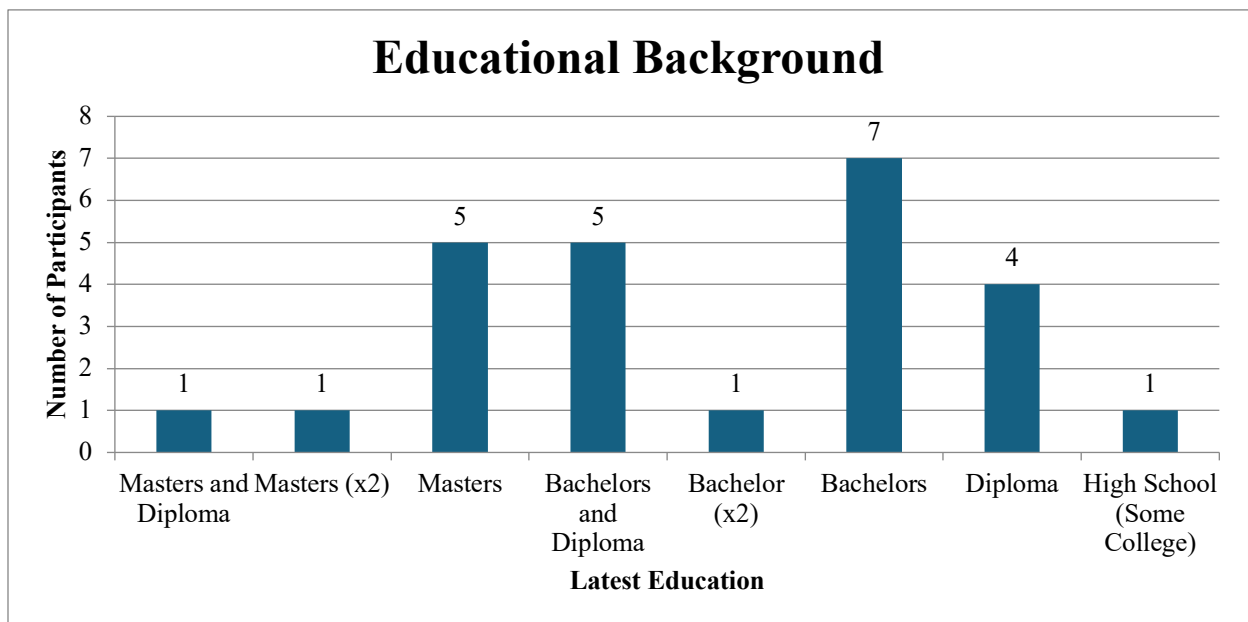
and addressing the specific needs of young people with intersecting identities, these workers can play a critical role in shaping a more responsive and equitable youth work sector. This perspective highlights the importance of recognizing diversity within the workforce and leveraging it to address systemic gaps in service provision for marginalized communities.

Educational Credentials

The educational credentials of the youth workers in this study reveals a wide spectrum of academic experiences, underscoring the diverse pathways that lead individuals into the field of youth work. Among the 25 participants, the data highlights a significant diversity in the highest levels of formal education completed. The most common level of education is a bachelor’s degree, with seven participants having attained this qualification. Additionally, five participants have pursued both a bachelor's degree and a diploma, suggesting that many youth workers seek to complement their primary degree with additional qualifications that enhance their professional skill set.

Figure 5

Educational Background



A further five participants have achieved a master's degree, reflecting the presence of advanced educational attainment within the sector. There is one participant who holds two master's degrees, and another with two bachelor's degrees, underscoring a deep involvement in academic and professional development. Four participants reported that their highest level of education is a diploma. The data also accounts for participants with unique educational journeys, such as one who completed some college education without obtaining a degree, and others who hold a combination of educational qualifications, such as bachelor's and diplomas or multiple master's degrees. This diversity in educational backgrounds illustrates that the youth work sector does not conform to a rigid, prescribed educational pathway. Unlike other professional fields where specific degrees or certifications are prerequisites for entry, youth work is characterized by inclusivity and openness to individuals with varied academic and professional histories. The presence of both highly educated individuals and those with non-traditional or interrupted educational paths highlights the sector's receptivity to diverse skill sets and experiences.

The educational background data also intersects with the age distribution findings, particularly in the late 20s to early 30s age range, where many individuals have completed their education and are establishing their careers. However, the decline in youth workers around the age of 30, as seen in the age data, may be linked to the pressures of balancing personal responsibilities with the demands of the youth work sector. This period is often when individuals reassess their career paths, which may involve pursuing further education, transitioning to other roles within the sector, or leaving the field altogether. The variety in educational backgrounds raises important questions about future trends in youth work. As the sector evolves, understanding how educational experiences influence career longevity and job satisfaction will be crucial. The presence of both highly educated youth workers and those with interrupted or non-linear educational journeys suggests that policies and professional development

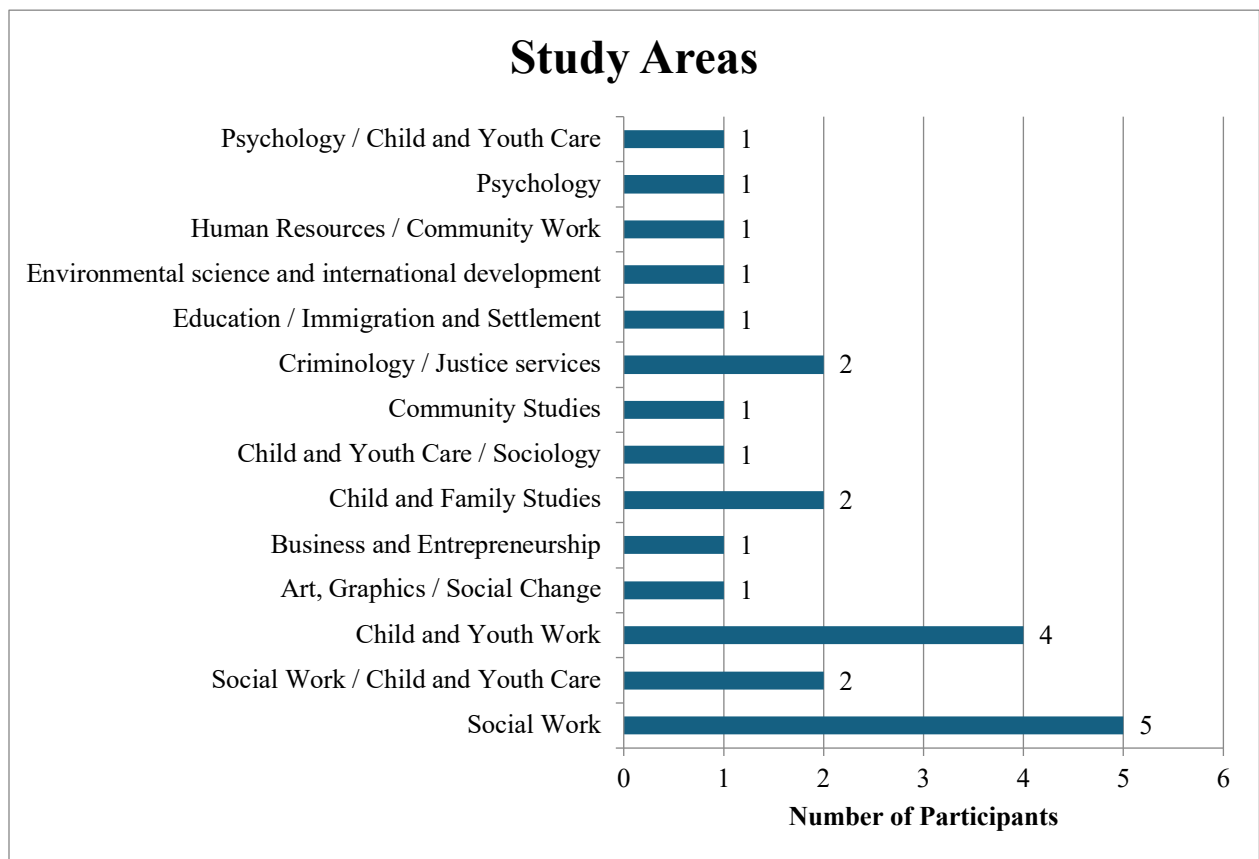
opportunities need to be adaptable and inclusive, supporting retention and career progression for all individuals in the field. The educational background of youth workers in this study reflects a rich tapestry of experiences, illustrating the sector's openness to diverse academic paths. This diversity enriches the youth work field and presents challenges and opportunities for the development of supportive policies that can sustain a committed and skilled workforce in the long term.

Educational Disciplines

The following chart represents the study areas of the 24 participants who responded to the question about their educational background and areas of specialization, reflecting the diverse academic pathways that have led individuals into the field of youth work. In analyzing the data, several related fields were consolidated to provide a clearer and more coherent representation of the participants' academic experiences. For instance, Child and Youth Work was merged with Child and Youth Care, as these fields are closely related and often overlap in both academic training and professional practice. This consolidation reflects the emphasis on working with youth across various contexts, an essential aspect of the sector.

Figure 6

Study Areas



Similarly, Child Studies and Education were combined with Child and Family Studies, as these areas share significant overlap in their focus on the well-being of children and families. This decision was made to avoid fragmentation and to present a unified view of the educational backgrounds relevant to working with children and families, which is central to many roles within youth work. Additionally, Criminology and Social Services were combined with Criminology and Social Work, recognizing the interconnected nature of these fields in addressing issues related to justice and social services. This merger highlights the multidisciplinary approach required in youth work, where professionals must navigate complex social, legal, and psychological issues.

In cases where Sociology and Psychology appeared alongside Child and Youth Care or Social Work, these fields were acknowledged separately to respect the interdisciplinary approach often necessary in youth work. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the participants' educational backgrounds while still highlighting their focus on youth care and social services. The data reveals that Social Work is the most common field of study among participants, indicating the centrality of social work training in preparing individuals for roles in youth work. This is not surprising, given that social work provides a strong foundation in understanding social systems, client care, and community engagement, all critical skills in youth work. The presence of participants from less traditional fields, such as Art, Graphics, and Social Change, or Business and Entrepreneurship, also underscores the sector's openness to diverse perspectives. These unique backgrounds likely contribute to innovative approaches in addressing the complex and multifaceted needs of youth. This diversity in academic preparation suggests that the youth work sector benefits from a broad spectrum of perspectives, which are crucial in developing and delivering programs that effectively address the challenges faced by young people today.

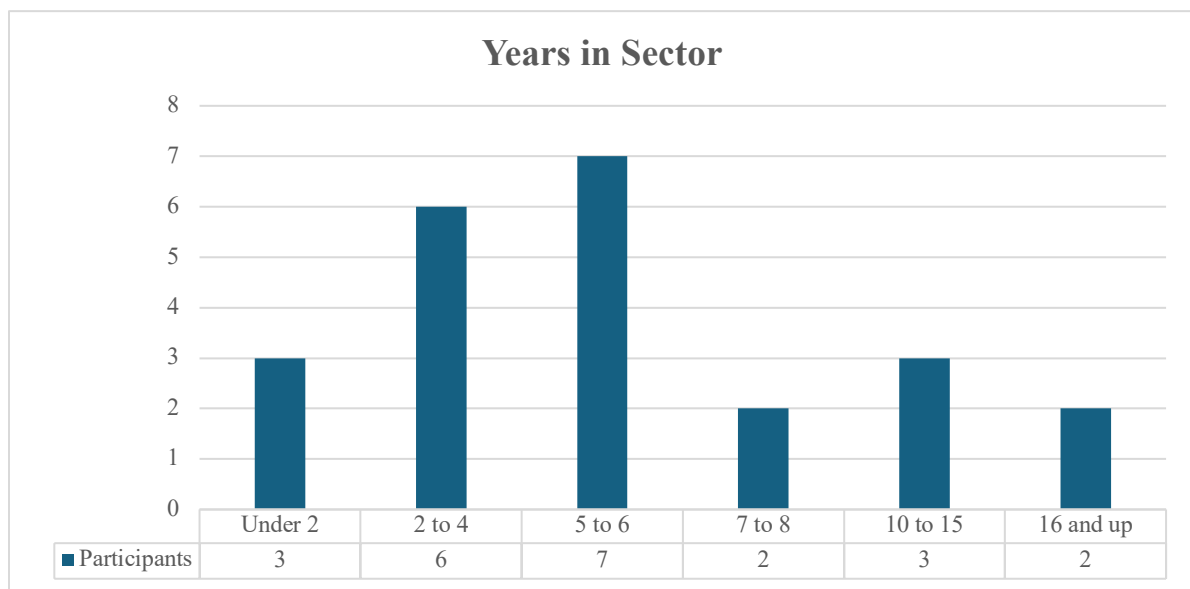
Years in Sector

This finding explores the varying lengths of time that youth workers have spent in the sector, from early-career professionals to those who have dedicated several decades to the field. By examining the distribution of experience across different stages of career development, we can gain insights into the factors that influence retention, career transitions, and possibly the overall sustainability of youth work as a profession. As youth workers progress in their careers, they may encounter barriers related to compensation, career advancement, and work-life balance, all of which can impact their decision to remain in the field. Understanding the distribution of experience among youth workers can shed light on these challenges and provide a basis for

developing strategies to support career longevity in the sector, if this is the desire of the youth worker. This section will also have implications to consider regarding the support structures and professional development opportunities that may be necessary to retain experienced youth workers. Through this analysis, this study aims to inform future research and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening the sector.

Figure 7

Years in Sector



The chart above offers a visual distribution of the participants based on their years of experience in the youth sector, according to what was shared around their work experience in the interview, which may serve as more of an approximation than record of note. It is segmented into six distinct categories: "Under 2 Years," "2 to 4 Years," "5 to 6 Years," "7 to 8 Years," "10 to 15 Years," and "16 and up." This distribution provides a valuable perspective on the career longevity and engagement of youth workers within the sector, highlighting both the concentration of experience levels and the potential for long-term career sustainability. The largest group within the chart is the "5 to 6 Years" category, which encompasses 7 participants,

representing 28% of the total sample. This peak in the mid-career range suggests that a significant portion of youth workers remain committed to the sector through this period, likely in their late 20s or early 30s. This stage may reflect a period of relative stability where individuals have gained sufficient experience to navigate the complexities of their roles effectively yet are still deeply engaged in frontline work. The substantial representation in this category highlights the importance of the mid-career phase as a critical juncture in youth work, where individuals may either solidify their commitment to the sector or begin to contemplate future transitions.

The next largest group falls within the "2 to 4 Years" range, with 6 participants, accounting for 24% of the sample. This group is indicative of early-career professionals who are still in the process of establishing themselves within the sector. The relatively high percentage of workers in this category suggests that the youth sector continues to attract new entrants who are likely motivated by a desire to make a meaningful impact. However, the proximity of this category to the "Under 2 Years" group, which includes 3 participants (12% of the sample), underscores the challenges of retention beyond the initial years. Together, these two groups, comprising 36% of the total participants, represent a significant early-career population that is crucial to the sector's future, yet potentially vulnerable to high turnover. In contrast, the "7 to 8 Years" category has only 2 participants, making up 8% of the sample. This dip following the 5 to 6-year peak may suggest that around the 7-year mark, some youth workers begin to reassess their career paths, possibly leading to attrition or transitions into different roles within or outside the sector. This could reflect the pressures and challenges associated with sustained frontline work, including burnout, limited career advancement opportunities, and the demands of balancing professional and personal responsibilities.

The "10 to 15 Years" category, with 3 participants (12%), and the "16 and up" category, also with 2 participants (8%), represent those who have achieved long-term engagement in the

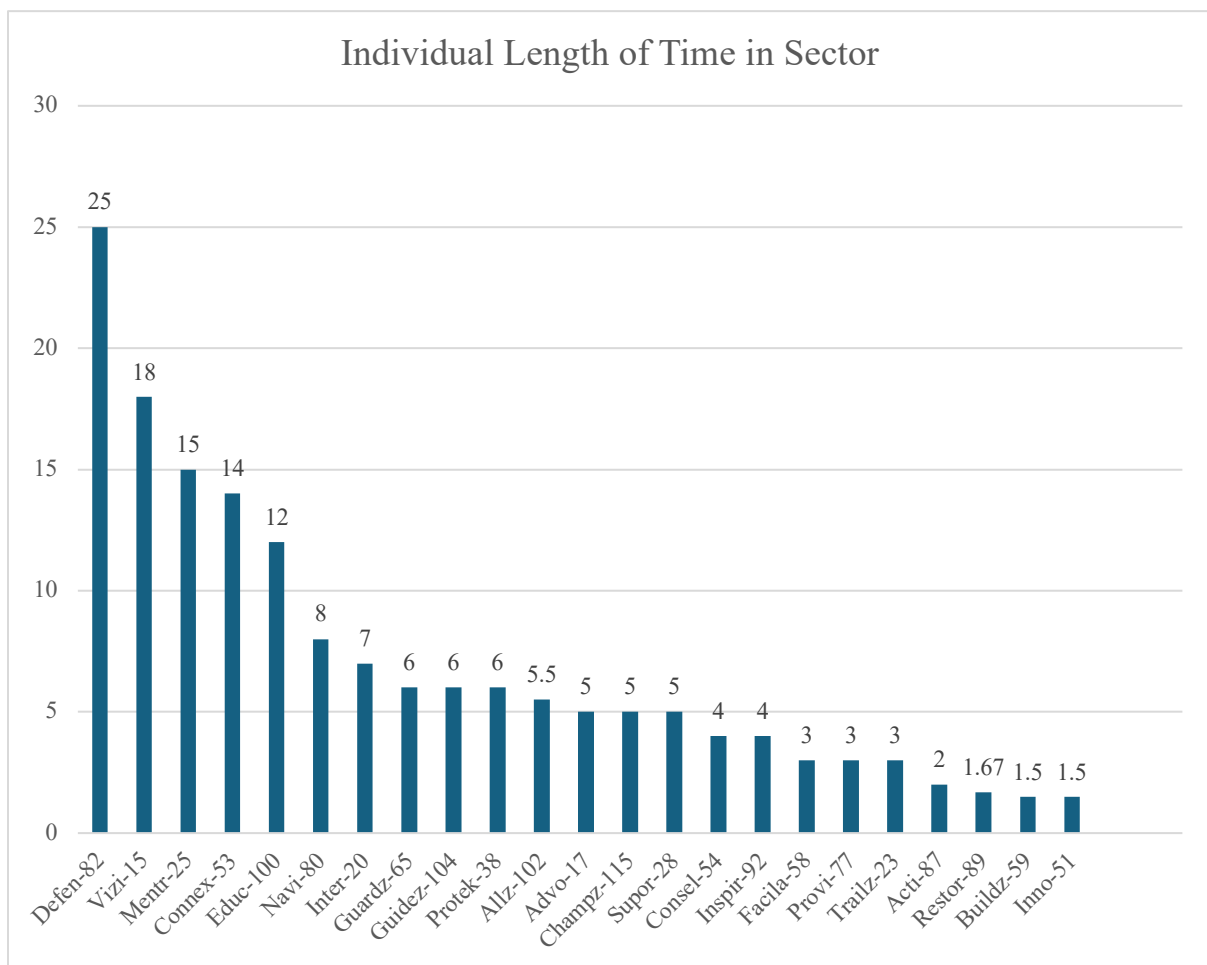
sector. Some of these individuals may have transitioned into other roles, as one participant, Vizi-15, attests to obtaining a leadership role and running her own program in addition to continuing direct-service work. The relatively small percentage of participants in these categories highlights the difficulties in maintaining a long-term career in youth work. The data suggests that while the youth sector attracts and retains a significant number of professionals during the first few years, the challenges of maintaining a long-term career in this field become more pronounced as individuals approach the 7-year mark. For those who do remain beyond a decade, their roles likely evolve to accommodate the changing demands of the sector and their own professional growth.

This distribution raises important questions about the factors that contribute to career longevity in youth work, as well as the supports needed to retain experienced professionals who can provide leadership and continuity within the sector. It also highlights the importance of ongoing professional development, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities to support youth workers at different stages of their careers, ensuring that the sector can continue to benefit from their expertise and commitment. While the data presented provides valuable insights into the distribution of experience among youth workers, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this analysis due to the small sample size. With only 25 participants, the trends observed in this study should be interpreted with caution, as they may not be fully representative of the broader population of youth workers. The percentages and patterns identified here offer a snapshot of career longevity and engagement within this specific group, but they cannot be conclusively generalized to the entire sector. The relatively small sample size limits the ability to make definitive assertions about broader trends, such as the rate of attrition or the typical career trajectory in youth work. Larger studies with more extensive participant pools would be necessary to confirm these trends and provide a more comprehensive understanding of

the factors that influence career sustainability in the sector. Nonetheless, the data presented here complements existing research and thematic findings, suggesting areas of concern and opportunities for further exploration in future studies. While these findings are indicative, they should be viewed as a preliminary step toward deeper investigations into the dynamics of youth work careers.

Figure 8

Individual Length of Time in Sector



The chart above provides a detailed visualization of the number of years each of the 23 respondents (of the total 25) has spent in the sector, arranged from the most experienced to the least. This chart confirms several key trends identified in previous analysis while also offering

deeper insights into the distribution of experience among the participants. At the top of the chart, "Defen-82" leads with 25 years in the sector, followed by "Vizi-15" with 17 years. These individuals represent the pinnacle of career longevity in the youth sector within this sample. Their extensive experience suggests that while the sector is often challenging in terms of compensation, career advancement, and emotional demands (as the data will reveal later), it is possible to sustain a career in youth work over multiple decades. The progression down the chart reveals a gradual decline in the number of years spent in the sector, with "Mentr-25" (15 years) and "Connex-53" (14 years) representing those who have surpassed a decade but have not yet reached the 16-year mark. Their sustained presence in the sector indicates that it is feasible to remain engaged for a substantial period, particularly if career development opportunities and supportive work environments are available.

The mid-career category, encompassing youth workers with 5 to 9 years of experience, is notably diverse; however, as the chart moves towards youth workers with slightly less experience, such as "Allz-102" (5.5 years), "Advo-17," "Champz-115," and "Supor-28" (each with 5 years), it becomes apparent that this is a critical juncture. At this stage, many youth workers have accumulated substantial experience, yet they are likely facing the pressures associated with sustaining a career in a demanding sector. These pressures may include financial concerns, burnout, and limited opportunities for advancement, which can prompt individuals to either transition into more senior roles or exit the sector altogether. At the other end of the chart, we observe those who are relatively new to the sector, such as "Facila-58," "Inspira-92," and "Consel-54," each with 4 years, and "Provi-77," "Trailz-23," "Acti-87," and "Restor-89," with 2 to 3 years. These individuals are likely in the early stages of their careers. The presence of early-career professionals in the sector is crucial for its ongoing vitality, as they bring fresh perspectives and energy. However, their lower levels of experience also make them more

vulnerable to the challenges that can lead to attrition. "Buildz-59" and "Inno-51," each with 1.5 years, represent the newest entrants into the sector. Their positions on the chart underscore the importance of understanding the factors that influence early-career retention. These youth workers are still in the process of establishing themselves within the field, and their future in the sector will likely depend on the support they receive, the opportunities for growth, and their ability to navigate the initial challenges of frontline work.

Despite the small sample size which limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions, these trends align with broader thematic findings that suggest youth work is challenging to sustain over the long term, especially as individuals take on additional personal responsibilities. The data suggests that while the sector continues to attract new entrants, retaining them beyond the early-career stage also remains a challenge. The insights emphasize the need for ongoing support, professional development, and career advancement opportunities to retain experienced youth workers and ensure the sector continues to benefit from their expertise and commitment.

Participant Profiles

Participant Pseudonyms

As outlined in the methodology chapter, maintaining the anonymity and privacy of the interview participants was a crucial priority during both the data collection and analysis phases of this study. Protecting the identities of those who participated is essential, and this researcher expresses deep gratitude for the insights that the participants generously shared. Their contributions have significantly illuminated the often-overlooked world of frontline youth workers in Ontario. Through personal narratives and reflections, participants provided a window into the challenges they face in their roles, challenges which, according to their own testimony, are frequently disregarded or underappreciated by broader systems and institutions. The stakes in youth work are undeniably high, as youth workers must reconcile the personal, professional, and

even political consequences when their efforts feel unsuccessful or when the systems intended to support them fall short. The insightful accounts offered by the participants throughout this findings chapter underscore both the rewards and the profound challenges of frontline youth work. As the reader navigates these vivid narratives, it is important to be introduced to the profiles of the individuals involved in this study.

Before presenting the profiles, it is necessary to establish a naming system that preserves anonymity while maintaining clarity and humanizing the participants without revealing their identities. In developing this system, careful consideration was given to avoiding any labels or names that could inadvertently impose cultural, gendered, or other identifying attributes onto participants. This ensures respect for the participants' identities and safeguards against unintended associations or projections. To create an effective and appropriate naming structure, this study assessed descriptive characteristics related to the type of work each participant performed. Participants were assigned a descriptive word to encapsulate their role and the core aspects of their contributions to youth work. These descriptive names were then creatively "remixed" into unique monikers, which were combined with the participant's original ID number to create distinct identifiers for the study. The original ID numbers, initially preceded with the letters "YW" (for "youth worker") were appended to the new pseudonyms to retain both the practical purpose of identification and an element of confidential creativity. These new monikers are a means of grounding the profiles in the original data while providing a more engaging and humanized reference system for the participants' contributions to the research. The following table illustrates the method and results of this process. To review the naming convention list, please see Appendix 2.

Professional Profiles

The following table offers a brief overview of the diverse specializations, and experiences that have shaped the careers of the 25 youth workers involved in this study. This cohort exemplifies the multifaceted nature of youth work, with specializations ranging from equity and arts-based approaches to educational counselling, restorative justice, and mental health support. Each participant contributes a unique set of skills and experiences to the sector, often driven by personal motivations and a deep commitment to addressing the needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations. The range of years of experience among these participants is considerable, from those in the early stages of their careers to individuals who have dedicated over two decades to this work. This variation underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of youth work, where professionals enter with differing levels of expertise and continue to develop their capacities as they navigate the challenges and opportunities inherent in their roles.

The pathways into the youth sector for these participants are as diverse as their specializations. For example, "Vizi-15," with 20 years of experience, has assumed a leadership role within a non-profit organization that focuses on equity and cultural empowerment, particularly for Black and Indigenous youth. Conversely, "Advo-17" entered the sector with a focus on advocating for sexual and mental health among young men and masculine-identifying individuals, navigating the complexities of the sector during the early stages of their career. Others, such as "Reha-19," transitioned into youth work from different fields, moving from law enforcement to youth work, motivated by a passion for assisting disadvantaged youth through holistic rehabilitation approaches. A consistent theme among these participants is a commitment to supporting marginalized communities, whether through advocacy for 2SLGBTQ+ youth,

addressing the intersecting challenges of poverty and homelessness, or working with survivors of human trafficking.

This section lays the groundwork for exploring the factors that have influenced these youth workers to enter the sector. It is evident that personal experiences, a strong commitment to social justice, and a desire to effect meaningful change play pivotal roles in shaping these career paths. The table provides a brief window into the professional journeys of these individuals and sets the stage for a more in-depth analysis of the entry points into youth work. This analysis will further examine the challenges these youth workers encounter as they balance their professional roles with systemic barriers and the opportunities for growth within the field, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the factors that draw individuals into youth work and sustain their involvement over time.

Table 1

Professional Profiles

Pseudonym	Years	Specialization	Experience
Vizi-15	18	Equity, Arts-based approaches, Black and Indigenous youth	Leadership in non-profit sector, focus on arts and cultural empowerment for marginalized communities
Advo-17	5	Sexual health, Mental health, Masculine-identifying people	Advocacy for sexual and mental health among young men and masculine-identifying people, navigating early career challenges
Reha-19	1+	Criminal justice, Psychoeducational programming, Youth in conflict with the law	Transition from law enforcement to youth work, passion for helping

Pseudonym	Years	Specialization	Experience
Inter-20	7	Youth mental health, Homelessness, Counseling, Case management	disadvantaged youth, holistic approach to rehabilitation Deep involvement in mental health and homelessness services, commitment to holistic youth care across multiple systems
Trailz-23	3	2SLGBTQ+ youth, Homelessness, Poverty, Advocacy	Advocacy for marginalized 2SLGBTQ+ youth, experienced barriers in the sector such as racialization and transphobia
Mentr-25	15	Students facing multiple barriers, Poverty, Homelessness, Mental health	Significant experience with youth facing multiple barriers, driven by personal experiences, systemic advocacy within educational settings
Supor-28	5	Youth aging out of care, Life skills training, Transition to independent living	Balancing multiple roles in youth care, facing personal and professional challenges, yet driven by a commitment to supporting youth independence
Protek-38	6	Anti-human trafficking, Child and adolescent mental health	Expertise in anti-human trafficking, dual roles in mental health and advocacy, commitment to protecting vulnerable youth
Paths-43	10+	Conservation-based youth programs, Outdoor-focused settings	Shift from institutionalized youth care to innovative outdoor and conservation-

Pseudonym	Years	Specialization	Experience
Inno-51	1.5	Forensics unit, Youth employment, Vocational training	focused approaches, deep experience in residential care Specialized in youth employment and vocational training, navigating the intersection of youth work and forensic psychology
Connex-53	14	Youth in transition housing, Outreach coordination	Extensive involvement in youth transition programs, deeply connected with various outreach and support initiatives
Consel-54	4	Career counseling, Employment services, Domestic and sexual violence	Career focused on supporting youth in crisis, experienced challenges with workplace dynamics and systemic issues in employment services
Facila-58	3	Leisure development, civic engagement, program development	Experience in program development for civic engagement, leveraging leisure activities for positive youth development
Buildz-59	1.5	Latino community, newcomers, youth program coordination	Focused on supporting Latino newcomer youth, significant role in community building and cultural integration
Guardz-65	6	Transitional housing for human trafficking survivors, case management	Specialization in transitional housing for survivors of human trafficking, driven by a passion for supporting vulnerable populations

Pseudonym	Years	Specialization	Experience
Provi-77	3	Youth employment support, health services, educational support	Provides comprehensive youth services across multiple domains, advocates for stronger professional support in the sector
Navi-80	8	Case management, child welfare system, system navigation	Highly experienced in child welfare and case management, adept at navigating complex systemic challenges
Defen-82	25	Child protection, group homes, foster care	Long-standing commitment to child protection, combining frontline care with advocacy for systemic change
Acti-87	2	After-school programs, empowering young women and girls	Dedicated to empowering young women and girls through education and skills development, overcoming sector challenges
Restor-89	1.67	Youth diversion, Restorative Justice, mental health support	Committed to restorative justice and mental health support for youth offenders, passion for giving youth a second chance
Inspir-92	4	Autism program, behavior plans, social and life skills	Inspired by personal experiences to support students with autism, balancing professional roles with systemic challenges
Educ-100	12	Autism support, life skills, behavior management	Long-term role in supporting students with autism, passionate about behavior

Pseudonym	Years	Specialization	Experience
Allz-102	5.5	Newcomer and refugee youth, mental health coping strategies	management and life skills development Deeply connected to the community served, using personal identity as a key asset in youth mentorship and support
Guidez-104	6	Educational support, social programming, academic tutoring	Navigated early career challenges in the youth sector, developed a strong foundation in educational support and social programming
Champz-115	5	School-based social work, student associations, mental health	Focused on systemic racism and its impact on youth, deeply committed to supporting the next generation through education and mental health services

Analytical Approach

The analysis of participant narratives required a methodologically rigorous and interpretive approach that ensured confidentiality while maintaining the integrity of thematic development. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) provided a framework to engage deeply with the ways youth workers articulated their professional experiences while attending to the structural conditions shaping the sector (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2023, 2024). Unlike positivist models of thematic coding, which assume themes emerge naturally from data, RTA acknowledges that themes are actively generated through the researcher’s iterative engagement with the dataset, requiring reflexivity at every stage (Byrne, 2022). The absence

of direct interaction between the researcher and participants, due to the third-party data collection process conducted by York University's Institute for Social Research (ISR), introduced considerations that shaped the analytical process.

The confidentiality of this approach ensured that participants could share their experiences freely, without the concern that prior or future professional ties with the researcher might influence their responses. While this design meant that co-construction of meaning was not possible in real-time, it also provided security and mitigated response bias. The use of RTA in this context reinforced the need for an interpretive strategy that relied on repeated engagement with participant transcripts rather than direct dialogue to refine themes.

Reflexivity and the Conditions of Interpretation

Reflexivity remained central throughout the analytical process, shaping the engagement with participant narratives. Given my professional role within YouthREX, it was necessary to maintain awareness of how familiarity with the sector's policies, institutional constraints, and funding structures could influence thematic development. Reflexive journaling was incorporated as a tool for tracking interpretive decisions, identifying points where sectoral knowledge informed coding, and ensuring that emergent themes remained accountable to participant narratives rather than researcher assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). With the anonymized nature of data collection removing opportunities for direct clarification or follow-up engagement, the analysis required heightened attentiveness to the ways participants framed their experiences and the strategic ways they positioned themselves within their narratives.

Reflexive engagement was key to ensuring that themes did not become static categories but instead captured the tensions, contradictions, and structural realities that

shaped youth worker experiences. The absence of direct participant interaction heightened the importance of language and discursive analysis, requiring an approach that went beyond categorize concerns, examining how those concerns were articulated within broader institutional contexts. The balance between security and analytical depth was a key methodological consideration. While future research may benefit from greater direct engagement with participants, the structure of this study ensured that findings were shaped within a research design that prioritized confidentiality and minimized potential bias from researcher-participant familiarity.

Thematic development was therefore an interpretive process that required sustained engagement with the structure, tone, and implicit meanings embedded in participant responses, ensuring that findings were not just descriptive but critically engaged with the systemic conditions that defined youth work practice.

Thematic Development and Structural Engagement

The coding and theme development process unfolded through recursive engagement with the dataset, allowing patterns to emerge through multiple rounds of reading and re-reading transcripts. Thematic structures were not determined solely by frequency but by conceptual significance, relational meaning, and structural relevance within the youth work sector. MAXQDA software was used to facilitate the organization of codes, but coding decisions were made through an analytical lens that prioritized depth over mechanical classification. Themes were refined not by collapsing participant experiences into simplified categories but by maintaining an analytical approach that attended to how youth workers described their challenges, motivations, and institutional conditions.

The process of moving from initial codes to finalized themes required sustained interrogation of how narratives were constructed, ensuring that interpretation remained both methodical and contextually grounded. The contradictions within participant accounts, where expressions of commitment to youth work were often positioned alongside frustrations with sectoral instability, were central to understanding the complexity of professional sustainability in the field. By structuring the analysis in this way, the research maintains a commitment to examining youth work not as a set of discrete experiences but as a field structured by economic, policy, and institutional conditions that shape practice.

Process of Analysis

The analysis of participant narratives followed a structured, yet iterative process aligned with the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), ensuring that themes were not extracted mechanically but developed through sustained engagement with the data. Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach provided the foundation for this process, guiding the movement from initial familiarization with transcripts to the generation of a refined conceptual model that captures the complexities of youth worker experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Each phase required recursive interaction with the dataset, refining codes and themes to ensure that findings were not surface-level descriptions but reflective of deeper patterns embedded in participant narratives. While this methodology was the most appropriate tool for organizing the interview data and reconciling these findings with the context of my own experience and positionality, the political leanings of a research philosophy of critical interpretivism implicates the social and personal – all of these elements and spheres inform one another. Reflective Thematic Analysis continues to wrestle with questions that lie between process, product and purpose.

Nearly twenty years ago, Braun and Clarke provided a framework for Thematic Analysis that two decades later they would bemoan once again for misappropriation and misuse by researchers who stamp the methodological terminology on their projects without interrogating the process with less methodological integrity. In my interpretation, what Braun and Clarke have provided academic scholarship is a point of reference for critically and reflectively engaging in the categoric thematization of data, even though they seem to paradoxically engage in the respectability of methodology in initially identifying Thematic Analysis as a “very poorly ‘branded’ method” in the sense of its competitive currency when compared to other analytical strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). However, in the context of what could be called the academic industrial complex where “intellectual property” is capitalized epistemology, knowledge production becomes political and upward mobility is linked to “academic currency.” The same economic-driven values which promote rigid practices of evaluation aligned more with transactional equity rather than social equity, place the business of academia in the fore, where one’s program of research is not entirely separate from marketing and entrepreneurship. Demonstrating value as a novel contribution also fulfills the objective of being fundable. The “business” of scholarship is a factor to account for in neoliberal- influenced societies, as these factors compound with positivistic preferences. The temptation to compete with institutionally “credible” knowledge by mimicking natural science disciplines when attempting to understanding social phenomena has been a sight of great tension. Conceding to the fact that people and communities are not lab experiments does not make the generation of knowledge in this area less rigorous, it adds a great deal of nuance and dynamism. Resisting the urge to “know” for the sake of obtaining a stance of power and feigned omniscience, reinvokes Paulo Freire’s notion of pedagogy by

explicating power dynamics for the sake of a more humanizing function. Therefore, methodological tools go beyond canonical texts to reign in scholarly doctrine amongst a faithful set of disciplines; instead, methodological tools are resources to share and reform in humble efforts to learn, relearn, share, challenge, and reason. Reasoning in this sense should resist hierarchical propositioning and remain critically reflexive. With this context in mind, methods are simply a pathway, a way of demonstrating the journey to how one came to know and see the findings of their (re)search to further understandings and discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Bruan and Clarke’s leadership in Thematic Analysis and their six simplified steps for data analyses (referenced in the table below) provided the groundwork for my review of the interview transcripts.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis Process

Phase	Description of the Process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

Phase	Description of the Process
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table # (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Familiarization with the Data

Establishing an in-depth understanding of the data required sustained engagement with interview transcripts, reading and re-reading each document while taking notes on emerging patterns and significant moments in participant accounts. This phase involved an initial review of the dataset to ensure that each participant met the study's eligibility criteria while also allowing for early insights into potential thematic directions. Reflexive journaling during this stage facilitated a process of documenting my preliminary impressions, particularly in response to participant's understanding of professional challenges and the tensions that surfaced between their commitments to relational work and institutional constraints. Attention was also given to the structure of the interview process itself, including the flow of questions, moments where participants elaborated on specific points, and any interruptions that may have influenced the dynamics of the conversation. During my first readings of the transcripts, I also made notes on my perceptions of the dynamics and techniques of the interviewers, as a team of interviews. I made efforts to be sensitive to any potential dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee, making note of laughter, perceived levels of engagement with the interview overall and specific questions, responsive cues, etc.

At this stage, I wrote summary notes and memos to capture my impressions to help facilitate reflections on my own biases (assumptions). I wrote as if I were speaking to myself, candidly noting anything that appeared to be insightful, unexpected, questionable, disingenuous, overly cautious, or candid. At times, I utilized software for dictation, note consolidation, organization and project management tools to review, recompose and streamline years of reflections in the form of written memos. In this way, I was able to examine how my contemporary reading the text contrasted with my previous judgements and presumptions on the nature of this study. In a sense, though my work had begun years ago, once the data analysis started, a new study began. I assessed the interviews individually, making notes on their styles and approaches and wondering if any demographic changes with the interviewees might change dynamics. While these interviews were conducted over the phone for anonymity and safety during the context of the global pandemic, I was very sensitive to the impact of the interviews, which I deduced to be professional and effective overall.

Generating Initial Codes

The coding process began by labeling segments of participant responses according to emerging comments and insights, extending beyond the predefined survey questions and interviewer prompts. This phase employed an inductive approach, ensuring that codes were constructively generated directly from participant language rather than being imposed through pre-existing analytical categories. The use of MAXQDA software facilitated the organization of data, allowing for codes to be later be categorized in ways that preserved the integrity of participant narratives while setting the stage for thematic development. In some cases, in vivo coding was utilized to capture the precise wording used by participants,

recognizing that language itself is a key site of meaning-making within youth work practice (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This method was employed to keep the data grounded in participant perspectives. As coding progressed, patterns of shared experience began to emerge, as youth workers described the expectations and consequences (for better or worse) of the roles they filled. Codes that appeared to be similar were not deleted or merged, to allow for the expansion of nuances. During this stage, I did not restrict myself to any number of codes and allowed for new codes to become more detailed as additional observations became evident. No statement was regarded as mundane and the entire transcript was coded, including any emerging details pertaining to demographic data (which was later used to crosscheck for accuracy). The questions of the interview guide were used as initial categories to organize codes that were direct responses, but the new categories and non-categorized codes were also plentiful.

Searching for Themes

The movement from coding to thematic development required a process of identifying patterns across the dataset, ensuring that individual codes were not treated as isolated units but examined in relation to broader conceptual groupings. At this stage, codes were further grouped into preliminary themes as categories, with attention given to how different aspects of participant narratives intersected to form meaningful conceptual groupings (Braun et al., 2022). This phase involved iterative engagement with the data, revisiting earlier coding decisions to refine the thematic structure and reflecting on how emerging findings resonated with the research questions. Utilizing the MAXQDA coding interface, codes and emerging code categories were assigned distinctive colours and organized into a coding tree where the original codes were nested under malleable category

headings. As the coding stabilized, the objective shifted from populating as many relevant codes as possible, to searching for ways to potentially consolidate and organize the data.

Reviewing Themes

Ensuring conceptual clarity within and across themes required a process of refining and re-examining coded data, exploring whether emerging categories effectively capture the complexities of participant experiences. This phase was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2023) emphasis on internal homogeneity, working to ensure that data within each theme remained coherent and external heterogeneity, ensuring that distinctions between themes were analytically meaningful throughout the full transcripts. The process of theme refinement involved re-reading transcripts with a focus on how participants framed their experiences in the youth sector, ensuring that the themes also reflected on personal, professional and socio-political implications. Some initial thematic groupings were collapsed and restructured to reinforce an analytical approach that remained critically engaged with the deeply personal and systemic realities of the youth sector. Once the categories were firmly established, I utilized MAXQDA's Creative Coding feature to produce a mind map of all relevant code and category nodes in order to review and reorganize (see Appendix 7 for the initial drafts linking codes and categories). Admittedly, the initial focus of assessing the ways youth workers navigate the Non-Profit Industrial Complex shifted into an inquiry on how youth workers conceptualized and experienced their critical practice. This subtly shift in focus occurred over significant reflection and a decision to centralize how youth workers describe the principles of their work. The initial literature review explicated the impact of neoliberalism on the youth sector. While some codes and categories emerged that meaningfully connect to theoretical concepts in the literature and my own work and

reflections, these codes were set aside in favour of two key points of inquiry from the interview guide; namely, what were the benefits of youth work and what made youth workers want to quit. While the eventual finding themes of Supportive and Obstructive factors replaced the inaugural framing of benefits and barriers, the focus on “critical” youth work created an unexpected shift in the direction of the research.

Defining and Naming Themes

The refinement of themes required moving beyond broad categorizations toward a structured framework that articulated how different aspects of participant narratives intersected. Each theme remained connected to categories and codes within the dataset, ensuring that its conceptual foundation was clear while also maintaining flexibility for continued refinement. The names chosen for the themes shifted often, guided by the desire to encapsulate the shared aspects of participant experiences with relevance to the research questions. As noted, the research question stayed consistent in its overall point of inquiry, but the language of the themes and even research inquiry shifted throughout the writing and review process, as the critical interpretation of the data also involved an iterative process of recognizing the creation of new insights and directions.

During the first drafting of this dissertation, I produced a number of mind maps, tables and models in an attempt to reconceptualize the data in more sensible and insightful ways. My analysis of the emerging categories evolved into larger themes which in turn were linked to spheres of influence. I reimagined Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) Ecological Systems Theory of the micro, mezzo and macro spheres of impact, into the individual, interpersonal, institutional and industrial levels that the Supportive and Obstructive factors impact (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Emphasising these ecological contexts, I created illustrations

to show how the majority of Obstructive factors came from systemic and organizational contexts while the Supportive factors were largely relational and interpersonal. This distinction led to shifting in my theoretical framework and literature, to examine the structural violence and potential for praxis within conceptual frameworks that advocated for humanism. Johan Galtung and Paolo Freire were ultimately proponents of social harmony, who focused on addressing the difficult to name forces of dehumanization while simultaneously struggling to maintain and advocate for hope. At this juncture, the two main themes juxtaposed Humanizing and Dehumanizing factors. I also explored Supportive factors and Demoralizing factors, as the focus began identifying the prevalence of moral distress. I also contemplated a binary framing of the Push and Pull factors, which implicated attrition and retention dynamics. However, these framings appeared to be in close proximity to the discourse around Decent Work, focusing on why youth workers are pushed out or demoralized in their work rather than a fuller exploration of how youth workers may reconcile their value system with their work and the cost, benefits and possibilities associated with those efforts. By emphasizing participant's definition of their critical youth work and examining how the Supportive and Obstructive factors of critical youth work simultaneously impact youth workers through every ecological sphere, the research study revealed itself through a revitalization of the study.

Producing the Final Analysis

The final stage of analysis involved integrating the thematic framework into a structured interpretive narrative, ensuring that the findings were presented in ways that remained true to the depth and complexity of participant accounts. This phase required moving from coded excerpts to a fully developed analytical structure, ensuring that each

theme was contextualized within both participant experiences and the broader structural forces shaping youth work. The recursive nature of this process required continuous re-engagement with transcripts, thematic categories, and reflexive notes to ensure that the final analysis centered youth worker voices.

The process of writing the final analysis required ongoing reflexivity, ensuring that my interpretive lens did not overshadow the voices of participants but instead facilitated a deeper understanding of the conditions shaping youth work experiences and insights. This thematic analysis framework provided a structure for engaging with participant narratives in a way that remained analytically attuned to the personal and social aspects of the field. The process of data interpretation is not neutral, neither is data analysis and synthesis about “giving voice” to those studied; this is why reflexivity and self-awareness is essential to incorporate in these exercises (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80, 2024). The findings were divided into three chapters, beginning with the Critical Principles of youth work, the Supportive Factors of critical practice, followed by the Obstructive factors. Following the findings, I present a final chapter where the theoretical framework and initial inquiry of research is reconnected to the data.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The scope of this research was intentionally narrowed to examine the experiences of full-time youth workers in Central Ontario, refining the broader Ontario Youth Compass (OYC) dataset to ensure a detailed, context-specific analysis. The focus on full-time professionals within the social service sector provided an opportunity to explore the complexities of youth work as a career path, examining how economic, institutional, and policy conditions shape long-term engagement with the field. This study does not incorporate

the perspectives of part-time staff, volunteers, or individuals outside the targeted geographic region. The decision to exclude those who engage in youth work through academic placements or short-term contracts was made to center the experiences of those navigating the sector's structural challenges on a sustained basis. While this approach strengthens the study's depth, it also presents limitations in terms of generalizability, as it does not capture the full spectrum of engagement within youth services.

A key methodological consideration involved the recruitment process, which relied on digital outreach through YouthREX's established networks, including newsletters, social media platforms, and direct email invitations. While this strategy effectively reached a diverse sample of youth workers, it also introduced potential bias by favoring those who were already professionally connected to sectoral knowledge-sharing spaces. Youth workers who were less engaged with professional development opportunities or who operated outside of formalized networks may have been underrepresented, limiting the extent to which the findings capture the experiences of those in more precarious or grassroots roles. This sampling method, while efficient in reaching those with sectoral experience, may have excluded perspectives from individuals who are structurally marginalized within the field. The absence of part-time, volunteer, or student perspectives means that the findings do not fully reflect the transitional or precarious labor that often characterizes early engagement with youth work, though future research could extend this inquiry by including a wider range of employment experiences.

Validity and Reliability in Reflexive Analysis

The analytical rigor of this study was reinforced through the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), ensuring that themes were developed through sustained and

engaged reading of the data rather than through mechanistic coding. The process of thematic development involved multiple rounds of engagement with interview transcripts, allowing for the refinement of thematic categories while maintaining fidelity to participant narratives. The validity of this approach was further strengthened by integrating a Systemic Reflexive Analysis (SRA) framework, which allowed for a structured yet interpretive engagement with the data, ensuring that findings were not extracted in isolation but examined in relation to broader sectoral and institutional conditions. Reflexivity was embedded throughout the analytical process, ensuring that researcher positionality was acknowledged at each stage.

Given my professional background in youth work and capacity-building, a conscious effort was made to document analytical decisions, question potential biases, and refine interpretations through ongoing engagement with the dataset. The absence of direct participant-researcher interaction in this study meant that meaning-making relied entirely on transcript analysis, requiring an approach that remained attuned to both explicit and implicit patterns in the data. Coding decisions were revisited multiple times to ensure internal coherence, with themes refined iteratively to maintain analytical precision. The reliability of this study was maintained through a process of cross-examining thematic structures, ensuring that the findings aligned with the complexities of participant narratives while remaining critically engaged with structural conditions shaping youth work (Byrne, 2022).

The decision to exclude direct member checking, a technique often used in qualitative research to enhance validity, was based on ethical and methodological considerations. Given the confidential nature of the data collection process, where interviews were conducted through the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University, returning transcripts to participants posed a risk of inadvertently compromising anonymity. The interconnected

nature of the youth work sector heightened this concern, as participants might recognize their own responses in broader analyses, potentially raising concerns about identifiability. While member checking was not possible in this context, validity was reinforced through continuous reflexive engagement with the data, ensuring that participant narratives were represented with accuracy and depth while maintaining the integrity of the research process.

Ethical Protocols and Data Security

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, with full approval granted by York University's Human Participants Review Committee (HPRC). Ethical considerations were particularly significant given the nature of the youth work sector, where many professionals operate in precarious or high-turnover roles. Ensuring confidentiality was critical to protecting participants from potential repercussions related to their reflections on institutional conditions, funding constraints, and systemic challenges within the sector. Participants were provided with detailed consent forms outlining the research objectives, their rights as participants, and the measures in place to protect their anonymity. The involvement of ISR as an external research body reinforced these protections, as interviews were conducted by trained professionals with no direct affiliations to the sector, minimizing potential power imbalances that could influence participant responses, or create concern pertaining to potential future encounters with participants in the sector, who would have preferred to be and remain completely anonymous. Honoraria were provided as recognition of participants' time and expertise, ensuring that their contributions were valued while maintaining voluntary participation.

To further protect participant identities, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts prior to analysis, with anonymization protocols embedded into the data processing stage. Given the sensitive nature of discussions around job precarity, funding instability, and workplace conditions, particular care was taken to ensure that no identifying details related to organizations, locations, or specific programs were retained in the dataset. The original audio recordings of interviews were securely stored until transcription was complete, after which they were deleted to further protect confidentiality. Data security protocols adhered to institutional guidelines, with encrypted storage ensuring restricted access to research personnel. While some qualitative studies incorporate direct participant validation of findings, the risks associated with returning transcripts or themes to youth workers in this study outweighed the potential benefits. Many participants disclosed workplace concerns or critiques of institutional practices that could pose risks if identifiable responses were traced back to them. To mitigate these risks, the analytical process prioritized methodological rigor in thematic interpretation, ensuring that findings remained aligned with participant narratives without requiring direct participant review.

Considerations for Future Research

The limitations outlined in this section suggest several avenues for further inquiry that could extend the contributions of this study. Future research may benefit from incorporating perspectives from part-time and volunteer youth workers, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of the range of labor conditions that characterize the sector. Additionally, studies that engage in direct researcher-participant dialogue through longitudinal or participatory methodologies could offer deeper insights into how youth workers conceptualize and contest the constraints imposed by funding models, institutional policies, and systemic inequities.

The absence of direct co-construction of meaning between researcher and participants in this study reflects both the ethical protections built into the research design and the constraints of conducting an anonymous secondary analysis. However, future research could explore collaborative knowledge production models that involve youth workers, young people, managers, funders and other youth sector stakeholders in the thematic development and analysis process, allowing for shared interpretation and sector-wide dialogue. There is a great deal of insight to gather from multiple perspectives, but the groundwork of constructing shared concepts and theoretical frameworks to further these discourses is essential.

Chapter 5: Critical Principles, Findings, and Analysis

The next three chapters present the findings from the 25 semi-structured interviews with frontline youth workers based in Central Ontario. These findings respond to the questions of how youth workers define their critical praxis (value system and actions) and the factors that support or obstruct this work. The current chapter details five principles of critical youth work that emerged from interview discussions about the daily work of frontline staff, centering their experiences and perspectives on the “real” work. Initially coded as the “dynamism” of youth work, participants shared insights into the nuances and challenges that surfaced in their interpersonal and institutional interactions, as well as how they understood their work through the lens of outsiders. These emergent principles were unexpected but greatly shifted and fine-tuned the focus of the research once the significance of these findings was understood. Chapter 6 presents six factors that support critical practice in the sector and Chapter 7 relays six obstructive factors.

By analyzing the personal testimonies of Ontarian youth workers, this study seeks to develop a nuanced understanding of the benefits and challenges of working on the frontlines in this particularly understudied sector. It aims to contribute to the broader discourse on youth work by providing evidence-based insights that can inform policy and organizational practice. This inquiry is particularly relevant in the context of the urgent need for a healthier and sustainable youth sector, where workers are empowered to perform their roles effectively. The findings explore the impact of these dynamics in the personal and professional spheres, while setting the stage for exploring the critical role of administrative, policy, and funding practices in shaping the working conditions and overall well-being of youth workers in the final Discussion chapter. By providing a comprehensive analysis of

these consequential factors within the youth sector, this study aims to inform strategies for creating a more supportive and sustainable environment for frontline youth workers.

The Five Principles of Critical Youth Work

A critical youth worker operates within a framework that prioritizes the specific needs and lived experiences of young people, particularly those who have been marginalized or are navigating complex, oppressive systems. Central to this role is the adoption of a needs-based approach, where the youth worker actively engages with young people to understand and address their unique circumstances, goals, and challenges. Rather than imposing predetermined solutions, a critical youth worker empowers youth to define their own paths, fostering a sense of autonomy and self-determination. This approach is deeply informed by the recognition of systemic inequities and the various forms of oppression that youth may encounter, both within and outside institutional settings. Critical youth workers not only support the individual development of young people but also advocate for systemic changes, embodying a human-centered approach that emphasizes relational trust, empathy, and the active participation of youth in shaping their futures.

The findings from this theme of critical youth work principles is embodied in five key subthemes that define the complex, multifaceted, and deeply meaningful nature of critical youth work: relational, holistic, responsive, transformational, and reflexive practices. Relational youth work is centered on building strong, trusting relationships with young people, where youth workers act as consistent, non-judgmental supports. This relational aspect is fundamental to the effectiveness of youth work, as it enables youth workers to be a reliable presence for young people, especially in circumstances where other systems have failed them. Holistic approaches in youth work emphasize the importance of understanding

the full context of a young person's life, including their psychological, physiological, and social environments. By considering these factors, youth workers can provide more comprehensive support that addresses both immediate needs and underlying issues, thereby facilitating more sustainable positive outcomes.

Responsive youth work is characterized by the flexibility and adaptability required to meet the ever-changing needs of young people. This involves transitioning from rigid, institutionalized settings to more dynamic, youth-centered approaches, and being able to quickly respond to crises and evolving challenges. Transformational youth work goes beyond immediate interventions to facilitate deep, systemic change in the lives of young people. This includes fostering self-actualization and autonomy, empowering youth to navigate complex systems, and advocating for systemic change that addresses the root causes of the challenges young people face. Finally, reflexive youth work underscores the importance of self-care and reflective practice for youth workers themselves.

The emotional demands of the work, coupled with the need to persist through setbacks, make it essential for youth workers to engage in ongoing reflection and self-care to maintain their effectiveness and well-being. These subthemes collectively underscore the critical role that youth workers play in fostering resilience, growth, and transformation in the lives of young people facing significant adversity. The dynamic interplay between relational trust, holistic understanding, responsive action, transformational change, and reflexive practice forms the foundation of effective critical youth work, which ultimately seeks to co-empower young people and advocate for a more just and equitable society.

In exploring how the participants viewed the practical reality of their social justice-oriented work versus the perception of their work outside of the frontline, the interviews with

youth workers reveal common misconceptions about the nature of their work. The key informant interviews identified several themes and subthemes that extend far beyond the typical job descriptions or public assumptions about the responsibilities of youth workers. In many cases, the work of youth workers is unrecognized and underappreciated and, at times, trivialized. Youth work is inherently dynamic, requiring a high degree of flexibility and the ability to adapt to evolving circumstances to effectively meet the needs of young people and community stakeholders. As one participant states,

I think youth work itself is very dynamic. No matter how many manuals or how many specific program fliers and sheets there are for a certain program I think it's also very flexible with work. I think that you have to be always on your A-game, always on your toes. You could be ready to speak with a client and then suddenly, you know, something happens, a crisis hits, and you have to react quickly. (REHA-19)

This insight underscores the complexity and nuance involved in youth work, highlighting the gap between public perceptions and the realities of the profession. The work of a youth worker goes beyond serving young people, often involving a great deal of administrative, evaluative, and so psychological engagement. In addition to requiring a diverse range of skills which merge professional expertise with interpersonal talents and experience there is also a context of environments and circumstances that have the potential to be highly volatile. For workers who are supporting young people in precarious situations or helping them navigate through mortal crisis, youth workers take on a great deal of emotional, mental and at times physical strain that is difficult to quantify or account for in program evaluations. Often working above and beyond the stipulated hours of a contract there is no practical way to account for the way that youth workers continue to be “on the

job” outside of, work time whether through continuing to engage with clients or even troubleshooting and reflecting upon the ways that they will be successful in providing the support necessary.

The transformative impact and integrity that comes from nurturing the reciprocal relations that you’ve workers can have with the communities they support is grounded in the foundation of building, trust and understanding the purpose in one’s work. This theme on the dynamism of youth work praxis (in principle and practice) were identified to help to conceptualize how youth workers understand the key components of the work and service that they provide that extends beyond descriptive, occupational day to day duties and dives into categories of approaches to work which are echoed the values and methods of their critical engagement with young people to affect transformational positive impact. These dynamic elements also speak to a value system of some of the pillars of youth engagement, which are necessary to support young people in self-actualization and navigating through systemic barriers. In this way, youth workers also find reward in the impact of their work, regardless of the challenges through years of effort and support. One participant outlines a rewarding experience after supporting a young person for 5 years in navigating the education system, stating,

We’re able to see youth who have struggled over the time like I’m thinking of right now someone who just graduated high school who’s 22 and I’ve been working with her since she was, since she was 17 and she struggled all the way through.... you see their successes and the obstacles that they face but also when they actually get there, it’s just – I think it’s really rewarding and nice to see. (PROTEK-38)

However, many youth workers will never have an opportunity to understand the full impact of their work, especially in the context of short-term contracts and project grants. In some cases, a “success story” does not materialize in the way that youth workers would hope. While the work is challenging and has consequential impact on young people’s lives, there are many dynamics and values of the work that remain aloof for those who are not working in the frontlines. There is also a common contradiction in the way that youth work is difficult yet assume to be easy and to disrupt that lens of viewing the work as not being rigorous potentially because of the lack of professional oversight and traditional entry points into the field of youth work as professionalization is increasing, but there are still many dynamics, which would open doors for unconventionally trained workers to enter the field.

Keeping in mind that the label of professional is loaded with political context, which means that someone with the with a high degree of experience and education in the work itself may not be recognized as having credentials since these insights were not officially recognized by a formal institution. However, critical youth workers contribute to a significant social impact that is necessary for broader social well-being, extending benefits well beyond the individual young people. When asked what they wanted other people to know about youth work, one participant states:

That it’s really hard work. And this is really needed and that – I really think that if this work didn’t exist, we would see huge societal impacts. (INTER-20)

While the work itself can be difficult, and the results of the work can feel rewarding the values and effort that inform much of the work with schematize in the study in six ways. Six sub themes emerged in an assessment of the ways that youth workers understand key aspects or approaches that informed their work. These sub themes include a relational,

holistic, responsive, transformational, critical, and reflexive approach that youth workers take in order to support solutions for the young people they serve, and to do so in a way that maintains their value system and builds on the overall integrity of the relationship that they have with young people and community. These sub themes also speak to the broader, professional and political context of doing Frontline youth work in a way that reflects a value system and reciprocal relations that support longer lasting and transformative outcomes rather than just responding in a reactionary or unsustainable way.

Relational: Interpersonal and Communal Connections

Relationship building was one of the strongest dynamics of youth work that related to the values that youth workers possess to feel a sense of purpose behind the work and to appreciate the outcomes of their efforts through the work. By forming trusting relationships as a foundation of their engagement and support, the efficacy of being able to overcome barriers and celebrate success relied heavily on the ability to form connections that were genuine and reliable. The importance of maintaining strong and supportive connections throughout the work is a fundamental core concept that is difficult to quantify and to understand from reporting metrics, but is so strong in the quality of its impact that youth workers often times were counted across young people many years after they had been engaged in programs and hearing how their reflection on their time and programming was a great benefit and produced outcomes for them, which may have otherwise gone much worse. Interestingly, for some of the youth workers, their connection with the young people does not stop when their occupation or work ends both in the sense of the workday and even the specific contracts that they fulfill. For the relationship between young people can very likely extend because these are interpersonal relationships that, have the potential to transcend the

parameters of a program start and end date. The system of valuing relation and relational connection is very much a personal matter and has relevance so that as youth worker is value discord concept that their work is able to be more successful because this crucial component, especially for young people who may not have other consistent, supports or relationships of trust in their life from other adults becomes even more significant and impactful. In the following case, the youth worker's relational support helped a young person successfully navigate their educational journey, and they were subsequently called upon to continue to provide that wraparound support, even after the program had ended.

Yeah, so we had this student who in grade six, started off. She was kind of out of control. She would hit us and try to kick us and run away and stuff and tell us that she was going to call the police on us after hitting us. And just turning the class upside down to at the end of grade eight, her calling me, her best friend, and us being able to talk and sort things out. And she hardly did any work in grade six and by the time, she got to grade eight, she would at least know OK, now it's time to work. We can play after. We really built a good bond and a trusting relationship. So much so that when she transitioned to high school, they called me because again, she was under control.

For students who have autism, sometimes a lot of times, transitions and change don't always go well. So, for her, there was a lot of issues. So I'd spoken to her a few times, they had me come to the school to try to support her a little bit. I would say, that was the biggest success story for me. Just because she had built a bond with us at school, and her behaviour changed a lot. (EDUC-100)

From this quote, the reward of the "success story," where the youth worker was able to leverage a trusting relationship, was built through many years. The young person was able

to build a relational bond that interjected and interrupted the violent response. Some of the challenges the young person was navigating were also due to cognitive context that require understanding (and in some cases accommodation) to be able to facilitate safe or spaces for everyone that emphasizes patients and investment in care. Care exemplified in this context is the commitment that goes beyond a typical occupation where the “good bond and a trusting relationship” became a priority in terms of a method for success as well as a value for the process itself.

In this example, the importance of constructing a solid relationship that was built on rapport and sometimes can emerge from shared interest can create a connection that is very important in navigating challenges and resistance, particularly for the young people who may push back resist or be sceptical of relationships from previous experiences that may have led to disappointment. Due to the many barriers for young people facing structural marginalization, there is a wide-spread lack of trust caused by their consistent experiences of disenfranchisement, including disenfranchisement from authority figures, which may include a majority of adults. Factoring in these dynamics that may emerge as well as interpersonal dynamics of cognitive functioning, and emotional or traumatic circumstances are all dynamics that relate to a youth workers ability to operationalize relationships in a way to meet their deliverables without compromising or contradicting their personal ethical and relational integrity.

In the following example, a youth worker describes working with a younger program participant who had a great deal of difficulty with building rapport, but through this youth worker, persistence and consistent availability and strategy in valuing the foundational structuring of a relationship they were able to create a meaningful bond.

...this was during my placement; this is something that always really sticks to me.

There was one youth in particular, he was, I guess, deemed the youth who has behavioural issues, the youth that didn't really like to listen to authority, that's what the, that's the picture that they painted on him. And at the time, I believe he was ten years old and he really, it took a really, really long time for me to connect with him and to show him that he can trust me. And so, one thing that really stood out is just, us, I was working really hard and trying to build this relationship, but also not being too forceful.

But we ended up creating a really good therapeutic relationship and he ended up asking me to read 'Twilight' with him and it was something that he got made fun of for read, for doing, reading 'Twilight' with him. But he did not care and that's something that really always stood out, because a lot of youth are very resilient. All our children youth are very resilient and being able to, and this was one of the youths that I've had the most challenging times really getting to know and having to support. But we were able to breakdown all those barriers and all that trust and he was able to just confide in me in different areas of his life. And then just read, read that 'Twilight' book, he would just come to me, "***, can we go in the corner and just read 'Twilight' together. (PROVI-77)

The participants explains that this experience "really sticks" to them and was meaningful in their earlier interactions with the sector. And while they celebrated and acknowledged the resilience of the young people that were using the Frontline services, they realize that barriers required trust in order to be breached, even if creating that trust seem to be as simple as reading a book that so-called simple activity could mean a world of

difference for someone. In the context of the young person in the example above, even though his peers teased him for, the reading activity that social shaming did not deter him from seeking out that connection that had a greater meaningful reward for his own well-being. This youth worker participant goes to explain,

[He] did not trust anybody at all, he was, he had experienced a lot of disloyalties growing up, a lot of abuse and neglect and he did not trust adult figures at all.

(PROVI-77)

As the context of this young person's experience with adult figures in their lives is further explained the importance of building trust in a critically conscientious way that acknowledges barriers without pathologizing individuals is emphasized. Critical youth workers have an opportunity to help humanize and destigmatize the disenfranchised youth they support by being intentional advocates and allies, building cooperative bridges and rapport to connect and improve services. As another participant describes,

Sometimes that relationship is hard to build because they already have difficulty trusting people so I tend to be that middle person to kind of explain OK this is what depression looks like and PTSD looks like, and these are things that you can do. Kind of be that bridging gap to help them feel connected to that nurse or whoever that may be so that they can actually continue on that relationship. (PROTEK-38)

Youth workers must take care to promote a non-judgmental support base that also celebrates and recognizes the resilience of the young people and refuses to project pathology upon them as social and structural barriers are recognized as being problems. This balance between problem, counterproductive behavior, and identifying forces of conflict intention that exist outside of the control of the young person is a delicate balance that requires

intuitive, insightful, and wise, introspection from youth workers. This is not to overly romanticize or take for granted the complexities that come with interpersonal relation and dynamics, or to assume that the intersectionality and structural complexes that also impact individual interactions is inconsequential. Youth workers are not to be labelled as an iconic solution to problematic young people, but to be understood as professionals involved in the care, industry or care sector that support young people and navigating and can do so more effectively if they are aligned with key principles and values that the youth workers who were interviewed underscore.

One participant provides an example of the importance of being a consistent support in the lives of young people who may be working through exploitive relationships in the context of lacking other supports, and in his motive, survival may not be able to feel that they can rely on relationships from lesser-known adults, even if they current primary relationships are somewhat destructive. Discussing an experience in supporting a young person experiencing human trafficking, this participant explains,

So if you look at like the human trafficking so like a youth they might be in and out of the life and it might be an abusive relationship with the pimp and, you know on my side it's like everything is clear, I see it – the simple answer is you need to leave. But for them it's not clear, right, it might their trafficker is their only support, the only person they have so it's they'd rather have a support or a person in their life rather than be fully alone, right. There's just the matter of being that consistent support for them, and even though they feel that way you not giving up on them. (PROTEK-38)

The participant is aware that the material reality and precarious position of the young person has to be factored in in order to have a sustainable and realistic intervention that will

require a high degree of patience and consistency in building the necessary rapport so that they can provide more responsive and effective help. In this case, and the former cases, the importance of relationship building cannot be underestimated however, if programs and organizations are unable to appreciate and support these crucial components of effective youth engagement by creating space and time for youth workers to grow these relationships, then contradictions and conflict may emerge between youth workers who feel a lack of care and regard and support, and for the young people who may have gone through a number of youth workers and who may continue to feel let down if more consistent supports are not enabled on an organizational or programmatic level. The nature of short term and precarious labour contracts in the sector, along with a potential for micromanagement that may place the youth worker in a difficult position where their tactics and methods are questioned or brought under scrutiny, which may not have the full context presents a potential threat to this success of some of the integral work that is done particularly around relationship building

The participant goes on to detail the experiences of the young person that they supported in the context of human trafficking, identifying that she was 15 years old and transitioned through the foster care system while experiencing sexual assault from a relative and attempting to emancipate herself when possible, from her grandparent's home, but also not wanting to be separated from her siblings. This participant states,

She's a very sweet girl and very smart and knowledgeable, it's just it was a bad situation for her at the time. And I worked with her for about two and a half, three years and working with her like she experienced a lot of barriers and a lot of obstacles and found herself arrested... where predominantly white people [were]....

It was a fight and I had to fight for her that day because they kept her in custody while the whole entire jail emptied out and the courthouse emptied out and she was the last one there because they wanted to hold her. So I supported her through a lot of that stuff which was nice and I think it helped us to build that relationship. When I left my previous job I didn't hear from her and she actually reached to me at my new job I want to say the beginning of this year. And now she owns her own business, she is still kind of in and out of the life but she's smart. She graduated school and she's overcome so many different things and actually ready for trauma therapy which is really nice to see where she's come from to where she is now. (PROTEK-38)

While the youth worker explains how intelligent and capable, this young person was well also sharing the traumatic circumstances surrounding her upbringing. This anecdote touches on the severe violence of sexual abuse and exploitation along with a failing of many elements of foster care and racism within the criminal justice system. As this youth worker has taken years to support an underaged, vulnerable young person in some of the most extreme circumstances of violent abuse they use the framework of resilience rather than a deficit viewpoint to view the young person themselves and try to see them within the context of there are circumstance but not being their circumstance.

In this case, if it had not been for the young person reaching out, and finding this youth worker, the usefulness of this youth, workers support could not have been substantially appreciated. The fact that this young person made efforts to reach out, demonstrates that the youth worker had a positive impact even though there may be many factors to consider the young person deciding to seek out trauma therapy and completing their education to offer

them support as they continue to navigate their journey. This dynamic speaks to the way that youth work in its fulness and dynamism can be rendered invisible in certain aspects that are not easy to capture on reports and Evaluation metrics, as one participant illustrates in discussing the merits of this research and the interview itself,

...interviews like this is what's really needed to really get the stories of that because – I mean you're just putting down numbers to kind of, you know, combine.

It's like usually it's not quality studies, stories, it's usually like Oh and like how many youth have been arrested, how many youth have been in incarceration. Like so yeah it's not a place that I feel like something to take out of context and we need to spend time on because they are the future. (SUPOR-28)

This excerpt speaks to the importance of assessing the impact of youth work beyond the numbers and quantitative surveys and listening to qualitative studies and interviews. While this participant also is advocating for greater stability with funding to support programs and refers to this social investment in young people as an investment in “the future” in the above statement, they critique the dehumanization of common program evaluations and advocate for more time to be spent to appreciate the greater contexts and qualitative stories. Moreover, the importance of youth workers feeling validated in their work is supported by hearing the testimonies of those they have assisted in the past. These testimonies motivate the workers and serve as validation for the unseen impact and underrecognized work from the frontline. These retrospective testimonials are grounded in relationship, and they become a product of that continued relationship as the young service users reflect on their experiences and their connections and that special bond that was built

an offer a tribute to it by acknowledging it, and celebrating the efforts of the frontline employees, as one youth worker attests to having their efforts acknowledge:

That's super rewarding. And like for them to come back, or like years later and just be in a place where they're you know feeling good about life. I think that's what's really valuable. And building those connections. Not necessarily with me, but with others. And building those roots where they feel like they have a place to call home. And yeah, but then like I guess some of the challenges are, well more in organisational or systemic, structural kind of issues. Where you know that could be anywhere from just worker conditions. Where you know pay has always been a challenge. (PATHS-43)

This is a nature of critical youth work, to create non-judgmental spaces for young people to feel supported through a relationship that is built with integrity even in the face of structural and organizational barriers that require efforts to prioritize the well-being of young people and oneself at the same time. The value of relationship and the dynamics of how youth workers navigate building trust and building relationships with the young people in the youth sector is incredibly important and vital to the work itself.

More recognition and celebration of these relational dynamics as well as creating space for relationships with caring adults to flourish, organically, and with organizational endorsement and supports is important in having a positive impact on the various barriers that young people navigate. Acknowledging that youth workers are utilizing their professional expertise as well as their personal energies in establishing and maintaining these relationships must be acknowledged and in hearing from the interview participants, the greatest reward may come from testimonies of young people who have benefitted from this

intervention in those rare and serendipitous moments where youth workers can be informed about their previous accomplishments that bore out over years, however, this does not diminish the importance of organizations making efforts to recognize the importance of relationship building and finding ways to validate youth workers efforts to establish trust and rapport by examining ways that organizations can also support youth workers in feeling a sense of trust and rapport with management and administrative staff. Celebrating youth, workers efficacy, can prolong their engagement and recharge their efforts which will lead to a more sustainable career and potentially better outcomes due to the supportive factors which will be discussed in the next segment, but returning to exploring the sub themes of dynamic youth work values, the next sub theme speaks to the importance of a holistic approach in supporting communities.

Holistic: Collaborative and Well-Rounded Approaches

In addition to establishing trusted relationships, youth work must employ a holistic perspective and practice. A holistic approach in youth work involves considering the myriad factors that shape a young person's reality. While understanding psychological and physiological needs is essential, it is equally important to account for the social environment, social bonds, and influences that impact the young person. This broader perspective enables youth workers to contribute to the co-empowerment of young people more effectively by addressing the underlying causes of the challenges they navigate. A holistic approach seeks to examine the full context of a young person's life, identifying and addressing the roots of the barriers they face. As demonstrated in the earlier discussion on relationality, youth workers often see their role as filling gaps, both interpersonal and structural, that are crucial for a young person's well-being. This subtheme explores the methods youth workers use to

intervene and the scope of factors they consider when creating strategies of support. By understanding the full reality of the young people they serve, youth workers resist presumptions and stereotypes about service users and their situations. Instead, they apply a critical awareness, simultaneously assessing the social determinants of health that affect a young person, while avoiding overly deterministic conclusions. Maintaining open communication with young people to support self-actualized solutions to the barriers they encounter is central to the success of this approach.

Providing holistic support begins with a flexible awareness of the various contexts that may impact youth. Youth workers offer practical assistance, mentorship, and work to bridge gaps in accessing resources, all of which are crucial for helping young people thrive. Through trusted relationships, youth workers can tailor their responses more effectively to meet the diverse needs of young people and address gaps through direct and community-based interventions, as well as through expanding referral systems. Beyond providing direct support, advocacy for systemic change is also a critical component of a holistic approach. Youth workers recognize that young people are connected to families, communities, and broader social systems that significantly impact their well-being. This recognition is vital in critical youth work, as it aims to achieve sustainable, far-reaching positive outcomes for both youth and their communities. Employing a holistic view also requires youth workers to be aware of various aspects influencing a young person's life, including their own goals and objectives, personal boundaries, and past barriers that may continue to affect their current perceptions. Additionally, this approach involves celebrating and building up the young person's agency to accomplish their objectives. Collaboration with other agencies is an integral part of achieving a well-rounded resolution for young people, who are often involved

in multiple spaces and have other mentors and supports that can be leveraged to enhance their overall progress.

Many interview participants described work as intensive, underacknowledged but highly specialized. The efforts of frontline youth workers fill potential gaps in the lives of young people concerning access to caring and supportive adults and peers, and also provides support for other industries and sectors that have stakes in youth development. In the next example, a participant discusses how their work in a school setting helps to bridge service gaps for young people who may have otherwise been neglected.

... just reaching the kids that other teachers and that might kind of, not give up on but they're difficult. So it's easier to just send them out of the room, or send them to the resource room, or send them to the office. And we are the ones, youth workers who reach those kids, and then being in the field for a while I've actually seen students who have graduated. And they're out and they're working, and they're an adult. There's a next generation in the field and just having them remember you and miss, thank you so much for just doing something maybe so small. (INSPIR-92)

After explaining how education systems can be enhanced through youth worker involvement, this participant celebrates the retrospective testimonial of the young people's positive outcome in their intervention but goes on to elucidate the holistic services that they provided including beyond the direct engagement with the young person.

It could be anything for from just acknowledging a kid and just saying hi to them every day... and it can be as big as kind of advocating for a family and maybe accessing funds. And maybe you provide that family with some grocery cards for the

winter break. Or even bigger things kind of advocating for change within the board and things like that. So all of those things combined. (INSPIR-92)

In this “Holistic” subtheme, the youth worker engages with the young person and often (where appropriate) the families of the young people in their service delivery and advocacy. Their advocacy extended beyond interpersonal contexts and engaged with a system-level impact as they participant discussed working towards bigger change on the school board level to improve outcomes for youth and families. The holistic nature of youth work is intent on finding resolutions that meet the immediate needs of young people and feed longer-term opportunities to improve safety and security beyond program hours. By engaging families and advocating for systems change, the efforts to affect sustainable for the positive outcomes are better supported. Advocating for systems change (in the school board in this case) was included as an additional factor which extends these frontline workers efforts to broader socio-political dynamics. In providing wraparound supports for young people to be assisted in various elements and dynamics of their life youth workers employed direct front line intervention, as well as broader social political strategies in their work to address the immediate problems and to immediate future disparities.

While advocacy work may be a broader component that some youth workers wish to take on within and beyond the scope of their employment, the daily interactions and support that you’ve workers provide to young people can be incredibly diverse and dynamic with radical change and a plot of skill sets a plethora of skill sets in addition to the drive and creativity necessary to find solutions and situations that are unique and urgent. Youth workers often go beyond their job descriptions to provide help in any area relevant to youth success, as one frontline youth worker shares,

We provide support in all of those areas. I help a lot of youth apply for OSAP and I help a lot of youth do their course selection or apply for college or apply for university. So, we really try, like the way I think of my work is, whatever support they need in the moment, in their life at that moment, I do what I can to support them and give them help where needed? (PROVI-77)

In addition to filling gaps within sectors, critical youth workers must also cooperatively work across disciplines and industries in order to promote holistic solutions to personal and structural challenges faced by the young people they support. The next participant describes the nature of this cross-collaboration highlighting the need for nuanced approaches wraparound services that provide a comprehensive and responsive review of these efforts to ensure its efficiency. When addressing the nature of effective youth work, they claim:

It also involves a lot of collaboration between agencies within the youth sector, but also outside of the sector. Like health care and justice, education in order to make sure that the services that we're providing to one youth are coherent and not duplicative and streamlined. Gosh do everything under the sun.... This could be helping a youth find a cat that they want as a support animal to going to the rec-room when it was open to blow off some steam for youth experience really intense trauma, anger responses to what's going on in their life. (NAVI-80)

The youth worker continues, highlighting the importance of youth agency, stating, ...that's kind of the beauty of my job, is because it's ***, even though we're transitioning youth to independence, they get to really determine a lot of what their

goals are. And so it's different for each young person coming to our program. (NAVI-80)

So even in doing what they can to fill gaps, there is a consistent conversation happening to centre the evolving needs of the young people that youth workers are supporting. There is no template for effective youth work, as each of the solutions to provide holistic support are responsive to the needs of the young person and with a critical approach, youth workers are invested in ensuring that the youth they support have agency and an appropriate level of autonomy in addressing the barriers they face. Therefore, a holistic approach must always consider a variety of shifting needs and resources which attempts to always be responsive, which is the subject of the next subtheme.

Responsive: Accountable and Adaptable Supports

In the evolving landscape of youth work, the capacity for responsiveness and adaptability emerges as a critical principle that underscores the effectiveness and relevance of interventions in the lives of young people. As the third principle in the broader framework of youth work, following the relational and holistic approaches, responsiveness embodies the dynamic nature of this field. It emphasizes the necessity for youth workers to transition from rigid, institutionalized methodologies to more flexible, youth-centered approaches that are attuned to the specific and often unpredictable needs of young individuals. The contemporary context of youth work is characterized by the need for immediacy and agility in responding to crises and emerging challenges. This requires youth workers to maintain a high level of adaptability, not only in their methods but also in their overall approach to service delivery. The traditional, one-size-fits-all model of youth work is increasingly being replaced by a more nuanced, tailored approach that prioritizes the individual needs and goals of young

people. This shift is reflective of a broader understanding that young people do not exist in a vacuum; their lives are multifaceted and influenced by a myriad of factors, which necessitates a comprehensive and responsive support system.

Central to the concept of responsiveness in youth work is the recognition that effective support cannot be confined to predefined job descriptions or rigid protocols. Instead, youth workers must engage in practices that are fluid and responsive to the moment-to-moment needs of the youth they serve. This involves addressing immediate crises and anticipating and adapting to the evolving challenges that may arise in the lives of young people. The ability to leverage informal networks, collaborate with various organizations, and engage in creative problem-solving are all essential components of a responsive youth work practice. These strategies ensure that support is immediate, sustainable, and holistic in addressing the broader context of a young person's life. Moreover, the principle of responsiveness highlights the importance of autonomy in youth work. When youth workers are granted the freedom to determine how they allocate their time and resources, they are better positioned to meet the unique and dynamic needs of young people. This autonomy fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, which is crucial for maintaining motivation and effectiveness in the field. Conversely, when youth workers are subjected to micromanagement, surveillance, or inflexible institutional demands, it can lead to a demoralizing work environment that hampers their ability to be truly responsive. The tension between autonomy and institutional constraints is a critical area of concern, as it directly impacts the capacity of youth workers to fulfill their roles effectively.

In the subsequent analysis, qualitative data derived from interviews with youth workers will be critically examined to elucidate how the principle of responsiveness is

operationalized in practice. The narratives provided by these practitioners will offer insights into the complexities and challenges of maintaining a responsive approach within the constraints of various organizational structures. Furthermore, the analysis will explore the implications of responsiveness for both youth and workers, highlighting the reciprocal nature of this dynamic. The findings will underscore how responsiveness, when integrated with relational and holistic approaches, forms a comprehensive framework that enhances the overall impact of youth work. Through this critical examination, it becomes evident that responsiveness is a practical strategy and a fundamental value that permeates the ethos of youth work.

Reflexivity implies a deep commitment to understanding and addressing the lived realities of young people, recognizing the fluidity of their experiences, and adapting interventions to meet their evolving needs. By prioritizing responsiveness, youth workers can more effectively support the development and well-being of young people, contributing to their empowerment and fostering resilience within communities. This principle, therefore, is essential for the advancement of youth work as a dynamic and impactful field, which is responsive to the needs of youth while changing structural contexts of inequity.

Upon an examination of the adaptability and flexibility required in youth work, the following excerpts from participants offer crucial insights into the importance of a client-centered approach that allows youth workers the latitude to respond to the dynamic needs of the young people they support. These reflections emphasize the critical need for flexibility, not just in methods and models of intervention, but also in the timelines and goals set within youth work practices. One participant highlights the unique position they occupy within their

workplace, which affords them significant flexibility in how they engage with the youth they support. They explain:

Well, this is more unique to my position, not working with youth in general. But in my position, I have the latitude to determine what I – what kind of support I provide to the youth. There is a lot of emphasis on this program being needs-based, client-centred, so we don't do what we think the youth need, and we do what they tell us they need. And that's probably one of the things I liked the most about it, the ability to do that, the ability to walk along with someone and just be, I want to say, like, be an – yeah, like, I guess a mentor, a presence in their life, that help them self-actualize, help them do what they want to do. And as opposed to, you know, what we see a lot in life, descriptive things, be it in programs or in our relationships, 'this is what we think you should do, this is what I think you should do.' Instead, you know, talking to youth and helping them figure out what matters most to them, that's, for me, that process is lovely and beautiful. So, that's probably my favourite thing. And what's challenging? (ALZ-102)

This participant's narrative underscores the value of a needs-based, client-centered approach in youth work. The flexibility in their role allows them to be more responsive to the unique and ever-changing needs of the youth they support. Beyond providing for what is assumed to be necessary; it is about co-creating a path forward with the youth, fostering their self-actualization, and supporting their agency in determining what is most important to them. The participant contrasts this approach with more prescriptive models often seen in institutional settings, where external opinions and rigid frameworks dominate. Here, the youth worker's satisfaction derives from both the outcomes achieved and the relational and

collaborative process of collaborating with youth to achieve their own goals. Another participant further reinforces the importance of flexibility in their work, particularly in being able to choose appropriate models and approaches based on the specific contexts of the youth they support. They state:

The roles that I've had have been really flexible in that I'm not being asked to work from any specific model except outreach. But I'm not being asked to work from, you know, a CBT model or work from any specific model; I can really fit my work to work with the clients. I also don't have time-limited services so it's just like I work with folks until it feels right. Let's say that, you know, we kind of have our – we can set our own goals and timelines. And I find that to be really, really helpful about the roles that I have. (INTER-20)

This participant highlights the significance of being able to adapt their methods and timelines according to the needs of the youth. They point out that while specific models like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) have their place, they also have limitations. The ability to choose or adapt these models to better fit the individual circumstances of each youth is crucial for effective support. Moreover, the participant emphasizes the importance of not being constrained by time-limited services, allowing them to provide support that is both comprehensive and responsive to the youth's evolving needs. This flexibility benefits the youth and aligns with critical youth work principles that prioritize qualitative outcomes over rigid programmatic goals.

However, the analysis of these narratives also reveals the potential challenges that come with this necessary flexibility. While adaptability allows youth workers to be more effective, it can also lead to overwork and burnout, particularly in organizations that do not

provide adequate support or resources. The tension between the need for responsive, individualized support and the constraints of institutional structures highlights a critical gap in how youth work is managed and supported. There is a need for organizations to strike a balance between providing consistent, reliable structures and allowing for the flexibility that youth work demands. Without this balance, youth workers may find themselves stretched too thin, compromising both their well-being and the quality of support they can offer to the youth they serve.

A client-centered, adaptable approach better meets the needs of young people and enhances the relational and process-oriented aspects of youth work that are crucial for fostering growth and self-actualization. However, these benefits must be balanced with organizational support to ensure that youth workers can sustain their roles without facing burnout, thereby maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of the work they do. The dynamic nature of youth work is both a source of excitement and a significant challenge for those in the field. One youth worker describes the variety inherent in their day-to-day tasks as a key aspect of their role, stating:

I also like the variety. Like one day you could be just working on interviews or something and then the next day could be like, 'OK, we're going to go hand out resumes, so where do you want to go?' And then brief that. And then in terms of when I was working at the group home, some days it's like, you know, you get to take the kids somewhere to Canada's Wonderland and like, right, be a part of that, and it's always those kinds of things are really fun. (INNO-51)

This quote highlights the flexibility and adaptability that are integral to effective youth work. The participant finds satisfaction in the ability to shift between different types of

activities, from more structured tasks like interviews to engaging in enjoyable outings that provide positive experiences for the youth. This variety is seen as not just beneficial but necessary in creating a supportive and responsive environment that caters to the diverse needs and interests of young people. The unpredictability of the work can also lead to challenging situations, as the same participant notes:

Yeah, I guess, it would kind of be the same thing, because it is so varied, like one day can be great and the next day can be shit. So you can go from – right, like having a great experience and then in the next hour it's like, 'We're down in the ground, [unintelligible 00:14:01],' right? Or the kid's AWOL'd or something, so those parts are hard. And there's a lot of times where it's like the agency or the corporation that you're working for doesn't really back you. (INNO-51)

This statement underscores the dual-edged sword of flexibility in youth work. While the diversity of tasks can be engaging, it also means that youth workers must be prepared for sudden shifts from positive to negative experiences. The volatility of the work, where a day can quickly turn from rewarding to difficult, adds a layer of complexity and emotional strain. The participant's reference to the lack of institutional support during these their tumultuous experience further emphasizes the challenges youth workers face. Without adequate backing from their organizations, the burden of these unpredictable and often distressing situations can be overwhelming. Simultaneously, there may be instances where youth workers have to also scrutinize other stakeholders in the sector in order to protect the interests of the youth, this may even apply to agency partners who profess to have good intentions, but may be contributing to harmful outcomes, as participant Consel-54 who used to support youth employment programs testifies,

I find that we have a lot of predatory employers, and some people are better at spotting that than others, so I don't work as a job developer anymore. But when I did, I often had employers that I would have a funny feeling about and I would do some investigation, and it would turn out that they were just kind of trying to rip us off. So we offer subsidies for employers to hire through us. And I find that the vetting process for these employers is not nearly as detailed as it should be. And because of that, a lot of clients end up in situations that they shouldn't be in. (CONSEL-54)

In this instance, the youth worker had to take on an investigatory initiative to follow their instincts about a potentially problematic community partner. In their account, the formal process for their organization assessing employers is lacking key details, but this youth worker had to rely on their own intuition and resolve in order to respond to the needs of youth. While the flexible and varied nature of youth work allows for creativity and responsiveness to the needs of young people, it also demands a high level of resilience and adaptability from youth workers. The ability to navigate the highs and lows of this work, particularly in the face of insufficient institutional support, is critical to sustaining their role and effectiveness in supporting young people.

The data underscores the importance of flexibility in youth work, particularly as it relates to the unpredictable nature of the challenges youth workers face. The ability to adapt and respond creatively to these challenges is crucial for the development of effective programs and fostering a collaborative environment where young people feel empowered to take an active role in shaping the services designed to support them. This flexibility is especially valued by youth workers, as it allows them to tailor their approaches to the specific

needs of the young people they work with, rather than adhering to rigid, top-down structures that may not resonate with or meet the needs of the youth. As the participant highlights,

When it comes to my particular role, there's a lot of freedom and creativity, which I particularly love, because it gives us – gives me a lot more flexibility to actually listen and attune to the needs of young people. So, I'm not just developing, like, a program out of nowhere, like, I'm actually developing programs with young people in mind, and with me, you know, they're partnering with me to develop these programs and opportunities. That's a benefit is being able to be that... and have that expansion where you can actually develop models of youth-led programs. Because you have that freedom. (FACILA-58)

This quote illustrates the profound impact that organizational flexibility can have on the effectiveness of youth work. The participant expresses how the freedom afforded to them in their role enables them to be more attuned to the needs of the youth they serve, fostering a co-creative process that allows for the development of programs that are truly responsive to the needs and aspirations of the young people. This approach enhances the relevance and impact of the programs while promoting a more equitable and inclusive dynamic between youth workers and the young people they support. By shifting away from a top-down, adultist approach that imposes predefined agendas onto youth, this participant advocates for a more collaborative model where youth are active partners in the design and implementation of the services they receive. This point is illustrated by GYDZ-104 in the following statement:

I think one thing that we've started to do and one thing that I think a lot of youth programs can start to do is just start listening to your youth, and start asking what

they want and what they need instead of assuming and making sure that you're checking your assumptions with the people that are actually in your programs, and then start building out and working together and collaborating on, you know, what those youth actually say. (GYDZ-104)

Encouraging and supporting occupational flexibility allows youth workers to be more responsive and accountable in their practice, as they can better measure the relevance and effectiveness of their programs by directly engaging with the youth and adapting to their feedback and evolving needs. This responsiveness is crucial in ensuring that programs remain relevant and effective, providing youth with the support they need to thrive in a way that respects their agency and contributions. With the elements of strong relationships, holistic approaches and responsive (and relevant) programs, youth programs and interventions have the potential to become transformational, which is the next subtheme that emerged from the findings.

Transformational: Progressive Change and Advocacy

The “transformational” subtheme explicates the dual role of youth workers as both advocates and facilitators of young people's growth and achievements. Central to this work is the commitment to co-empower young people, working with them to navigate complex and challenging barriers they encounter, while also fostering self-actualization and autonomy. The work of critical youth engagement extends beyond the provision of immediate support, encompassing the broader goal of reinforcing skills and confidence and supporting young people in advocating for themselves.

A key aspect of this subtheme that emerged from the interview data is the emphasis on witnessing and celebrating growth. Youth workers derive significant satisfaction from

observing the personal, academic, and professional development of the young people they support. Such growth often serves as a testament to the resilience and potential of the youth, as well as the efficacy of a strengths-based approach that focuses on their capabilities rather than their deficiencies. Youth workers play a critical role in nurturing this development by creating environments where young people can explore their identities, develop their skills, and build the confidence necessary to achieve their aspirations. The celebration of these milestones reinforces the youth's journey towards self-actualization.

In conjunction with celebrating successes, youth workers are deeply engaged in advocacy and empowerment. This role involves advocating for the needs and rights of the youth within various systems and institutions, co-empowering the young people to become their own advocates. By guiding them in navigating complex systems, such as education, legal, or social services, youth workers contribute to leveling the playing field for marginalized youth who might otherwise be disadvantaged. This process is fraught with challenges, particularly when confronting systemic barriers that are deeply entrenched and resistant to change. However, it is through such advocacy efforts that youth workers can make a profound impact, facilitating the creation of pathways that lead to greater opportunities and equity for the young people they serve.

Navigating complex situations is another critical component of this subtheme. Youth workers often find themselves supporting young people through some of the most difficult and traumatic experiences of their lives, including human trafficking, abusive relationships, and encounters with the legal system. In these scenarios, the youth worker's role is both that of a guide and a protector, assisting the young person in navigating these challenges while advocating for their rights and well-being. This aspect of the work requires a deep

understanding of systemic and legal landscapes as well as a profound sense of empathy and commitment to the safety and empowerment of the youth.

The following account offers profound insight into the complexity of youth worker's roles, particularly when faced with crises that transcend the immediate context of the programs and touch on deeply embedded cultural and familial dynamics. The situation described highlights the urgency and gravity of the youth worker's intervention, where traditional approaches seemed inadequate in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by the young person. The youth worker recounts:

I have a story of a student who expressed to me suicidal ideation, feels very isolated, feels – they have learning struggles, challenges. So because of those learning challenges feel like a failure, feel like a burden to their family, all sorts of different things. And in – and because the family are from a culture where education is really important, some of their family values are, yes that it's very important and level of independence I think that they expect.... it was affecting the kids' mental health.... I was trying to engage the kid. I was worried with the kid. I was trying to engage the parents. But sometimes, I just – and I couldn't. I couldn't get through to the parents. And I knew what was needed was somebody to go home – into the home and build a relationship. And then what happened was an Agency, called ***, ended up getting funding that allowed – that gave them that opportunity – the program was to engage disengaged youth. And they were able to go into the home and I can't – I have to say that support just turned things around – a complete 180 with the family, with the student. The parent is more engaged. They feel more part of the process. They have more of an understanding of how our system works. It's – to me it's how – it's how

schools and community organizations can work here to fill the gaps, because there are gaps in our system. (CHAMP-115)

This narrative reveals the youth worker's recognition that standard interventions were insufficient in addressing the suicidal ideation and profound sense of isolation experienced by the student. The youth worker understood that the barriers extended beyond the individual and were entrenched in cultural expectations and communication breakdowns within the family unit. The youth worker's approach underscores the importance of a holistic and culturally sensitive strategy that engages both the young person and their family. This scenario illustrates the necessity of going beyond surface-level interventions and engaging in a deeper, more relational form of support, which includes understanding the cultural context and familial expectations that contribute to the young person's mental health challenges. The success of the intervention, which the youth worker describes as a "complete 180," was facilitated by an external agency that provided the necessary funding to engage disengaged youth and their families directly within their homes. This reflects the critical role of community-based interventions and the importance of external resources in supplementing the work of youth workers. The youth worker's ability to identify and utilize such resources was pivotal in transforming the situation, highlighting the importance of adaptability and the capacity to recognize when additional support is required.

This example illustrates the potential for transformative outcomes when holistic and culturally informed approaches are employed and underscores the broader implications of such interventions. The success in this case was not solely attributed to direct work with the student; it was deeply rooted in the establishment of a trusting relationship with the family, bridging cultural gaps, and fostering a collaborative environment where all parties felt

understood and supported. This scenario highlights the critical role of youth workers in navigating and transforming systemic barriers, thereby creating more supportive environments in which young people can thrive. It is important to recognize that youth workers' interventions do not always manifest as dramatic intercessions resulting in immediate outcomes. Often, youth workers take a more supportive, observant role, allowing young people to make their own decisions, whether good or bad, and guiding them through the potential consequences of those choices. This approach is articulated by the following youth worker:

No matter the amount of forewarning or cautioning I could give these youth, it's important for them to learn that they're going to make a choice, and they're going to deal with the consequences. But I guess the overarching lesson is we stick with them through it. So even though they hit, shit hits the fan, we're still there with them, and we're not going to be like, 'I told you so,' we're just going to be like, 'Hey, what can we do differently next time?' I'm really sorry you had to go through this; it was hard for me to watch you be hurt by this or that negative experience. But what can we learn from this? So even though it's really difficult, it's a crucial part of the work, I would say. Because that's how all of us learn. We learn from our mistakes. It's just that, a lot of the time in child welfare, the consequences for these young people are so disproportionate to what the actual mistake is. Oh, you missed curfew, so you can't have dinner. Where else in the world, or in a loving family or functional family environment, would that happen? So why is it happening with government kids? And that's not the kind of consequences I'm talking about. I'm talking about if you miss school, if you miss five days of school because you chose to sleep in and didn't want

to get up for your alarm because you thought it was too early, that's a choice you have to live with. And then maybe next time, when you apply to that program, you'll be more committed to being there on time. (NAVI-80)

This perspective aligns with the broader principles of critical youth work, which emphasize the need for supportive, non-punitive responses that foster learning and resilience. By maintaining a balance between providing guidance and allowing youth to navigate their own paths, youth workers can help young people develop the skills and confidence needed to overcome challenges and achieve their goals.

The transformational impact in youth work is not about simply ensuring that a young person obeys or complies with directives but about teaching them how to navigate systems independently. This speaks to the intrinsic values youth workers hold in building capacity and providing support in cooperative and constructive ways. The youth worker here also highlights the disproportionate consequences that young people often face when they fail to comply with expectations designed for their positive development. Such punitive measures, rather than fostering empowerment and growth, may instead alienate young people, preventing them from fully absorbing the significance of their decisions and the lessons inherent in their experiences. In the latest example, the transformation discussed is not about a dramatic 180-degree change; rather, it is about the everyday work and life experiences where the dynamics of both positive and negative phenomena inform us. Even if immediate actions do not result from these interactions, the education and insight gained can be so transformative that they lead to new perspectives and opportunities. In understanding how youth work can be transformational, it is crucial not to focus solely on galvanizing catalytic moments of intervention but to acknowledge that consciousness-raising, advocacy, informed

decision-making, and the processes of self-care, self-improvement, and community cooperation are all part of how transformation is constantly occurring. Change is always happening, and within the context of critical youth work, the intentionality behind that transformation is to enhance young people's capacity to be well and to thrive, both for themselves and within their communities.

This youth worker's perspective on using mistakes as opportunities for learning and growth highlights an essential aspect of the transformational and educational journey for young people. The idea that mistakes and their consequences can serve as pivotal moments for development reflects a deeper understanding of the youth work practice, where the focus is on supporting young people through their decisions rather than simply preventing or punishing them from making errors. This approach contrasts with other accounts where youth workers express the stress and concern, they feel when witnessing young people make potentially harmful choices. While this stress is undoubtedly present, the youth worker in this example emphasizes the importance of reframing these challenging moments as opportunities for constructive development. This shift in perspective from viewing mistakes as failures to recognizing them as integral parts of the learning process illustrates a more resilient and adaptable approach to youth work. It underscores the need to balance emotional responses with a commitment to supporting young people through their potential missteps, thereby fostering a more empowering and transformative experience. As youth workers reflect on their own stakes and wellbeing in the process of supporting the journey of young people, the final subtheme find resonance.

Reflexive: Critical Awareness and Self-Reflective Practice

In the context of youth work, reflexivity is a critical practice that allows practitioners to maintain effectiveness and resilience in the face of the numerous challenges they encounter. This subtheme emphasizes the importance of perseverance, emotional balance, and reflective practice as integral components of sustainable youth work. Youth workers are often confronted with complex and emotionally challenging situations that demand professional expertise and a deep sense of personal resilience. Perseverance in this field includes the will to maintain hope and commitment when faced with workplace and systemic challenges that can seem overwhelming. For many youth workers, this perseverance is fueled by a steadfast belief in the potential of the young people they support and a commitment to seeing them through their struggles, no matter how long it may take.

Navigating the emotional landscape of youth work requires a delicate balance between empathy and self-preservation. Frontline youth workers are frequently exposed to the raw and often painful realities of the lives of the young people they serve (especially youth who face discrimination due to their intersectional identities) including concerns about disengagement, disenfranchisement, mental and physical injury and matters of life and death in some instances. The ability to manage these emotional demands without becoming overwhelmed is essential. This necessitates a commitment to self-care and the cultivation of emotional balance, which allows youth workers to remain effective in their roles over the long term. Reflective practice plays a significant role here, as it enables youth workers to process their experiences, learn from them, and continually adjust their approaches in ways that benefit both themselves and the young people they support. Engaging in regular reflection helps youth workers maintain their emotional well-being while enhancing their capacity to provide thoughtful, responsive support.

Celebrating incremental progress is another vital aspect of reflexive youth work. In a field where progress can often be slow and hard-won, recognizing and celebrating small but meaningful changes in a young person's behavior or engagement is essential. These small victories serve as important reminders of the impact that persistent, dedicated support can have, even in the face of significant challenges. Moreover, these moments of progress offer a source of inspiration and motivation for youth workers, who draw strength from witnessing the resilience and growth of the young people they work with. By acknowledging and celebrating these small wins, youth workers reinforce the value of their efforts and sustain their own resilience, ensuring that they can continue to provide the support that is so crucial for the well-being and development of the youth they serve.

The next account from GYDZ-104 highlights the emotional complexities and challenges inherent in frontline youth work. While the work can be fulfilling, there are moments when the perceived lack of progress or the frustration of systemic barriers can feel overwhelming. These challenges can be so demoralizing that the youth worker might momentarily question the value of continuing in the field. However, this participant emphasizes the critical role of support systems such as supervision, colleague consultation, and engagement with the youth themselves in helping to manage these difficult moments. Self-care practices, including rest and reflection, are also vital in restoring perspective and resilience. As GYDZ-104 explains:

I mean, sometimes we all have our really tough days when, you know, nothing seems to go right. And in youth work, because we're working with humans and because we're working with youth over such a long period of time, it can be really hard to appreciate all of the small successes and see them as a small success and see them in

the first place, because they can seem so small. So sometimes the lack of progress or the perceived lack of progress can be kind of infuriating, or, like, some sort of barrier can be really infuriating. And, you know, depending on my mood and where I'm at in terms of my own mental health, you know, it's that impulsive, like, I just want to quit kind of thought. But, you know, with supervision, consulting with my colleagues, or some of – being able to see some of the students in person, or even just, you know, being able to sleep on things. I wake up the next morning realizing that I still do actually overall love my job, and I'm not serious about quitting. Yeah. This is one of those, like, hit of peak kind of things when certain conditions just come together and it's that impulsive thought, but it's not actually a serious one. (GYDZ-104)

This account underscores the importance of reflexivity in youth work. Reflexive practice, which involves ongoing self-assessment and dialogue with peers, helps youth workers navigate the emotional demands of their roles. By reflecting on their experiences, seeking support, and engaging in self-care, youth workers can maintain their commitment to the field even in the face of significant challenges. This practice sustains their well-being and supports their ability to provide effective, empathetic support to the young people they serve. The balance of relational, holistic, and responsive approaches that youth workers cultivate is essential for the youth they support and their own sustainability in the profession.

GYDZ-104 further elaborates on the necessity of maintaining a sense of purpose and motivation, particularly during difficult times. They acknowledge the emotional toll that youth work can take, especially when external factors such as seasonal changes exacerbate stress. Reflecting on the importance of understanding the impact of their work, they state:

And, you know, reminding myself of why I do the work is also really important to my mental health. You know? And looking at individual students or looking at our program and our success rates, things like that. Because otherwise, this job is hard. Youth go through so much. And, you know, it's hard not to take some of that on and it's hard not to feel some of the stress that they're feeling. And, you know, for example, this time of year is awful on everyone's mental health because it's getting dark earlier, holidays can be rough for a lot of people. There's a lot of stress because, you know, they're trying to finish up assignments before winter break. Finals are coming. We're in the midst of post-secondary applications. So there's a lot of pressure on these youth and it gets to them and it takes a toll. And, you know, in this position, like, there are definite times of the year where I can point to where I've heard more, you know, self-harming tendencies or suicidal ideation or struggles with mental health, struggles with depression, struggles with anxiety from our youth. And then having – hearing those stories takes a toll, but then also, you know, feeling a little bit responsible for making sure that these kids are getting the supports that they need. It can be a heavy burden to carry. You know? It's learning – some of it is learning boundaries and learning what's yours to carry and what's not, and that definitely helps. But even just hearing these stories, because your empathy gets triggered and your sympathy gets triggered, like, it has an impact, for sure. (GYDZ-104)

GYDZ-104 emphasizes the critical importance of setting boundaries to manage the emotional impact of youth work. In the context of increasing mental health challenges and the inherent stress of supporting vulnerable youth, this participant highlights the necessity of

learning what is theirs to carry, and what is not. This practice of setting boundaries is essential for sustaining their work in a healthy and effective manner. The ability to recognize limitations and practice self-compassion allows youth workers to continue their essential work without succumbing to burnout or emotional exhaustion. This finding underscores the critical importance of self-care within the youth work profession, recognizing that the well-being of youth workers is fundamentally linked to their ability to effectively support and empower the young people they serve. However, the support for youth worker well-being from organizations is often inadequate, as highlighted by DEFEN-82, who discusses the emotional vulnerability inherent in the work and the additional strain caused by bureaucratic barriers:

Well, I would say it's not really a job you can just let go at the end of the day. It stays with you all day, sometimes into the night, worrying about the youth. Some of them anyway. Being frustrated with the systems and getting angry and upset about things that, you know, should be seamless and should be accessible. And when they're not it's very frustrating. So dealing with this stress... while you're trying to navigate all manner of red tape is very taxing, I think, on one's mental health because it's nonstop. (DEFEN-82)

DEFEN-82's account highlights the dual stressors that youth workers face, both the direct emotional toll of working with vulnerable youth and the compounded frustration of navigating systemic inefficiencies. The statement “it’s nonstop” reflects the relentless nature of the stress experienced by youth workers, who must continually respond to counterproductive elements within the system, both inside and outside their organizations. This relentless pressure exacerbates the already significant mental health challenges

associated with the work, illustrating the urgent need for better organizational support structures that prioritize the well-being of youth workers.

The lack of practical support from organizations is not the only source of frustration and anxiety for youth workers. The broader industry often attracts individuals who are deeply committed to their work, prioritizing the well-being and development of the youth they serve over personal financial gain. This dedication is evident in the reflections of REHA-19, who acknowledges the unique demands of the field:

And I think, you know, everyone is a hard worker, but social work or social service work isn't for everybody, right. It takes a certain type of people of person to want to give back and work in this type of field and I think that not only me, but people around other agencies as well as my colleagues do deserve more, and I don't think it's bad to say that. (REHA-19)

REHA-19's statement that youth workers "deserve more" and the acknowledgment that it is "not bad to say that" suggests a broader industry culture that may discourage discussions around compensation and working conditions. This reflects a critical tension within the social services sector, where the demand for extensive emotional and personal labor often goes hand in hand with low compensation and job insecurity. The statement also points to the potential silencing of advocacy efforts by youth workers who may feel that raising concerns about their own well-being detracts from the needs of the young people they serve. This study intentionally centers the experiences of youth workers as vital stakeholders in the broader discussion of social justice and youth well-being. While the voices of young people are paramount in discussions about the youth sector it is essential to acknowledge the specific challenges and needs of youth workers, whose labor and advocacy are crucial to the

success of the programs and services they provide. Though assessing youth voices is beyond the capacity and scope of the current study, this study acknowledges that these gaps in research are wide and demand additional focus and attention. Recognizing and addressing the systemic barriers that silence and sideline youth workers is also a necessary step toward creating more equitable and sustainable conditions for all stakeholders involved in youth work. This attention to the well-being of youth workers enhances their capacity to support young people effectively and contributes to the overall health and sustainability of the youth services sector.

In summarizing the principles of critical youth work, the five key subthemes: relational, holistic, responsive, transformational, and reflexive practices. Youth workers build strong, trusting relationships with young people, provide comprehensive support that addresses both immediate and systemic needs, and remain adaptable to the evolving challenges faced by the youth they serve. Through fostering self-actualization and advocating for systemic change, youth workers play a transformative role in the lives of marginalized young people. At the same time, the importance of reflexivity and self-care underscores the need for youth workers to maintain their own well-being to sustain their impactful work.

Youth work requires a nuanced understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by young people, necessitating the integration of relational, holistic, responsive, transformational, and reflexive practices. These approaches allow youth workers to build strong, trusting relationships with young people, providing essential support and advocacy for those navigating difficult circumstances. By adopting a needs-based and client-centered approach, youth workers co-empower young people to define their own goals and take an active role in their development, rather than imposing solutions that may not align with their

unique needs and experiences. The work is multifaceted, involving both practical assistance and emotional support, and it plays a crucial role in bridging gaps for those who have been underserved or overlooked by other systems. Despite the emotional and mental demands of the work, the fulfillment youth workers derive from witnessing the resilience and growth of the young people they support reaffirms the significance of their role. This holistic, critically informed approach underscores the vital importance of youth workers in advocating for systemic change and contributing to the empowerment and well-being of young people. In the next section we will explore these and additional factors that the interview participants have identified as supportive and obstructive factors in their critical practice.

Findings and Analysis Summary

The following chart provides an overview and practical examples of the framework for critical practice principles identified through youth worker interviews. These principles emphasize the relational, holistic, responsive, transformational, and reflexive dimensions of youth work, underscoring the importance of centering relationships, adapting to evolving needs, and addressing systemic inequities while ensuring youth worker well-being.

Table 3

Principles of Critical Youth Work in Action

Principle	Youth Worker Responsibility	Sectoral Responsibility
Relational	Building authentic, trusting relationships with young people.	Centering reciprocal relationships between youth and youth workers through open communication and trust. Establishing clear objectives, boundaries, and limitations in a collaborative, respectful manner that fosters mutual investment in outcomes. (Example: Supporting youth workers in prioritizing rapport-building while ensuring they

Principle	Youth Worker Responsibility	Sectoral Responsibility
Holistic	Addressing immediate needs while considering systemic influences.	are not required to over-disclose personal experiences to strengthen relationships.) Recognizing the intersectional realities of youth workers and the systemic barriers they face. Providing support that acknowledges personal and professional challenges linked to social marginalization and discrimination. (Example: Acknowledging and addressing issues such as overwork, underpayment, and emotional labor by implementing policies that support youth workers' mental health and well-being.)
Responsive	Adapting approaches to meet individual and evolving youth needs.	Ensuring funding, institutional support, and mental health accommodations. Actively listening to youth workers, integrating their feedback into organizational policies, and prioritizing their insights in decision-making. (Example: Developing organizational policies that reflect youth worker input and address their concerns in meaningful ways.)
Transformational	Co-empowerment with youth to navigate and challenge systemic inequities.	Implementing humanizing practices that position youth workers as active participants in systemic change rather than as mere responders to crises. (Example: Providing structural support for youth workers engaging in policy advocacy to address systemic inequities affecting young people.)
Reflexive	Practicing self-awareness and self-care to sustain their own well-being.	Encouraging critical reflection and safeguarding against experiences of Structural Violence. Supporting youth worker agency by allowing time for professional development and grace periods within demanding work environments. (Example: Ensuring organizations remain aware of how their internal culture and systemic factors influence trust, communication, and accountability with both service users and frontline staff.)

This framework underscores the importance of a critical, justice-oriented approach to youth work which values both frontline service and systemic transformation. By recognizing

the interdependence of relational trust, holistic support, responsiveness, transformation, and reflexivity, organizations can create conditions that sustain youth workers while ensuring meaningful, long-term impacts on the young people they serve.

Chapter 6: Supportive Factors, Findings, and Analysis

As discussed earlier, the factors leading youth workers into the field are diverse and complex, reflecting a wide range of experiences and motivations. Among the 25 participants interviewed, several common themes emerged regarding what motivates them to continue their work in youth services. Their responses highlighted both personal and professional motivations, emphasizing the rewarding nature of their employment. The findings within this theme, beginning with personal motivation, outline four subthemes that emerge from participants' responses, including reciprocal relationships, personal fulfillment, a sense of purpose or duty, and the benefits of personal growth and development. These supportive factors propel youth workers to explore and remain in the field and serve as a counterbalance to the challenges that are inherent in their work. Whether through navigating barriers in supporting young people or dealing with frustrations stemming from organizational constraints, these personal motivations are crucial in sustaining their engagement and enjoyment of their vocation. Given the deeply personal nature of youth work, the emotions and feelings of youth workers play a significant role in their ability to support and navigate challenging circumstances alongside the young people they serve. Witnessing the growth, development, success, and setbacks of these young individuals, youth workers find meaning and support in the positive connections and relationships they build. These relationships rely heavily on the workers' personal energy, enthusiasm, and resilience, which are essential for infusing the work with care.

As outlined in the critical youth work subthemes (relational, holistic, responsive, transformational, and reflective), intentional engagement with supporting young people is grounded in a sociopolitical orientation aimed at improving social circumstances, particularly

for those facing systemic barriers. However, within the context of the social services sector, where investments in community and human resources are often secondary to capitalist economic priorities, youth workers face significant challenges. Limited resources, funding, and time constraints can undermine their ability to perform their work meaningfully. Coupled with the emotional labor and potential exposure to vicarious or secondary trauma, the risks of burnout are substantial. These challenges are not just personal but are cyclical, as the overwhelming demands of the work are rarely addressed in a preventive, systematic or transparent manner. To improve this dynamic, youth workers themselves require organizations to adopt a critical approach to youth work, one that upholds reciprocal relationships between workers and institutions and emboldens a holistic and responsive approach to addressing the needs of youth workers, including active listening, involvement in program development, and inclusion in decision-making processes. Ensuring that systemic changes are continually pursued and that the alignment between program values and community needs is genuine and reflective is the goal of this approach.

These dynamics connect youth work to broader political and social environments, where frontline youth workers are constantly negotiating with larger forces and institutions that impact the lives of the young people and themselves. Often engaged in advocacy and consciousness-raising, critical youth workers aim to address the root causes of inequities and systemic barriers. Thus, while the next set of subthemes addresses personal dynamics, it is important to recognize that the personal and professional spheres discussed here are deeply intertwined with the political landscape. This includes relationships with administrative, policy, and funding bodies, which will be further explored in the discussion section. Given these wide-ranging influences, it is crucial for youth workers to continually re-examine their

personal motivations for engaging in the field. A clear understanding of the cost-benefit analysis is essential for developing protective factors that support their sustainability in the field. The first subtheme that emerged, reciprocal relationships, echoes the relational subtheme of critical youth engagement. The importance of building trusting and meaningful connections with young people serves to accomplish the goals of providing responsive and thorough support while sustaining the personal motivation of youth workers.

Reciprocal: Building Rewarding Relationships

..And human nature, you like to kind of connect with other people, and learn from each other, and laugh together, and just enjoy life. (PATHS-43)

Respondents emphasized the value of building meaningful relationships and connections with the youth they work with. They find great fulfillment in sharing experiences, learning from each other, and witnessing the youth's growth and happiness. The development of trust and rapport with young people enhances the effectiveness of the support offered by youth workers, allowing them to witness progress, which is often reported as deeply rewarding. The consistency required to be a caring adult presence in the lives of young people is invaluable, though it sometimes clashes with organizational constraints, such as limited funding and time. These challenges are compounded by the often-precarious nature of youth work, where part-time or contract positions limit the ability to form lasting relationships. Despite these obstacles, the relational connection with young people serves as a crucial motivating factor, providing fulfillment that sustains youth workers through the complexities of their roles. The joy in their response is palpable as they express their love for the relationships they develop through their work:

[Laughter] I absolutely love – I think the first thing that I love is just the relationships that I get to build with youth and through my work. Because our program works with high school youth specifically, we have youth in our program. Usually on average for four years, if not more; sometimes a little bit less. But over those four years you really get a chance to get to know the students beyond, like, their grades or what they're taking in class. You get to know them as human beings and, you know, you get to know their friends and, you know, who they're talking to, some of the issues that they face, and working through them. And you also get to see a lot of growth over those four years. I've had students on my caseload since they were in grade nine, and by the time they graduate in grade 12 or 12 plus, it's incredible just the amount of things they've learned and how they've grown over those four years. (GYDZ-104)

The satisfaction expressed in recalling these experiences underscores the significance of time and consistency in fostering meaningful relationships. The data consistently reveals that youth workers believe their effectiveness hinges on the establishment of trusting relationships. One participant echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the necessity of trust in making a meaningful intervention:

...when you have trust, that's when you can really be able to provide and make meaningful change and a youth's life. If a youth doesn't trust you then they're not going to want to work with you... they're not going to want to see you as someone that they can access resources from. (PROVI-77)

The trust and relationships developed are just as important in keeping the youth workers themselves engaged as one participant outlines their motivation to continue working.

What makes me want to continue working? I think it's just the relationships that I have with the youth. You know, coming into this role the most important thing is the relationship with the youth, right. If you have a bad relationship, they're not going to trust you, they're not going to want to work with you whereas if you have a great relationship, you know, they're going to trust you, they're going to respect what you have to say. (REHA-19)

This subtheme highlights the reciprocal nature of these relationships, where the youth worker's effort to build trust benefits the young person and fulfills the youth worker's own need for meaningful connections and a sense of purpose. The data suggests that the relational aspect of youth work is not just a strategy for effective intervention but a crucial element that sustains the emotional and psychological well-being of youth workers themselves. These relationships are particularly vital in the care and social services sectors, where workers often support vulnerable populations while navigating precarious positions themselves due to a lack of recognition and institutional support.

This finding calls for a deeper exploration of the relational dynamics in critical youth work, as the ability to form and maintain these connections is fundamental to both the well-being of youth workers and the success of their interventions. The implications extend beyond short-term programs, highlighting the potential for lifelong mentoring and mutually beneficial relationships that can enhance the impact of youth work. While maintaining appropriate boundaries and transparency is essential, there is a need for organizations and policymakers to recognize and support the relational integrity that underpins critical youth work. This dynamic, often overlooked, deserves greater attention. Doing so will ensure that

the human element of youth work is preserved and nurtured, ultimately benefiting both youth workers and the young people they serve.

Undoubtedly, the connection that young people offer youth workers is an indispensable factor in their connection to their work. The deeper investment in the lives of young people beyond just being numbers or names in an attendance sheet was attested to frequently during the interviews.

I get to share experiences with youth and to kind of go through life and just witness what they're going through and to hold them up and to encourage them along the way. Like those parts are really, really fulfilling, and exciting.

Like those things are really rewarding to see the kid happy and doing that experience with them; that is a benefit. (INNO-51)

..And human nature, you like to kind of connect with other people, and learn from each other, and laugh together, and just enjoy life. (PATHS-43)

These human elements of laughing together, sharing experiences, and simply enjoying each other's company are difficult to quantify in official program documentation, yet they are integral to the success of many youth programs. Without these connections, the effectiveness of youth work would be significantly diminished. Beyond being a factor in employment retention, the connection between youth and youth workers provides personal benefits as youth workers reported that their relationships with young people provided a renewing energy, helping to counteract stress and improve mental health, as described by the following two participants.

It really releases any kind of energy. Like, I can give today for example, I kind of went into the session feeling all over the place, out of sorts, I was kind of stressed, I was like, my god, I'm not really ready, and then, I'll have one of my young people, the youth, actually lead an activity and ice breaker, and when we started to play, it was so much fun. (FACILA-58)

Honestly, I think it betters my mental health, because I left a job that was very hard on my mental health and this job has a better work life balance. And I also just find if I have a bad day, but then I do a workshop with the youth, I just end up feeling better, because they just bring us an energy that just helps. (ACTI-87)

This energetic exchange is challenging to quantify in program design and evaluation, yet it plays a critical role in the reciprocal relationship in the sector. Though often invisible to outside observers, this dynamic significantly impacts the outcomes of youth work and the integrity of the relationships formed during the process. It is essential to recognize that the motivational support youth workers provide to young people is a two-way exchange; likewise, youth workers also need motivational support, not just from appreciative young people, but from organizations, policies, and funding bodies that often fail to acknowledge and respect the human elements of their work. In a social service industry based on providing care, humanization is frequently alienated due to the bureaucratic structures that simultaneously organize and confine service provision efforts.

Unlike other industries that have a tradition of incorporating a more hierarchical relationship between service providers and users (as in the medical or educational sectors), youth workers acknowledge how the young people in their care also care and support their wellbeing. One participant goes on to explain how their understanding of African and

Indigenous cultural practices reaffirms their commitment to reciprocal values and exchanges, offering support in their own human journey.

And the work that we do with *** too is rooted in very traditional African and Indigenous cultural practices. So it's a very - I love the communities and the people I meet. And that work that keeps those cultures alive and those traditions that are 1000's of year's old, keeps it alive in these times.... the love the people that meet and the, the ideas that they have. And just being in those spaces actually even helped me in my own life. Navigate just being a human being alive at these times. So definitely great. (VIZI-15)

This recognition of cultural practices as a source of guidance highlights the importance of integrating diverse cultural perspectives into youth work. By embracing these reciprocal values, the youth worker reinforces the relationships they build with young people while deepening their own sense of purpose and connection within their community. The following youth worker's account further demonstrates the positive impact of establishing relationships and connections with service users, as well as the benefits of witnessing their progress during and after programs, even when the conclusion of programs signals the end of their engagement, stating:

I think it's, like, about that fulfilling piece and those rewarding parts to it, and also, like, all of the great things that there is about being a youth worker, and being able to, you know, have relationships with the participants that you work with. You create bonds and you get used to seeing certain faces and looking forward to seeing folks and checking in and seeing how they're doing and seeing how things have changed for them or maybe, like, you know, parting with folks, because they no longer need to

access the services because they're in a different place in their life. That's largely why it's not something that I totally want to leave, even when it's challenging.

(TRAILZ-23)

This statement implies that the goal of youth work does not necessarily need to involve becoming lifelong friends or maintaining enduring associations with the individuals they serve. While there are contexts where longer-term connections may be mutually rewarding and purposeful, there is also significant value in acknowledging and celebrating the natural conclusion of these collaborations as young people move on from programs, particularly when these departures occur under positive circumstances. This youth worker emphasizes healthy and reciprocal relationship dynamics, which includes recognizing for when it is time to part ways, as a key motivator for remaining engaged in the sector despite the challenges that arise.

Reciprocal relationships often transcend the boundaries of formal programming, providing youth workers and youth with a sense of connection and value. The bonds formed between youth workers and the young people they support often extend beyond professional obligations and can be deeply rooted in genuine care, mutual respect, and a shared journey of growth. These moments of connection, where youth workers see the tangible impact of their efforts, are not fleeting but leave a lasting impression that fuels their dedication to the field and may satisfy a sense of personal fulfillment.

Fulfilling: Feeling a Sense of Purpose

I honestly feel like it's part of my destiny, it's part of what I was called to do. So, on a spiritual level... it's what I was meant to do. (FACILA-58)

The sense of purpose and fulfillment that youth workers derive from their roles is profoundly intertwined with their personal passions and values. For many, their work transcends the realm of mere employment, becoming a deeply rooted vocation that resonates with their intrinsic beliefs and lived experiences. This connection often arises from a powerful desire to create meaningful change in the lives of young people, particularly those from marginalized communities. The conviction to contribute positively can be grounded in the empathy and understanding that youth workers have cultivated through their own experiences or through witnessing the transformative effects of support in the lives of others. Participants in this study frequently describe their profession as a source of immense personal inspiration, driven by the satisfaction of helping young people navigate challenges and achieve their goals.

As one participant passionately expresses,

Yeah, yeah, it really can, that's basically the sense of fulfillment. Because that is the point – this is exactly where I am needed. And it's in that space. And when I lean into the work this way, that actually energizes me and gives me, you know, after I hang up from meetings like that, I just, like, throw myself back in the chair, because it's an hour of intense conversation with the youth worker and the interpreter and trying to describe – hold so many stakeholders, you know, with kindness and respect, and while maintaining, like, positive relationships with everybody, it's really exhausting. But by the end, you know, I just, like, OK, I'm really tired, but on the long-run, it's – it does give me a sense of fulfillment, and that feeling is good for my mental health. But it has to be kind of in these moments where I show up in the space where I'm needed. (ALZ-102)

In this account, the participant articulates the emotional labor and exhaustion that come with the work yet underscores how the sense of being needed provides a profound sense of fulfillment. This feeling, as the participant notes, counterbalances the demands of the job and contributes positively to their mental health. The dedication evident in this statement reflects a broader trend among youth workers who find deep meaning in their roles, driven by a passion that extends beyond the work itself to encompass a larger purpose. It is well acknowledged that passion and sense of accomplishment fuels the commitment of many youth workers, as the following participants confirm,

I do find most of the people who work with [youth] to be very passionate about it.

Yes, like I'm really inspired by the people I work with. (CHAMP-115)

...overall, I would say I really enjoy connecting with the youth and getting to know who they are, figure out what they like and kind of – like running with it. It's been pretty awarding and fulfilling and honestly fun to – I get to share experiences with youth and to kind of go through life and just witness what they're going through and to hold them up and to encourage them along the way. Like those parts are really, really fulfilling, and exciting. (INNO-51)

For some, this work is so personal that it resonates on a spiritual level, reflecting a sense of destiny or calling that goes beyond mere professional obligation. As one participant shares,

I honestly feel like it's part of my destiny, it's part of what I was called [here] to do.

So, on a spiritual level, it just feels that it's what I need to do, it's what I was meant to do. (FACILA-58)

This sentiment is echoed in the reflections of those who see their work as a critical intervention in a world fraught with challenges.

You understand the world we live in and how to navigate that. So yeah, youth workers are angels and youth workers are angels on earth and youth workers are city builders.... They're the reason why some young people are still alive. (VIZI-15)

While such expressions might seem romanticized to some, they highlight the profound sense of responsibility and purpose that many youth workers feel. The idea that their work is not just a job but a mission to counteract the forces of a tumultuous world is a powerful motivator for those who see themselves as champions of youth, fighting against systemic barriers and societal challenges. Whether framed in spiritual terms or as a fight against entrenched inequalities, the commitment to youth work is often driven by a deep-seated belief in the importance of the work. It is crucial, however, to recognize that not all youth workers are driven by what might be termed so-called altruistic motives, and this diversity of motivation should be acknowledged and respected. The data reveals a complex discourse that is often assumed but not thoroughly examined: the tension between personal commitment, professional passion, and the challenging conditions that characterize youth work. For those deeply invested in their roles, whether through personal connections, spiritual beliefs, or a profound sense of purpose, leaving the sector due to inadequate pay or difficult working conditions is not a simple or straightforward decision. These individuals are often so embedded in their roles that the idea of leaving feels counter-intuitive, even as the work may take a significant toll on their well-being.

Such complexity demands a more nuanced understanding of the motivations behind youth work and greater sensitivity in supporting those who choose this path. The study

suggests that individuals driven by moral or spiritual convictions may feel particularly vulnerable in a sector that does not always provide adequate resources or support. This vulnerability is compounded by the emotional and relational investments that youth workers make in their roles, which are not easily disentangled from their professional identity. The pressure to continue in a challenging environment, despite personal costs, underscores the need for more just and considerate working conditions that recognize the full spectrum of youth workers' experiences and motivations. It is imperative to ensure that those who are deeply committed to this work are supported in ways that honor their dedication and enable them to continue making a difference in the lives of young people. A reality that is a central concern of this study, here the intent is to illuminate the often-overlooked needs of youth workers and advocate for systemic changes that will allow them to thrive in their vital roles.

During the global pandemic, a time marked by a significant increase in online work and virtual meetings, one participant recalled an impactful experience following a keynote presentation they delivered. Although the youth worker generally preferred direct program engagement over speaking engagements, they were deeply moved by an email they received from a young attendee. The email highlighted the emotional connection and impact that their presentation had, even in a virtual format. The participant shared:

And I got an email from a young girl who was saying... she's learning from home and how much that presentation impacted her. And I don't consider when I do keynote, my most impactful way to work, I'm a person who loves to run programs or be in person and see. But even something like that, where it's just speaking and sharing my experience. And I do know I bring an energy that allows people to feel connected. And I'm just like you or I was you. I got this email that made me cry, that just the

person was, 'I'm going through a really hard time in my family. It's not really a good situation. I pray to God and I feel you are that answer to my prayers today. When I logged on and was taking part of this program that you ran in our school today.'

(VIZI-15)

This email deeply resonated with the youth worker, reinforcing their sense of purpose and dedication to the field, despite their initial doubts about the impact of virtual engagements. The participant elaborated on how such experiences affirm their commitment to the work:

That kind of stuff. I'm just wow, I could do this every day. It just makes me feel good to be alive to even impact one person that day, in that way. And I've seen that throughout the years of running programs, which is my favourite thing to do. One-offs are great, but you can see more people. But I love building relationships. I'm a relationship person. So that's great. That's why - that's what keeps me here. That's what makes me be OK, you can't afford me full-time. But how can I still work with you? Can we figure out a creative way that you could still bring me on to still do this work together? Because I love the work that I do. And I'll do it to the day that I die.

(VIZI-15)

The conclusion of this narrative reveals the tension between the deep lifelong commitment youth workers may associate with their work and the challenges posed by insufficient compensation and resource limitations from most funders and programs. The participant's dedication to finding creative ways to continue their work, despite financial constraints, underscores the powerful personal and emotional investment that youth workers bring to their roles.

From this finding a critical issue not to be overlooked is this: the dangerous tension that arises when work that is profoundly meaningful and personally fulfilling is not supported by sustainable compensation and resources. This tension necessitates more strategic, transparent discussions and solutions to ensure that youth workers can continue to provide impactful services without compromising their well-being. These push and pull dynamic the emerge between the motivating forces that employ the loyalty of youth workers clashes sharply against the demoralizing factors that push youth workers out or keep them hard pressed in a seemingly untenable situation where personal passion is undermined by professional precarity. This complex extends beyond financial compensation and includes a sense of overwhelm caused by overwork and insufficient support for balancing the demands of one's personal wellbeing and caring for the wellbeing of others who may severely lack primary resources.

Toward that end, youth serving organizations must improve their efforts to support youth workers, especially those who may still relate to the marginalizing experiences that they are tasked with helping service users navigate. Otherwise, youth workers who have relevant appeal, and a personal commitment and relatable experiences to the youth served may feel exploited and tokenized. The next participant expresses their passion about the work, which was born from lived experience, and the reciprocal relationship of mutual support that they gain from the young people they assist.

I'm really passionate about my work. I've been very fortunate too... I always feel like I'm a walking statistic, right. And some people will either take that in a good way or a bad way but my life experiences got me to live a life and experience things that I would never have been given if I didn't go through what I did in my life. So I'm

passionate and as much as the youth think we help them, they also help us in our journey as well and so it's a give and take relationship. (CONNEX-53)

While this participant acknowledges the reciprocal nature of their work, emphasizing that while they are deeply committed to helping young people, they also find that these relationships contribute to their own personal growth and journey. This opportunity, where the youth worker's past experiences and current professional role intersect, reflects the redemptive potential of their work in finding ways to address the marginalization of youth. However, this participant also articulates a tension that conflicts with their sense of fulfillment within the sector, expressing difficulty in balancing their professional and personal lives, as evidenced in their continued reflection:

I don't see myself [leaving the sector.] I always say I'm going to leave the sector and everything like that and all my friends are like, "No, ***, like you'll always be here in this sector," but I also want to be in the sector in the way that I want to be and wake up every day and it be my point of my life. Because that's one thing – I think that's one of my weaknesses.

It's something that is hard for me is balancing work and life because I'm so – like most of my jobs is the same thing, working with youth and child welfare system. All my friends are active in the child welfare system or work in the social service sector, so it's always there. Like I eat and breathe. Like for the first two years I was here I ate and breathed it. (CONNEX-53)

In this latter part of the statement, the youth worker confronts the challenge of finding balance between their professional responsibilities and personal life. Working in the child and youth welfare system, especially given their background as what they describe as a

“walking statistic,” has deeply enmeshed their identity with their work, making it difficult to create boundaries and balance outside of context of their employment. This tension is further compounded by the participant’s recognition of their desire to remain in the sector; despite the toll it takes on their well-being.

Interestingly, the participant characterizes this drive as a “weakness,” suggesting an internal conflict where their passion for the work is at odds with the demands and emotional strain it imposes. The complexity of this reflection underscores the profound commitment that youth workers have to their roles, while also highlighting the inherent challenges in sustaining that commitment without compromising personal health and well-being. This nuanced perspective reveals the intricate balance that youth workers must navigate between their dedication to their work and the need for self-care and sustainable practices within what can be a demanding and emotionally taxing field. Left without adequate support from organizations, youth workers must rely on themselves and peer support to find ways to ensure that their passion does not lead to a quick burn out. The “double-edged” nature of passion in youth work is explained by REHA-19 in the following excerpt.

...what’s hard for me in this role, and I see colleagues see this as well, is being able to disconnect. So in this role, it takes a lot of passion. And I’m sure you’ve heard of it, youth work, social work or social service work is a passion job, it’s a passion career and that’s what really drives you to work in this role. But part of that is it’s a double-edged sword, right. You’re so passionate to help others but when it comes to that client or that individual where you can’t help or they don’t want the help, then you can’t really do anything about it.

So part of that is difficult because, you know, you want to be able to do something and you want to be able to impact their lives and help them in a positive way. But it's hard for me to kind of detach that part and be like OK, well this is outside of my power, or outside of control or scope or whatever and, you know, kind of justify OK, well I can't help them because of this reason.

And I think that part of it is something that – not that I can't do but it's something that I could definitely improve on. Just kind of setting that boundary to kind of detach that away from bringing it home or even just understanding from my own point of view that OK, this is something I can't control, you know, I'm doing the best that I can and that's it. (REHA-19)

Incorporating emotional regulation without risking the youth worker becoming too “disconnected” is a delicate balance, one that requires careful navigation of personal passion and professional boundaries. The experience of Connex-53 provides a poignant example of the challenges inherent in maintaining this balance:

Like I would be messaging people on Instagram at one o'clock in the morning to have meetings, like a webinar and that just shows that even though it's a nine to five job, there's some of us that do go above and beyond because, you know, that's what we're passionate about. And sometimes that's our downfall because – it's sometimes our downfall and I think for me being able to say no to one of my youth I think is very hard.

Not being able to fix things for people when they need to be done, I think that's the hard pieces of my job or seeing somebody, a youth who I see myself in and you just want to shelter them but not enable them because as a social worker and a

youth worker I'm a different kind of social worker. Don't get me wrong, I follow the book, you know... it's very red tape and yellow line. But anything my youth need or want I'm going to make sure that I can possibly get it done, and if I can't get done I will definitely put them in the hands of somebody who can, yeah. (CONNEX-53)

This account reveals the intense personal investment youth workers often have in their roles, driven by a deep-seated passion to support young people. It also highlights the bureaucratic and systemic barriers that complicate their work, where the necessity of adhering to protocols and red tape can feel both burdensome and necessary. The challenge lies in finding ways to enable youth workers to maintain their passion and commitment while also protecting them from burnout, a task that requires more robust organizational support and systemic changes within the sector. The data consistently shows that the connections youth workers build with young people are mutually enriching, providing them with the energy and inspiration needed to navigate the inherent stress and challenges of their jobs. These relationships are professionally fulfilling and personally transformative, reinforcing the youth worker's sense of purpose and helping to mitigate the emotional toll of the work. The passion that drives youth workers can lead to burnout if not properly supported, making it crucial for the sector to honor and sustain this passion through fair compensation and healthier, more sustainable work practices.

Additionally, the theme of personal fulfillment extends to a broader sense of community and shared values among colleagues in the field. The collective passion and commitment within the youth work community further reinforce individual dedication, creating a network of support that is vital in sustaining motivation and resilience. This communal aspect is particularly significant in a sector often marked by precarious

employment conditions, where the emotional and spiritual rewards of the work provide a necessary counterbalance to the financial and systemic challenges faced by these professionals. Witnessing the progress of young people, from initial struggles to moments of success and self-actualization, serves as a powerful affirmation of the youth worker's role as a critical ally in their development. This phenomenon of mutual empowerment underscores the importance of recognizing and supporting the unique contributions that youth workers make, ensuring that their passion and dedication are met with the resources and respect they deserve. In doing so, the sector can foster an environment where youth workers are empowered to continue their vital work without compromising their well-being.

Empowering: Mutual Growth and Personal Development

I learned from [youth].... when you can get into that self-reflection and... relational dialogue with them.... it's an incredibly healing and, like, meaningful experience for them and for us. (INTER-20)

Youth work is often perceived as a unidirectional flow of influence, with youth workers imparting knowledge, guidance, and support to young people. However, the respondents in this study describe their encounters with young people as a mutual exchange that fosters co-empowerment. These youth workers emphasize that their interactions with youth provide opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and a deeper understanding of themselves. They value the feedback and learning experiences gained from these relationships, which enhance their professional practice and contribute positively to their personal life. As explored in the previous subtheme, the energy, presence, and connection with young people serve as significant sources of inspiration and resilience in the field.

Beyond this, the motivation derived from these interactions can advance the well-being and professional development of youth workers themselves. In this sense, the value and insights of young people requires greater acknowledgment and appreciation. In this way, the familiarity that youth workers develop with young people expands their insight into the impressive potential and contributions that young people have to share. Celebrating the resolve of young people, who are often underestimated, two participants declared:

It just, it feels good to see others - even if had nothing to do with me. Just getting to know these young people and just being a person that they want to even share their good news with, touches me as a human being. And there's so - the other thing too, they're so resilient. Every single one of these youths that I've ever worked with is so strong. They have bigger hearts than they can ever imagine and they're just constantly shit on by society. (NAVI-80)

..And with youth, there's just so much hope and inspiration. And they're just so - a lot of the time, they don't realise how smart and how, really how much potential they have. And I just feel like you're really able to motivate them and allow them to open their eyes and see their true potential. (ACTI-87)

Youth workers often discover that the gains and benefits from their interactions with young people are unexpected and, at times, overlooked by the general public. These experiences underscore the importance of creating spaces where youth can influence and shape the programs they participate in, ensuring that their voices and contributions are genuinely valued. This approach aligns with positive youth development frameworks, which challenge traditional views of young people as passive recipients of services, instead recognizing them as active contributors with valuable insights. This perspective is also

supported by critical pedagogy, which rejects the notion of young people as blank slates to be programmed. Instead, it acknowledges that the insights and experiences of young people are integral to a broader network of learning and growth. This principle reinforces the relational, holistic, and responsive subthemes discussed earlier in the critical principles theme.

By fostering meaningful relationships with young people and adopting a holistic approach to youth work, responsiveness is maintained through an openness to learning, adapting, and adjusting when young people identify new areas for exploration and growth. This dynamic process leads to positive transformation and necessitates constant reflexivity, ensuring that youth workers remain aware of how their work impacts others and how, in turn, they are impacted by those they serve. The following account highlights the taken for granted “teaching” that youth provide when responding to a question about the rewards of frontline work.

Oh there are so many. [Laughter] One thing is that, you know, you are constantly learning new things. Youth have – like, I think we take for granted that we’re teaching youth different things, but they’re also teaching us. Whether it’s, like, these new terms that are out there in the zeitgeist that I have no idea, or they challenge – they challenge my different ways of thinking. You know? I just learn so much from them.

Also, they keep you humble. Working with youth, you can’t necessarily take yourself too seriously, which is great because, you know, they will see right through any kind of pretense that you try and put on. You know? It’s really taught me to stay humble and admit that I don’t know what I don’t know. And, you know, if they know

it, then they're free to teach that whatever it is to me. So, yeah, those are some of the rewards of youth work. (GYDZ-104)

In this sense, critical youth workers remain “humble” by not allowing their social location to reinforce hierarchical posturing of adultism, whereby ageist assumptions of competence regard opinions and desires of youth are rendered superficial and uninformed. One participant viewed their learning and engagement with youth as the best part of their work, stating:

I like just interacting with the youth. I learn a lot from them. And I think their perspective is just so valuable. And often under-valued. I think that that's probably the best part of the job for me is just learning and kind of growing with the young people. And seeing the progressing and kind of just their own kind of satisfaction with their life as it develops. (PATHS-43)

Likewise, another participant responds to the assertion that youth are the only benefactors of social service programs, asserting:

...that's such a lie to say that we don't gain from those interactions. I learned from them.... youth are thinking and they have, like, they're thinking about the world and bringing new perspectives into mental health work and themselves and, like, when you can get into that self-reflection and... relational dialogue with them.... it's an incredibly healing and, like, meaningful experience for them and for us. (INTER-20)

This account emphasises the idea of youth informing mental health perspectives and contributing to healing processes for frontline youth workers in a mutual exchange of education and empowerment. This viewpoint dissolves the pre-judgement that may more

commonly be projected upon young people and adapts a humanizing view that embraces the value of young people without assuming that their age precludes relevant experience and insights. INTER-20 provides another example of this humanizing outlook, as they continue to explain their outlook.

...I love talking to people so and I love learning about people and... new perspectives on the world and just hearing – so I love stories, storytelling, people’s stories. So getting to hear all of these stories of the world and world views is so enriching and, like, valuable to, like, just me as a human. Not as a worker. You know? Me as a human. (INTER-20)

INNO-51 discusses how their experience in the sector has enhanced their personal capacity to navigate challenges and how invaluable the collaborative opportunities have been, stating,

You also learn a lot about yourself, so there is for the people who are interested in growing as a person there's lots of – you get a lot of feedback in this field on like what worked well, what didn't work well, like how to work with a team in a crisis situation is pretty invaluable. So that's given me I guess skills to deal with personal problems or personal issues or crises outside of work that I've been in. It also has been helpful in terms of – I’m trying to think of how to word it. It’s been good networking, honestly. Like I’ve been able to meet different people in different areas of child and youth work or the mental health field because of it. You can build up a network if you’re so inclined to, I guess. (INNO-51)

The benefits outlined here include a sense of empowerment from engaging with youth and other sector stakeholders. In the following subtheme on motivative factors that are more grounded in the broader context of the working experience, the social and communal benefits that youth workers value will be examined.

Necessary: Filling Service Gaps

...there's just a lot of needs still, and it doesn't seem it's changing that much. But then you can make those micro changes when it's affecting individual lives. That's really rewarding, and it's meaningful. And it's and it's important work that needs to be done.
(VIZI-15)

Regarding youth worker motivation in the context of their profession, many respondents reported a great deal of pride in providing services that would otherwise not be made available to the young people they support. Being a part of an active solution seemed to galvanize frontline staff as they noted their specialized contributions as enabling notable change. This subtheme will present instances where youth workers have been able to provide support in context where other support workers were perhaps over capacity or unable or not interested in providing the supports or specialized services required by the young person. Admittedly other social services, including those that have more structural support around them within the education sector do suffer from resource limitations, and strain as well, and therefore the role of youth workers and fill these gaps also speak to unfortunate gaps and service for young people across the range of sectors, which reinforces the work that youth workers have identified in terms of not feeling gaps with their direct service that they provide, but also actively addressing holes in the system, other sectors may not put appropriate emphasis in providing resources and guidance for young people in need so the

youth workers rule is multiplied potentially across a few sectors there more wholesome and holistic support may require them to go above and beyond their own work designations to either pr or source ways to address the gaps.

At times, youth workers are filling gaps in other sectors as support workers who may take crucial but often underappreciated roles in the health or education sectors. As the following educational support youth worker attests when describing their role in reaching youth that may be neglected by teaching staff.

..And also just reaching the kids that other teachers and that might kind of, not give up on but they're difficult.

So it's easier to just send them out of the room, or send them to the resource room, or send them to the office. And we are the ones, youth workers who reach those kids, and then being in the field for a while I've actually seen students who have graduated. (INSPIR-92)

While INSPIR-92 addresses missed opportunities for teacher to engage with students around challenging context as opposed to sending them away, INSPIR-92 also highlights the importance of relational consistency since they have been able to witness the graduation of students they have supported. As noted earlier, the fact that other social services and resources for young people are often understaffed and employees are overworked should be kept in mind as many care sectors do not set up staff to succeed in the ways of optimizing, the mental health and well-being of those they serve and their own well-being. Often with organizations and agencies is driven by government mandates there is still pressure to subscribe to the social return of investment model, which attempts to regulate compensation by the minimum wage in efforts to protect the profitability of corporations, which are the

priorities of capitalist, economy, and to line with the argument of “saving taxpayer money” culture, corporation, tax, evasion and benefits, is not nearly as scrutinized as what may be perceived is overspending in the nonprofit sector. There is a stigma attached to over-servicing the so-called poor while the surplus earnings of the wealthy are admirably framed as being industrious.

The concern around this subtheme in terms of the necessity of youth work unfortunately is that the cultural shift away from prioritizing the well-being of those who are marginalized, socially, and in vulnerable positions economically well at the same time professing to subscribe to the idea that poverty reduction and hunger and disenfranchisement are social archaic ills that must be addressed. Instead of having good rapport or relationship with the most marginalized stakeholders and working towards methods to address these grievances, top-down approaches are utilized which put more trust in the social science research around the issues than resources and trust in the daily workings of advocates who have personal stakes invested in seeing tangible shifts happen in the immediate future. Instead of an urgent reformation, an industry emerges unto itself, engaging in evaluation and research around issues that never progress to evolution or revolution.

Youth workers have a unique space in their position on the front line and their proximity to the organizations, policy and funding bodies that are immersed in the contradictions between loyalty to capitalism and service to community. The communal and capital disjunctions are almost deeply engrained in the Frontline youth worker’s efforts to reconcile the social impersonal safety of marginalized groups through politicized and professionalized labour force that is used as an auxiliary solution to addressing widening gaps in a system. Such “gaps” which are framed as unfortunate and unintended oversight or

mistakes in social organizing, can be more accurately imagined as pitfalls, or even traps, as a result of broader exploitative dynamics in the social economy which greatly concentrate wealth and affluence to a minority and subsequently require a wide base of labour to function under severely regulated tools of social control to maintain compliance and complacency through either coercion or concession. The politicizing of these pitfalls rather than acquiesce to the terminology of mistaken gaps in the system, challenges the taken for granted rhetoric of “social safety nets” without acknowledging the active severing and scorching of the net’s material by the same social systems.

Consequently, it is important to not reduce INSPIR-92’s concern solely as an chastisement of teachers who lack care and capacity, but to understand that there are two larger pieces of context that form problematic dynamics; one issue is that most caring professions that originate from the public service sector funding are typically under resource and underappreciated, the second concern is that youth work, being far less structured and regulated than the more traditional sectors are often undervalued and under acknowledged in terms of their expertise, competence, and the necessity of their functioning. This lack of regard and support increases the difficulty of youth work and produces confounding complexes in the place of communal care. This is a theme that will be explored shortly but returning to notion of youth workers filling the gaps (or chronic pitfalls), the necessity of youth work in serving the underserved resonated with many of the interview participants.

...what I love about youth work is just obviously, it's just really meaningful work. It's meaningful, there's so much need out there.... I feel it's only getting more since I've been almost 18 years in this game. And it just feels like, I don't know, there's just a lot of needs still, and it doesn't seem it's changing that much. But then you can make

those micro changes when it's affecting individual lives. That's really rewarding, and it's meaningful. And it's and it's important work that needs to be done. And done well. So that's what I appreciate about the work... (VIZI-15)

VIZI-15 reinforces the necessity of youth work as a growing demand, despite spending nearly two decades in this sector. Despite being able to make what they term as “micro changes” there is a bit of disappointment inferred from the statements around the lack of change happening on a larger scale when it comes to improving the lives of young people. EDUC-100 confirms in their own experience that issues for young people are in no way declining and provide another example of the classroom where youth worker intervention can ameliorate the limited capacity of teachers who may be challenged with balancing increasing demands and class sizes.

I think kids are facing a lot more issues and not as supported by their community. So having youth workers in the school is just someone's automatically there for them no matter what. Unfortunately... there should be more of us to support students. I know, a lot of my co-workers are stretched thin. But yeah, we kind of bridge that gap for the classes that are full and kind of chaotic. We can kind of take kids aside and try to help them out if they need anything. (EDUC-100)

The reality of overworked social support professionals who are "stretched thin" indicates systemic pitfalls remain even though demands increase. In the collaborative efforts of youth workers with other system professionals, a cooperative and communal approach is crucial in supplementing the necessary care to provide fuller wraparound, supports for young people. Unfortunately, where the broader system and sector is lacking in providing the resources and labour power to appropriately manage the needs, youth workers and service

professionals take it upon themselves to make extra (often unacknowledged) effort in their work to meet their goals.

Beyond providing supplementary support within neighbouring overworked sectors, youth workers also provide nuanced lessons and growth opportunities that may not be formal curriculum in the education sector as one participant shares.

...I think we're the teachers of behaviour and we are the teachers of was the social norms at school that don't get talked about in math class and don't get talked about in English. We work to teach what's acceptable in school, what's not.

How should you be at a job setting? How can you work best with a student with special needs? So I just think we do a lot of work that doesn't get recognised, but sometimes it does. And my work in particular, we've always - we can accomplish great things and reward the students. So we've had really great moments and memories with students. (INSPIR-92)

INSPIR-92 discusses how their role provides educational insight to young people and potentially other staff support as well; however, they also discuss the lack of recognition that they receive for their work (which may be rendered invisible) and discuss their marginalization from discussions around more formalized curriculum matters and teaching exercises. Well, they do acknowledge some degree of recognition, in this and future accounts (as we will see in the upcoming section on obstructions) the lack of appropriate acknowledgement of youth workers contributions and services can be highly demotivating. On the other hand, being in a position to offer resources and assistance that were otherwise unavailable enforces the contributive value of the youth worker as PROVI-77 extols,

...my joy really comes from, a lot of youth made comments like, 'oh I didn't know that you, your organisation provides this type of support, I really wish that I knew about this organisation earlier.' Those kinds of things, right, it's really the mentorship, the opportunities that a lot of times these are not being told, so that's what I really enjoy about my job, that I'm able to give them those resources. And so, they can basically use me as a resource, right, what is it that you need and how can I help you find it, that's what I enjoy the most. (PROVI-77)

The joy that PROVI-77 accentuates in this statement comes from the value that they place in their role as a mentor and the importance of being needed and feeling validated through the acceptance and appreciation of their service offerings. Youth workers fill space that has erupted in the void of communal and familial units with the rise of industrialization and the capitalist economy institutionalizes families in the training and labour markets for a majority of their socializing time. Framing one of the reasons for service gaps another way, VIZI-15 explains why there is a need for youth worker interventions, even in contexts where a young person has a healthy relationship with supportive parents, stating,

... there's a reason why in our communities, they say it takes a village to raise a child. Because even when you do have a good relationship with your child, they'd stopped listening to you sometimes or it's important to hear the same messages in a different way from the from others in the community. And because we don't live in villages anymore, community programs, youth programs become that village. Become that - the aunties and uncles. So this work is not just a side, throwaway thing. It's just as important as the economic running's of our communities. Just as important as jobs

and unemployment is making spaces for our young people to figure out who they are in this, in Ontario, that's where we are. (VIZI-15)

It is interesting that this statement includes a rebuttal to seeing youth work as a “throwaway thing” which validates the reason for why this research is needed along with the expansion of these dialogues on the lesser-known principles and factors that surround critical youth work engagement. Youth workers are stepping up to provide vital services while also dealing with forming trust relationships with young people who may be extra cautious around adults and peer supports, as well as potential broken trust between youth workers and influential sector stakeholders who do not regard the opinion and expertise of young people and youth workers, and reinforce the impression that youth work is not very serious which only makes the very important work more difficult to do than harder to bear when the emotional toil and exhaustion is exacerbated through these hierarchical and disrespectful dynamics.

To better support youth workers respecting the importance and relevance of their work, must be done on a broader scale with those who collaborate and administer youth serving programs. This orientation of high regard must also extend into appreciating the diverse and varied and often hard to measure outcomes of youth work as well

Effective: Accomplishing Positive Outcomes

...seeing the impact that I have on my communities, right. You know, hearing that from the youth themselves. Hearing that I had a great impact on their lives, I think that's what ultimately keeps me going. (REHA-19)

One subtheme that may appear to be obvious as a point of satisfaction for youth workers is the degree to which their interventions produce satisfactory outcomes. The

motivation of seeing one's efforts obtain their goal and lead to healthier outcomes for young people is an understandable, motivating factor for Frontline youth workers. Thus far this study has examined the positive impact of the process of youth work in regard to the relational connections, the sense of fulfilment and the mutual empowerment that comes through engaging in these programs, but the sense of duty for providing necessary, supports, and ultimately, seeing the supports materialize into the anticipated or hopeful outcomes, completes the intended circle for youth workers who have entered this field to make a positive impact.

While the process of witnessing the growth and development of young people and establishing meaningful relationships has been reported as its own reward in many instances and found to be a strong, encouraging factor for youth workers to maintain their efforts. It is the combination of satisfactory processes and satisfactory outcomes that combine to deliver strongly motivating forces for continued youth work investment. Through direct testimonials from the youth, youth worker can feel validated in learning about the true impact of their support and interventions. As this participant shares:

What I like about the work immediately you'll be able to see the direct results of being – of helping and hearing the youth tell me like, 'Oh hey, like I'm so glad we got connected. You know, I feel like I've made positive connections now and without our relationship it's I probably wouldn't be here' or, 'I'd probably fall deeper down through the cracks.' And just hearing that and hearing the impact that I have on a youth's life is huge, it's impactful to me... I think that's what really drives me and it keeps me going is to hear that positive reflection. (REHA-19)

The proximity of the youth worker to the young people, enables them to witness firsthand the outcome of some of their interventions. For these more short-term oriented outcomes, seeing the immediate impact can reinforce the youth workers sense of purpose. Even in the context of actions which may appear minuscule and inconsequential can have a prolonged and lasting effect on the young person and youth workers. Witnessing the joy and satisfaction from their engagement, the following participant exemplifies the small wins that rejuvenate and reward their work ethic.

...Being able to do some of those trips with the kids, like going to camp or those kinds of moments, or taking a kid to see a movie that they've been wanting to see for a long time is pretty – like that's a cool experience even though it seems small. Like those things are really rewarding to see the kid happy and doing that experience with them; that is a benefit. (INNO-51)

In instances that are less event-focused and more oriented towards service user safety and recovery, REHA-19 echoes the rewarding sentiment of youth worker's yields.

I think if you love working with the community and you love seeing the development of youth and how no matter your involvement, no matter how small or big it is, it has a huge impact on the youths' lives.

So I think being able to see the change and being able to see – you know, seeing like second – people do deserve second changes, right. And I think that's the benefits of being a youth worker is by being able to see your influence and your help with someone and being able to, you know, have that positive impact on someone's life and really give back. (REHA-19)

The notion of giving back is revisited here along with supporting a second chance for those who may find themselves alienated and at risk of abandonment or worse. Despite the intervention being what this participant labels as “small or big,” the programmatic impact is somewhat less significant than it’s emotive and relational consequences, which may inspire a boost in confidence or enhance the bond and trusting rapport that a young person invests in a youth worker. As the participants detail some of the highest rewards in their work, it is notable to observe the value system that emerges around the quality of engagement and interaction versus the quantity of measuring the scale or significance of the impact as the next participant attests

..And people come through the door saying, ‘You know what, I want to be – I want to give back, or I want to be – you know, I want to work with kids or students to share my experience so I can be helpful.’ And that’s you know that’s like wow, you know, you really kind of feel like, ‘Oh I touched somebody.’ So that’s where it is.

...just to make a dent. I just hope to make a difference in somebody’s life, and I hope by me doing what I’ve been at least make a difference in at least one person’s life. And once I think I’ve done that then I feel like I’m doing my job. (MENTR-25)

This instance reflects the profound influence that early empathetic connections within youth programs can have on young individuals, potentially directing them into future frontline youth workers - a path that many participants in this research have already taken.

However, the nuances of how these young people come to respect, honor, and aspire to the role of youth workers are often overlooked in traditional program evaluations and reviews, which fail to capture the depth of this transformative process. This retrospective testimonial from former participants underscores the importance of adopting a nuanced value

system for assessing the impact of youth work, one that prioritizes the quality of engagement over the mere quantity of interactions. Unlike conventional evaluations that rely on empirical scales to measure program methodologies or dosage, this approach acknowledges the inherent difficulty in accounting for all the factors influencing a young person's decisions. Ignoring the critical role of positive relationships in shaping these decisions would be equally remiss.

Regrettably, many youth programs attempt to validate their effectiveness through metrics that emphasize participation rates and the frequency of program instances. This focus often compels administrators and managers to concentrate on boosting numbers to satisfy the expectations of funding bodies and board members. Typically, this performance-driven model is accompanied by satisfaction surveys that reduce program success to a series of checkbox metrics. While these tools have their place, they often overlook the most valuable contribution of youth workers: the rapport and relationships they build with service users and the community. Without these authentic connections, many young people would likely disengage from these programs. It is frequently the genuine dedication of frontline youth workers that draws young people into environments where the political priorities of funding and evaluation are often misaligned with the overarching goals of personal well-being and social advocacy. Although organizations commonly highlight "success stories" to convey the qualitative impact of their programs, the true measure of effectiveness lies in the meaningful, sustained engagement that occurs over time. It is through these ongoing interactions that young people exhibit positive changes in attitude or behavior, transformations that can be attributed, at least in part, to the authentic support provided by frontline workers. Participants often stated that the youth testimonies are indispensable motivators, as REHA-19 states,

So, I think that would be what would want me to continue working, is seeing the impact that I have on my communities, right. You know, hearing that from the youth themselves. Hearing that I had a great impact on their lives, I think that's what ultimately keeps me going. (REHA-19)

In GYDZ-104's view, moments of accomplishment with program participants are necessary for improving their mental health,

...in terms of positive, you know, it's that being able to have that great relationship with students. And then, you know, also sharing those successes with them and being able to see their successes and being able to share with them their successes when they can't see them. That's a great booster for my mental health.... And, you know, when a student really gets a concept that they have been struggling with. And things like those moments, things like celebrating students at our own graduation ceremony that we put on separate from the schools, things like that are a really great boost and remind me of why I do the work. And, you know, reminding myself of why I do the work is also really important to my mental health. You know? And looking at individual students or looking at our program and our success rates, things like that. Because otherwise, this job is hard. (GYDZ-104)

GYDZ-104 highlights the importance of building strong relationships to enable and access the personal testimonials of positive impact shared by youth, as celebrating these accomplishments provides a mental health boost and reaffirms the underlying purpose of their work. The true reward lies in witnessing development and progress, not necessarily in being "The" change-maker, but in contributing in any way possible to that change.

Regardless of the circumstances, the feeling of gratitude that youth workers express for being able to effect such change is tangible in spite of the many challenging moments for them and the young person.

...you know, there are a lot of lows and there are a lot of tough moments, but there's also a lot of like good that happens....

to me, it's an honour, I think. It could've been someone else there helping them, but here I am in that position, so I think that's cool. (INNO-51)

The subtheme of effectiveness reveals the profound impact that youth workers have on the lives of the young people they serve, underscoring the importance of recognizing and valuing these contributions beyond conventional metrics. The deep connections and trust built through sustained, meaningful engagement are at the heart of this work, challenging the reductionist views that prioritize quantifiable outcomes above the nuanced, short and long-term influence that youth workers can have. As we transition to the next subtheme of service Responsibility as a supportive factor, the discussion broadens to consider the role of youth workers in individual development and broader societal needs. The sense of duty that drives these professionals extends beyond personal fulfillment; it encompasses a commitment to fostering social and even economic well-being on a larger scale and highlights the essential role youth workers play in shaping the future of their communities.

Responsible: Advancing Public Interests

...it's constantly wanting to build those young people who are marginalized and at a disadvantage and show them that with work and commitment and the right supports around them, they can achieve anything. (NAVI-80)

When reflecting upon their motivation for doing youth work some respondents indicated that they felt the sense of responsibility or duty for social well-being and that their roles were contributing to the broader social good. With this focus on mentoring and supporting the future generation, they felt that the investment in the social economy and civic engagement would produce a positive outcome where young people can optimize their skills and contribute to society. The approach here was less about critiquing shortfalls of social systems and better preparing young people to function through aid in the development and discovery of their skills and talents and guiding and motivating young people into positions that would solidify their place in society.

I think we contribute to youth wellbeing is the fact that I think a lot of people just probably see us as a role model for them, and a way for them to get the extra support or whatever, right.

I think mostly these programs are more preventative than punitive, so I think having more youth workers in programs and having more programs in general that are geared towards preventing and building these life skills for these kids is beneficial for everybody, right.

If that student is – or that person is in a program after school and is very likely to be on the streets, or doing whatever, it's beneficial for everybody because then it's gaining a skill and they're not impacting the system in a different way, hopefully, right. (MENTR-25)

MENTR-25 views youth workers as mentors to help young people become skilled citizens to benefit society overall. This framing does present the idea of young people could otherwise be unskilled and on the streets, or "doing whatever," so the narrative of young

people getting into trouble unsupervised or otherwise occupied is one that does require further scrutiny in context. However, being framed as a guide can be a motivating factor for youth workers to feel that their role serves a social good.

Another important observation from Mentr-25's perspective is framing effective youth work as preventative rather than reactionary. Unfortunately, with the social return of investment model framing that only emphasis social investment if there is a moral panic or some concern over the sustainability of the economy results in poor foresight and initiative in resourcing forward-looking growth and development programs. The reactionary nature of funding and policy is worsened in the temporary project-based approaches, particularly when it comes to the moral-panic threats of crime prevention and substance abuse for youth which often lack trauma-informed and harm-reduction approaches or a critical assessment of the systemic factors that result in disproportionate outcomes for marginalized youth and communities. Therefore, while the presumption that youth may be prone to deviance if left to their own devices should be complicated, the lack of preventative and caring resources for young people can certainly exacerbate underlying conditions of alienation and anti-social behaviour towards vulnerable groups. DEFEN-82 echoes the necessity of early intervention for positive youth development, stating:

Well, I think it has to start at a younger age quite frankly. I mean we're talking about youth, but these are youth who, at a young age, needed help and needed interventions. So more supports in schools, catching the problem at a much younger age so that when the children turn into youth they have some more coping skills and know how to ask for help. I think that's a big thing is youth need to know how to advocate for themselves... (DEFEN-82)

DEFEN-82 elaborates on some of the challenges that they identify as barriers for youth when asked what difficulties youth encounter, stating.

Oh, I'd say unresolved trauma. Lack of family connection. Lack of good role models. Being stereotyped, you know, if they're – like I think racism comes into play. Youth who go through the foster care system, they seem to get labelled as troublemakers even though they're not. But you know, like, oh, the teachers maybe don't have as much patience with them. They face tremendous barriers throughout their life. So it's amazing sometimes that some of them can succeed.

I'd like people to know that some youth who try very hard, that some youth try to overcome barriers and obstacles and barriers to education, barriers to work, employment. And that youth who don't come from well-functioning families need extra support and need to – need to have a priority when it comes to how services are allocated, where money is spent. (DEFEN-82)

There is a complicated opinion that may form when reviewing this analysis, we're on one hand the respondent is critically aware of the social influence of stereotyping, racism, and labelling based on one circumstance, but they also identify upbringing as a major factor in the young person likelihood of coming across social barriers. At the same time, many of the barriers are based on social discrimination. There is a stereotype around stigmatizing ones familial connections as a projection of being disadvantaged. While there is no dealt that a supportive family is instrumental in the outcomes of young people, there is a careful line around this point to avoid assumptions that certain family structures, particularly from the most targeted communities will lead to deviant behaviour from young people. This is an instance of the difficulty of operating with a critical lens that is aware of social issues but

also attempts to comply with “correcting” position or disposition of a young person in society. Ultimately, both perspectives should not be mutually exclusive, where social factors and structures are held to account and individual circumstances are not pathologies, but considered in context assist in navigating the best approaches to youth well-being.

There is a conceptual continuum where at the most extreme poles a youth workers can either operate as a disciplinarian on one pole or a trusted friend on the other. Between these extremes there is a balance of being able to provide guidance and fellowship with respect to professional boundaries and personal care; however, these tensions of how youth workers may be positioned as agents of social control as opposed to social revolution can appear in the work. In some instances, youth workers are positioned to operate as surveillance or policing agents, which is contrary to the value system of a critical youth work approach which does not assume that youth are innately problematic. Connex-53 shares an experience where these tensions created uncomfortable work conditions.

No. I wouldn't quit being a youth worker, but when I was at the shelter working with the youth there, I did not like the policing part, right. Like I'm not police officer, right. Like I don't want to check people's belongings, I don't want to search people's rooms, you know. So there's certain roles and certain parts of the job that we choose that I'm not all for, right.

...we're not there to be police officers, right. If they're not endangering themselves or the youth, leave them alone. Like being up in their faces and doing things to get a reaction from the youth I've seen a lot, right, and you don't have to do that. (CONNEX-53)

NAVI-80 also feels the responsibility of youth work is in its call to being socially responsible and helping young people accomplish their dreams, but the socioeconomic and structural contexts remain central to understanding the source of social barriers.

It's rewarding. It brings a sense of fulfilment, to know that I'm helping future generations. That I'm helping young people to achieve the dreams that they want to achieve. These are young people that had a disadvantage. I think there's just so much disparity and the opportunities that young people have across class and socioeconomic status. And so it's constantly wanting to build those young people who are marginalized and at a disadvantage and show them that with work and commitment and the right supports around them, they can achieve anything. (NAVI-80)

VIZI-15 views their work as a part of the social effort to strengthen social economies and infrastructure.

...youth workers are city builders. Youth workers, build economies. Youth workers hold space for young people to show up as they are and get support.” (VIZI-15)

They go on to explain in more detail:

...it's the future of our city, for real. And it leads to a good economy. If you have people that know who they are. Their talents are being - what's called, talents are being guided, that's not the word I was looking for, but guided. And then - and they're also being shown, OK, you love business, connect with this program or connect with this college degree or connect with this organisation, or connect with this trade union. We help build the economy by directing young people who have shown they had sounds and skills into those economies into those economic sectors. And we give

them the guidance and the courage and the motivation and the upliftment to know that - to feel good about whom they are.

So that they have that courage and confidence to walk into those places and excel, because they know who they are. So we help the economies to in a lot of informal ways that probably should be researched. (VIZI-15)

Therefore, youth work is contributing to advancing the public good while also scrutinizing negative framing of young people and conscientiously unpacking the social and structural causes of their disenfranchisement in order to simultaneously advocate for improving systems while at the same time finding a space for young people to contribute to the current social economies in a way that can sustain them. Detentions again emerge as youth, workers and young people attempt to improve social circumstances and enhance social justice, while also coping with the challenges of structural violence that they encounter in their personal and professional lives.

The personal and professional motivating factors examined thus far contribute significantly to youth worker's ability to persevere despite the myriad challenges they face, including societal expectations, the complexity of working with marginalized populations, and the demanding nature of frontline work. Despite these obstacles, several key motivators encourage youth workers to continue their roles and deepen their commitment to the sector. One of the most significant motivators is the flexibility and creativity afforded by their roles, which allows youth workers to tailor support to the individual needs of the young people they serve. The use of informal, non-traditional approaches, such as outreach and everyday activities, fosters environments where youth feel comfortable and supported. The freedom to

develop youth-led programs and be responsive to youth input is also highly valued, as it supports young people while reinforcing the youth workers' sense of agency and purpose.

A profound sense of fulfillment comes from offering second chances to youth who may have been criminalized or misunderstood by other systems. Witnessing young people grow, develop self-esteem, and achieve their goals is deeply rewarding. Yet, this work is not without its challenges, including societal perceptions of youth, the lack of stable funding, and the difficulties in building trust with isolated or traumatized youth. Despite these obstacles, serving as a mentor, role model, and consistent supportive presence in the lives of youth provides a profound source of motivation and personal satisfaction for these professionals. The variety, unpredictability, and direct impact of the work also contribute to its appeal and difficulty. Youth workers advocate for more youth-focused, preventative programming that centers on youth voices and agency, emphasizing the importance of listening to and collaborating with young people in developing programs that address their expressed needs. The role of the youth worker as a bridge between youth and other support services is crucial, particularly for marginalized populations. Witnessing the growth and development of these young people, even years after their involvement, provides youth workers with a profound sense of purpose and meaning, which are of utmost importance for sustenance in the field.

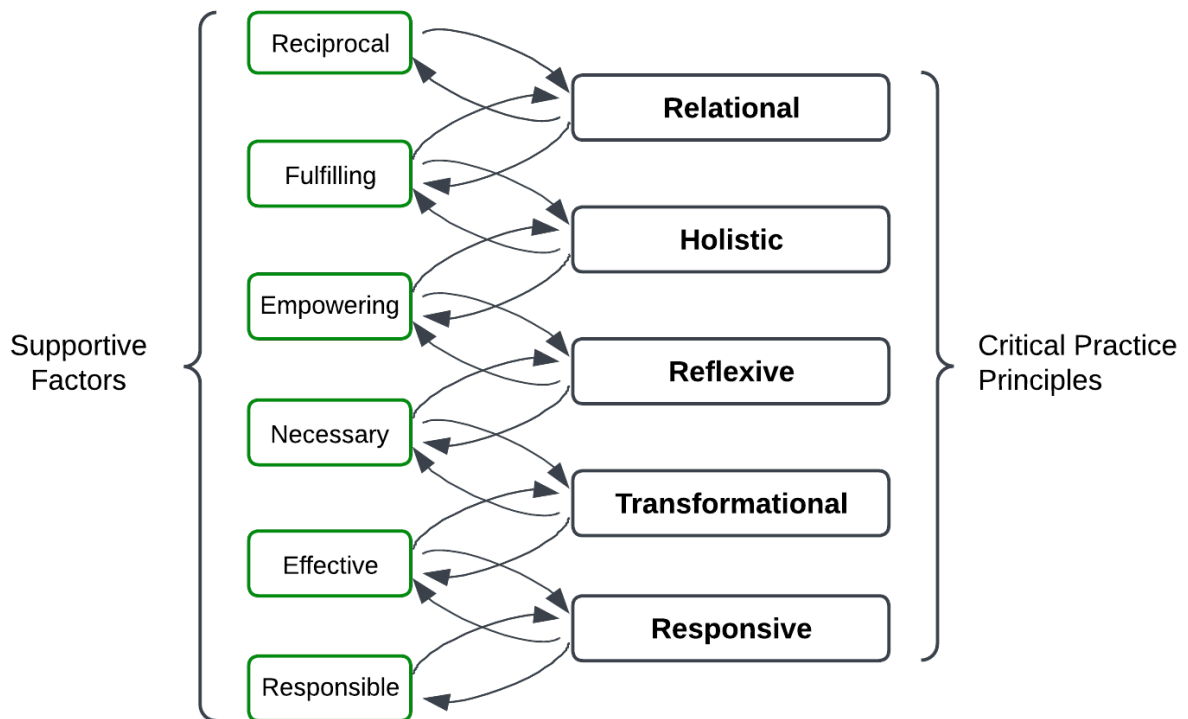
The relational, holistic, responsive, transformational and reflexive nature of their approach meld with the prioritizing of reciprocal, fulfilling, empowering, necessary, effective and relevant experiences with youth. In the next section, this study will examine the demoralizing factors that clash with these objectives and principles but are baked into the realities of frontline youth worker experiences, even though they are rarely examined in formal studies and policy reviews.

Findings and Analysis Summary

The Supportive Factors blend harmoniously with the critical principles that were interpreted from the twenty-five youth worker's engagement experiences. The figure below provides an illustration of the interrelations between these factors and elements of critical youth work practice.

Figure 9

Supportive Factors and Critical Practice



Within a supportive context, the **relational** principle thrives on reciprocity and a sense of fulfillment generated through connections among youth, youth workers, and a wider network of stakeholders. This network includes colleagues, community members, and individuals involved in the broader youth work sector, extending beyond the immediate

context of program delivery (Dominelli, 2009). The strength of these relationships provides a foundation for collaborative and impactful practice.

Concerning the **holistic** dimension of critical practice, shared fulfillment emerges as a crucial element, fostering a sense of co-empowerment that transcends simple program outcomes. This feature expands to include the growth and benefits experienced by both youth and youth workers as co-learners (Freire, 1970/2000). The holistic perspective integrates principles of critical pedagogy, actively challenging traditional educational hierarchies and dismantling the dichotomy between the "knowledge holder" and "the unlearned." Within the reflexive aspect of critical practice, the ability to remain responsive, reflective, and attuned to the needs of service users and the community addresses a fundamental necessity, leading to a profound sense of purpose derived from the inherent importance of the work (Sercombe, 2010). This sense of purpose is further strengthened when the work is validated and acknowledged. Given that youth workers often function within a sector that tends to undervalue their contributions, a critical and **reflexive** approach becomes essential. It enables practitioners to recognize the intrinsic worth of their efforts and understand the co-empowering nature of their interactions with both young people and the wider community. This reflexive engagement sustains commitment, allowing the essential nature of the work to be appreciated in ways that formal systems may not always fully recognize.

The **transformational** facet of practice connects this necessary work to effective action. It facilitates change and forward movement towards goals identified and articulated by service users themselves (Checkoway, 1995). This is not about imposing a predetermined agenda or attempting to "fix" young people deemed "deviant." Instead, transformation encompasses any outcome that young people perceive as beneficial and aligned with their

self-defined interests, while simultaneously promoting communal well-being in ways that surpass conventional metrics of success like education and employment. Finally, the **responsive** dimension of critical practice is intrinsically linked to accountability, the acceptance of responsibility for the actions taken and the outcomes achieved. This connection between "responsive" and "responsibility" underscores the vocational "call of duty" that is central to ethical youth work (Banks, 2010). Though the above illustration serves as a conceptual tool to imagine the interconnectedness of the findings, it is in no way deterministic and highly evolutionary. The model demonstrates the close relationship between the motivational and supportive factors identified by frontline youth workers and their understandings of meaningful (critical) practice. With this conceptual platform underlining the reaffirming elements of youth work, which resonate with critical pedagogy and praxis, we will now proceed to explore elements of youth work which create barriers which resonate with experiences that limit youth worker's from maximizing the fulness of their personal and professional potential (which, as I have argued, is a form of Structural Violence).

Chapter 7: Obstructive Factors, Findings, and Analysis)

This section explores the obstructive factors embedded within the realities of frontline youth work, which often clash with the sector's idealistic objectives and principles. Despite

their profound impact on the personal and professional lives of youth workers, these factors are seldom examined in formal studies or policy reviews. The obstructions that youth workers experience can manifest both at home and in the workplace, ultimately influencing some to consider leaving the sector altogether. While it is common for individuals to transition between jobs or view youth work (as any job) as a temporary career, significant structural issues impede their ability to establish a sustainable and fulfilling long-term career in this field. On a personal level, youth workers often face challenges related to low compensation and the emotional toll of their work. The demanding nature of youth work, coupled with inadequate pay, frequently leads to burnout. Furthermore, the instability of employment, characterized by short-term contracts and persistent anxiety about job security, exacerbates this sense of professional insecurity. For many, the lack of opportunities for advancement beyond frontline roles contributes to feelings of stagnation and frustration, especially for those who aspire to make a broader impact within the sector. Balancing the demands of work with personal and family life presents another significant challenge, particularly for those with caregiving responsibilities. The irregular hours and emotional demands of the job leave little time for personal life, leading to stress and burnout. Moreover, the emotional and mental health impacts of exposure to the trauma and violence experienced by the youth they serve can be profound, with many workers experiencing compassion fatigue, secondary trauma.

Beyond personal challenges, youth workers often encounter professional obstructions stemming from systemic issues within the sector. Many are frustrated by the lack of systemic change and the difficulty in addressing the root causes of the issues affecting the youth they serve. This inability to effect meaningful change can lead to feelings of powerlessness and

professional dissatisfaction. The complexity of navigating underfunded and siloed service systems further compounds these challenges, as advocacy efforts often yield little progress. Youth workers frequently feel undervalued and unheard by management and funders, with limited input into program design and decision-making. This lack of agency can contribute to feelings of disenfranchisement and demoralization. Additionally, safety concerns, including exposure to possible physical or mental aggression in the field, undermine the sense of security and well-being that is critical for sustained engagement in the sector. The lack of adequate supervision, support, and opportunities for self-care further isolates workers, leaving them to manage these challenges largely on their own.

The data from the 25 key informant interviews with youth workers will be analyzed to explore eight emergent themes of personal and professional obstruction, assessing their impact on well-being, career sustainability, and overall engagement in the sector. The analysis will cover three key themes under personal obstruction: the precarious nature of youth work, emphasizing personal and financial compromises such as poor compensation; the harmful aspects, focusing on unsafe work conditions and support affecting physical wellbeing and safety; and the disenfranchised experience due to intersectional and structural barriers, including intersectional oppression. In the area of professional obstruction, five themes will be examined: the onerous conditions resulting from poor support and unsustainable working conditions; the dismissive treatment, characterized by silencing, devaluation, and disempowerment with specific attention to minimalizing disregard and devaluation; and the limiting factors, such as career stagnation and de-professionalization, that restrict professional growth and contribute to obstructions forming. This comprehensive

analysis will provide crucial insights for addressing these issues through informed policy and practice improvements.

Precarious: Compromising a Sense of Security

I really like the job. I really love helping youth but sometimes I find it challenging to survive... (BUILDZ-59)

Youth workers are often subjected to substantial personal and financial compromises, arising from the demanding nature of their roles and the structural limitations embedded within the sector. Compensation for many of these professionals, particularly those in frontline positions, frequently hovers near minimum wage. Such inadequate remuneration severely undermines their financial stability, compelling them to undertake multiple contract-based positions in order to meet their basic needs. This precarious financial situation is exacerbated by the limited availability of permanent, full-time roles that provide benefits. Moreover, the scarcity of career advancement opportunities, particularly pathways to management positions, further deepens financial insecurity and perpetuates persistent anxieties related to job stability, contract renewals, and future employment prospects. These professional challenges exert significant pressure on the personal and familial lives of youth workers. The requirement to balance extensive professional demands, such as long working hours and on-call responsibilities, with personal and familial obligations, presents a considerable burden. This tension frequently results in feelings of guilt and internal conflict, as workers navigate the challenging task of prioritizing their well-being and family needs over the demands of their roles. The cumulative stress engendered by these pressures often manifests in adverse mental health outcomes, including burnout, and in many cases, precipitates a departure from the profession.

In the case of many participants, the high demands on the Frontline youth, workers caseload and the expectations to constantly be available despite the emotional and mental weight of some of the responsibilities took a toll on the participants. As Supor-28 details,

I feel like if you love what you do you – it's hard to kind of like separate yourself from your work. I find often times I'm always going – because this program specifically is so new there's a lot of things that still need to be done. And even after I've done work I'm doing work-related stuff, so like going to a library to get external resources to help create a structure for the house or, oh yeah like I wanted to go get this, this and this but I might not be able to go down on that shift necessarily because I'm the only one here and my client doesn't like – I can't leave them by themselves.

So I'm doing work after work so I'm constantly thinking about like oh I need to get into this or I need some of this or I should asked my boss if I could – if we have approval to do this. So it's like nonstop. And I think – I don't know what's worse, like feeling like you're at work all the time but not being there all the time. But at the same time it's something that I like to do but I've realized that it's consuming a lot of my days where I'm like tired and like I'm settling early just to kind of, you know, possibly be thinking about what I need to do tomorrow. Just kind of trying to unwind earlier so there leaves less opportunity for me to be like oh I need to do this, this, this and this tomorrow which is kind of like OK I'll tackle it in the morning when I get there. (SUPOR-28)

SUPOR-28 discusses their challenge in balancing personal responsibilities and duties with overwhelming work duties that are not just related to employment but also prioritizing the care of those who are being supported. This can lead to a feeling of guilt for putting one's

needs above the needs of the service users. For frontline youth work, especially in the context of grassroots organizations who often lack consistent funding and structural support, there are constant demands on limited staff much like a start-up business would experience. Having to fill multiple roles ranging from administrative to direct service duties, while being undercompensated or restricted to short-term grants while being mentally submerged in orchestrating this care work can be extremely exhausting, regardless of the moral rewards. PATHS-43 provides discusses their experience with managing the stress of carrying concerns of the work home and into their personal life.

I think often – we care about the kids right? And you care about the staff, and you care about just the people in general. Yeah, and when you care about people you're invested. And you – kind of it takes a toll when you're constantly thinking about somebody. Whether that's good or bad it is just constantly like a thing that kind of occupies you. Where even when you're at home you think about these young people. And you wonder how they're doing. And if there's a particular challenge that they're dealing with then you're going to continue to think about that challenge. Even when you're not at the workplace.

It becomes kind of a personal investment as well. And that can sometimes be a challenge. When it's particularly like difficult circumstances.” (PATHS-43)

When asked to expand upon how their work impacts their mental health, PATHS-43 provides a rich account of how they have pivoted from being drained by the work to being rejuvenated.

...I've developed a pretty good ability to manage my own mental health. I think overall it impacts me positively. Like I do notice just – like I don't know it increases

my own sense of empathy. And it's not a bad thing when I'm feeling these emotions about these young people and what they're going through.

Like it doesn't impact me to the extent that I feel like I need more support than I currently have. But I do naturally – like I do naturally kind of feel emotions that people generally say are negative, but I don't think of them as a negative thing. It's just like I do – I am impacted, but it doesn't impact my ability to go to work. Or go to like, go to home and just kind of live my life. And then I think the positive influence on my mental health far outweighs any negative kind of impacts on my mental health.

Where it's just very rewarding to just be there with them right? And even through the negative, just the quote, unquote ""negative emotions."" It makes me feel OK. Like yes, you know I'm sad, and they're sad. But it's OK. We're here, like it's not a huge you know? The world isn't going to end because of this. We're here, and in this moment. And this too shall pass. Like we'll get through to the next moment.

So I think overall it doesn't have a negative impact on my mental health. I think overall it's been – and it's been a process but I think now it's more positive on my wellbeing than anything else. Yeah, I think I'm yeah pretty good at being able to take breaks as needed. And I think that's partly why I change the way that I work with young people sometimes as needed. And when an institution is kind of not meeting my needs anymore and I'm able to slowly shift out of it. And kind of move on as needed. (PATHS-43)

Familial Responsibilities

This excerpt is profoundly insightful, shedding light on the evolution of this youth worker's approach to achieving greater sustainability in their role. It emphasizes the

understanding that negative emotions are not inherently counterproductive; rather, they are natural aspects of human relationships and can contribute positively to both personal and professional growth. The participant's adaptation in modifying their interactions with young people and institutions to ensure that their own needs are also met is particularly noteworthy. This passage provides an honest view into the persistent challenges of youth work while affirming that these challenges can be counterbalanced by the rewards and positive mental health outcomes of the work. It underscores the importance of intentional approaches that integrate principles of both client care and self-care; however, there are also contexts where the youth worker's personal life consists of more than self-care if they are a primary caregiver in their household. Caring for growing families can add to additional factors for youth workers to navigate in attempting to find an equilibrium in their work and home life. VIZI-15 elaborates on this experience accordingly.

The challenges would be, there's a lot of work to do so it can be very overwhelming. I did end up taking a break at different times and even thinking that I wanted to not do the work full time anymore. It's a lot to see as I'm a mother too. I have my own family and kids that need my time. So that's a challenge. As you get older and I guess you have your own families and there's a lot of need and the workload" (VIZI-15)

The challenges are definitely the work can be very heavy. Also, very, a lot of work. When you sign up for this, there's just a million other things that come on your plate. And it always feels there's, it's very urgent and there's always a deadline, and it's very urgent.

So it's very, its work that can feel very - you're always - it's very urgent. And always kind of a little bit high anxiety in a way it's always a kid this. It's kind of gets

done and this and there's just so much need and so much stuff. So that's part and seeing also the challenges when you're younger, could work. But as you get older, and I'm a mother of two kids, my children myself, and it's hard to sometimes balance that. And maybe with the late evenings, sometimes youth work is done after school or into the evening. So you can be doing that all the time if you have a family, or there's definitely some sacrifices. That can be challenging.” (VIZI-15)

And then again, as a parent, I have my own family, my own kids that are going through their own stuff.

I don't – I sound like a hypocrite. Many in the community, families are suffering, but the people they help are getting their help because they're sacrificing their own family for the work. Because of the late nights and the so much demands. And I just wasn't willing to do that. Because it was affecting my mental health, my wellness. So I had to draw that line in the sand to say, hey, my children are just as important as the children I serve. So they need to get as much as, the best of me as these other young people do. So yeah, that's going to - it's, yeah. It's a lot of work for a lot of little pay at a lot of positions.” (VIZI-15)

In this account, we observe that the overwhelming demands of frontline youth work, coupled with primary caregiver responsibilities, led this participant to reconsider their full-time role in the sector. The challenges of raising a family introduced significant concerns about the sustainability of their full-time involvement. Considering the observed demographic trends, particularly the age profile of most youth workers and the number of years they remain in the sector, it is evident that sustaining personal and familial well-being and security while working in an often under-resourced and highly demanding environment

is more the exception than the rule. However, balancing a family with the high demand of the sector is completely viable, even if it means that the pace of work must be approached in a strategic way, as EDUC-100 reveals,

Well, working for the school board isn't so bad with the working hours, especially now that I have a young child. There is opportunity for me to kind of grow, just looks it's going to take a little bit longer. (EDUC-100)

In fact, having familial responsibilities can actually enhanced the sustainability of Frontline youth work as it provided an opportunity which necessitated the need for the youth worker to be more tactical about compartmentalizing their mental space from the workplace in their home life offering some reprieve for prioritizing their own personal affairs, as EDUC-100 continues to explicate,

For the most part, I try to leave work at work. But it can especially when there's issues or something's going on with a student and their family, it does weigh on you. So sometimes it's hard to make that - draw the line, OK, let's leave it at work till tomorrow. Because I'm worried about my students, I'm always thinking about them. So I do have my own child now and other responsibilities. So I almost find it easier because I'm distracted. I have other responsibilities to do, to take care of. Yeah, it kind of depends how you process and keep what's going on. (EDUC-100)

Fair Compensation

Youth workers continue to demonstrate innovation and resilience in navigating their careers and maintaining their passion for social contributions, despite the precarious nature of the sector. The sector is plagued by unpredictable resourcing and haphazard policy shifts that are often reactionary, leading to instability, high employee turnover rates, and mission drift

among organizations striving to secure funding and survive in volatile political and financial environments. The persistent undervaluation and underinvestment by government, administrative funding, and policy bodies cast a long shadow over the sector, enabling counterproductive dynamics that undermine its stability and effectiveness. Fair compensation, in particular, is essential for the sustainability and well-being of youth workers, particularly those in frontline roles who directly engage with young people. Despite the critical nature of their work, many youth workers are significantly underpaid, with wages often hovering around minimum wage even for those with higher education. This inadequate compensation fails to reflect the cost of living in urban centers such as Toronto, and pay increases seldom keep pace with inflation. The scarcity of permanent full-time positions with benefits further exacerbates the situation, forcing many youth workers to rely on unstable contract or part-time employment.

The challenges extend beyond inadequate pay. The lack of stable, long-term funding for youth-serving organizations leads to widespread job insecurity and high turnover rates. Many positions are precarious, offering little to no benefits or pensions, which further discourages long-term commitment to the field. This undervaluing of youth work is stark, especially when compared to other professions like teaching, where compensation more accurately reflects the importance of the role. The impact of poor compensation on youth workers is profound. Low pay, combined with job insecurity, contributes to burnout, mental health challenges, and ultimately drives many dedicated professionals out of the field. To make ends meet, workers often need to take on multiple jobs, which further hampers their ability to achieve personal and financial goals and adequately provide for themselves and their families. These issues highlight the need for significant improvements in the

compensation and benefits provided to youth workers. Advocacy efforts call for substantial salary increases to ensure a living wage, the creation of more permanent positions with comprehensive benefits, and improved funding for youth-serving organizations. These measures are necessary to support the workers themselves and to recognize and appreciate the vital role they play in shaping the lives of young people.

The following quotes illustrate the experiences of youth workers who face the ongoing challenges of poor compensation and its implications on their professional and personal lives, beginning with insight from CHAMP-115 who provides a sense of the salary compensation for many youth workers.

...if you work in a Residential Treatment Home, you might make \$30 thousand.

That's pennies. Most child and youth workers – people who are – like need two jobs. Even there's some roles – some social work positions – that are out there that are about \$50 thousand a year. And that's a Master's level of education.

So when you think about – that's not – we don't do this for the money, but the money does help – life is expensive. And [laughs] so, it – I feel like it's just not valued and there's no money for it to – obviously there's no money to give. But it's just – I and I don't – that's more of a – that's more of a – that's just a big – suicidal issues – about what we value and who we pay money towards. Who's the one that makes the millions, versus the people who don't? Yes. (CHAMP-115)

CONSEL-54 reinforces this point, stating:

But I find that when I do look at the opportunities for under paid, like \$35000 a year which is crazy, or they're just not something that that I would be interested in. So yeah, it's a tough, I think it's a tough industry to stay in long term.

Because unless you are in a management role, I don't think that there's a lot of growth available. And not everyone wants to be a manager. Lots of people want to be in the frontline work. But yeah, that's been a challenge. (CONSEL-54)

INSPIR-92 plainly declares,

I'm just going to say youth workers are severely underpaid for the work that they are expected to do. (INSPIR-92)

And Connex-53 sarcastically replies,

You know, like yeah, I'm not going to become a billionaire in the social service sector. I don't know any billionaires from the social service sector but if there is, let me know. (CONNEX-53)

The poor compensation is often compared to other roles and social service sectors where participants notice discrepancies.

...if this jobs in this position paid well, like CS [Community Support] workers get paid, I don't think it'd be a question. But it's tough. They want us to - and we do this work, because we have good hearts, but at the same time, we were expected whatnot to be compensated in the way that we deserve. So it's we have to sacrifice things in our personal lives, to do the work that we want to do. That's what I'm going to say is the biggest [challenge], just being honest with you. But if we were talking on a practical level, working is just a disconnect. But no, this doesn't make me want to leave it makes me want to get involved in it more. Just how all the different sectors are so disconnected, we need integrated system, right.

And so maybe it's not necessarily leaving youth work, but moving into policy work to kind of advocate for better conditions on a macro level. As opposed to just doing the - it's helping one person at a time. (NAVI-80)

This quote reinforces the notion of personal self-sacrifice in order to do this “good hearts” work has encouraged this youth worker to pursue advocacy on a larger scale to create better work conditions, and therefore outcomes in the sector. In the next excerpt, this participant continues this examination of financial instability in the sector.

... the pay isn't that great when you're specifically basically at the frontline status. Obviously, if you move up into managerial roles, or I know people working at the City of Toronto, at different levels, you can have good pensions and packages and salaries. However, in my experience working more directly with youth, the further away you get from that is when you start to make more. So if you're passionate about really facilitating and keeping those connections with youth, you kind of get pay out - you get paid graded out if you don't - if you need to - you want to have bigger goals for your own family in your own self financially.

That work just doesn't make sense. So you have to – like me, and I know a lot of others, you do a part time on the side and probably just because you want to. I know people that are professors that they'll work with the program two days a week just because they love it, but it's not their full time anymore. (VIZI-15)

This statement evidences a great disparity between professionals that wish to contribute meaningfully to the youth sector but are unable to do so due to the dismal compensation and benefits, available to employees. This notion of “pay out” and grading or scaling pay according to sectors is showing the disproportionate marginality that Frontline

youth workers are exposed to the closer they are to direct service. This excerpt also underscores the need for many youth workers to be taking on multiple jobs and contracts to stay financially afloat, which adds to the strain and stress of the role, which is already challenging enough supporting young people who made themselves be in situations personal or financial distress. However, though the youth workers in this study are working full-time, there are many who were unable to participate in this study who are relegated to part-time positions and short-term contracts who may face even more drastic financial barriers.

In the open questions of the interview where respondents were asked about their own work, many shared that they are currently working multiple jobs in this sector which is necessary for financial survival.

Respondent #1

They're [youth workers] not getting a fair wage. And because they're not, they have to work two or three different jobs just to make sure they have enough – especially in Toronto..... And that's how it was before I got my role now, and then many of them are still in the same situation. (MENTR-25)

Respondent #2

...I have two, three leave of absence and I'm working at a location. So I usually have four jobs.

You don't get paid for overtime that you work... you accumulate enough hours to book off a day. The pay rate [pause] I make more working as a security

guard than I do working in my field and I have a degree with two minors.” (SUPOR-28)

Respondent #3

... it's difficult to pick a main [job, to discuss for the interview] because I do have more than one. And I think that's always been the case for me. To have multiple kind of things going on.... I guess I'll tell you about two positions. It's not the work itself that is burning me out. But it's the lack of pay for the hours that I put in that hasn't been sustainable. Just to afford living for my own life.” (PATHS-43)

Youth workers have a challenging time reconciling their love of the work with their need for fairly compensated work. This demoralizing factor is so severe that it is a leading cause for youth workers to consider leaving the field.

I mean in terms – I really like the job. I really love helping youth but sometimes I find it challenging to survive... You know so like that most of the youth get jobs. I really – it's not low income but considering inflation and... every year you know how things goes up the pay doesn't move in the same way. So that would be something that will impact in my decision if I would continue to stay in this type of job or if I will do something different. Yeah that's the only thing. (BUILDZ-59)

I am actively working on shifting my career away from youth work, unfortunately. I think I'm going to have to figure out a way to do that myself outside of agencies. Because of the reasons I mentioned, just funding models I think make it so that people like me don't get paid very well for the amount of work that we do, especially because it's an industry where you want people who care about the work, we come to

the work, we care about it, we get it paid really shitty to do it, and then we get burnt out. And so, I have seen there are people ahead of me and older than me that are completely burnt out but kind of stuck in this arena, and for me I just don't see it as a sustainable place for me to exist. So I'm definitely thinking about moving out of it.

(ADVO-17)

Reflecting on the trends related to age and tenure in the sector, this quote is particularly poignant in its depiction of seasoned youth workers feeling trapped and burned out, while newer workers recognize the lack of a sustainable future early in their careers. For work that is both indispensable and profoundly misunderstood, frontline youth workers who comprehend the significance of their roles and the sacrifices they make are especially vulnerable to exhaustion. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the lack of adequate support and understanding of the complexities inherent in their work.

The dedication and passion that draw individuals to this field are often not reciprocated with the same level of respect, care, or enthusiasm from the administrative side. This disconnect leaves youth workers in a position where they go beyond their job descriptions, offering support because they care deeply about the people they serve, even when it takes a toll on their well-being. As one youth worker expressed,

We are supporting in ways that we are not paid to support based on our job description, but because this is people work and because we care, we do the work anyways. And I think that takes a toll on us. I think that's why people get so burnt out. (ADVO-17)

To galvanize support for addressing the deep-seated issue of acute underfunding, youth workers have advocated for fair pay and innovatively imagined the introduction of

regulatory bodies to help establish better work conditions and regulations within their field, as Inno-51 outlines below.

If we were registered, that would definitely help us out a lot and put a lot more validity to us. And I know most of my classmates didn't continue in the field after a year or two after college because of the pay rate for a lot of our jobs are really low and either at like kind of the minimum living wage or just like not enough for us to survive on so we end up working like three jobs and getting burnt out and dealing with our own mental health or health issues that have manifested because of the burnout and the stress. (INNO-51)

Unfortunately, as this advocacy continues, the involuntary abandonment of the youth sector and revolving door continues to cycle as veteran and new talent field experience the stress and demoralization of their work not being appropriately acknowledged or valued in both a literal and figurative sense.

In compromising the longevity of talent in the field, there is a loss of organizational memory, trusted relationships, and the dynamics that inspired frontline workers to enter the field can be soured, interrupting a potentially rewarding and cherished career. Yet, inadequate compensation and personal sacrifices are just one of the many challenges that youth workers face outside of the complexities of their frontline engagements. Structural issues of pay equity, benefits and the notion of “decent work” whereby youth workers have a sense of sustainability, security, safety and dignity in their working roles is severely lacking. However, the structural issues also extend to the realm of physical and mental safety as the organizational duty to provide appropriate and holistic support for youth workers is often insufficient, creating an additional set of demoralizing factors in this work.

Unsupportive: Compromising Physical and Emotional Wellbeing

Everybody's overworked, it's just kind of what's expected, everybody's going to get burnt out and that's just how it is. I don't think it has to be like that... (TRAILZ-23)

The unsupportive subtheme addresses the pervasive and often overlooked challenges faced by youth workers in their professional environments regarding their physical and emotional wellbeing. While physical wellbeing may at times be an area of concern in this line of work, it is the emotional and psychological toll that emerges as the most significant concern. Alarming, these threats often stem not from the youth themselves but from the workplaces and systemic structures that fail to adequately support frontline workers. Youth workers frequently encounter emotional burnout and exhaustion, symptoms of the high demands and intense emotional labor required in their roles. The emotional toll is exacerbated by a lack of sufficient support, inadequate compensation, and a pervasive sense of being undervalued, which collectively contribute to high turnover rates and professional burnout. The absence of adequate mental health support, coupled with insufficient time off and poor work-life balance, further deepens personal obstructions and negatively impacts the well-being of these workers.

The nature of youth work, which often involves dealing with crises and navigating complex systems, places workers at a heightened risk of secondary trauma. The emotional and traumatic experiences they encounter can make it difficult to disconnect from their work, leading to a blurring of personal and professional boundaries that exacerbates stress and burnout. Furthermore, the bureaucratic obstacles and lack of resources that hinder meaningful change within the sector add another layer of frustration and fatigue. On the physical front, some youth workers are also vulnerable to harm due to the unpredictable and

sometimes aggressive behavior from distressed service users. These potential Incidents of physical violence or threats contribute to a heightened sense of fear and insecurity in the workplace. These physical threats may pose immediate risks and have lasting psychological impacts, including hypervigilance and anxiety, which can further deteriorate the mental health of youth workers. While instances of physical may be rare, they are factors that need to be accounted for in addition to how organizations can better protect and support frontline staff who have been harmed. INSPiR-92 points to the need for improved safety measures, stating,

...sometimes when things get hard, for example, I've worked in a DD [Developmental Disabilities] program before. So they have very severe special needs. And it's just sad because a lot of the time they're not in full control of what they're doing. But if we get physically assaulted, that hurts. When we get bit it still hurts. So those kinds of safety measures. (INSPiR-92)

In the following emotional and triggering account from a youth worker who experienced harm and a threat to their life from a young person in distress in a group home setting, Supor-28 vividly illustrates the traumatic journey of prioritizing the well-being of the young person while simultaneously grappling with the subtle yet persistent effects of post-traumatic stress on their own body and mind. This account provides a raw and insightful look into the challenges youth workers face as they navigate their own self-care while being the primary caregivers for others who may also be suffering. The experience underscores the critical need for systemic support and recognition of the emotional toll that this work entails. Supor-28's experience begins with an instance of confrontation with a young person that was responding to a sentimental piece of property that they had that was repeatedly

damaged in the property, and in a rage, the young person threatened to stab the youth worker who they felt was responsible for destroying their artwork intentionally.

Yeah I was working – we had problems with her. She’s had a lot of problems dealing with a foster mom, other people beating or hitting them; but this was only like 10 months into working with her that happened, or like nine months into working with her. We had a really good rapport. That caught me off guard but I’m just like – in terms of like distance, like I was confident that she wouldn’t harm me but it was the fact that she even came with that to me, “Like I’m going to kill you.”

And I was just going to say my coworker was like, “I’m just going to grab my stuff. I think you should step outside.” I was like yeah probably and I just grabbed my stuff and she tried to leave. I think that it was just funny.

It was – look I feel like – I don’t know. This might sound really weird but it was kind of more of – like I just kind of like laughed it off, like I was oh that was crazy. I’ve never seen her that mad at me before, like I wonder how awkward it’s going to be coming back to work. But she got – she ended up being apprehended. A K-9 unit and bomb squad, like everybody had to come. So like I didn’t see her for some time, so that kind of gave me some time to kind of like recuperate because it was like a Thursday so she wasn’t there on the Friday, I was off Saturday and Sunday so I had time. But had I been, like had she not been taken or I had to come into work the next day like I don’t know how that would have looked. But I know subconsciously it’s kind of like I knew– it did affect me.

And this is when I said before the contract ended when I told my boss I think I might switch locations because I was I was like playing a sport with my friends and

for some reason I had like – I don't know I was just – I was – I don't know, I turned around, I turned around, when a ball was thrown my way and I kind of turned around with the ball, and my client at that time was very aggressive and abusive. I think subconsciously it has affected me.

Subconsciously I thought – and subconsciously it affected me because I thought my friends who I've known for like 12 years, not necessarily was going to hit me but I had – like I flinched, I thought something was going to hit me. And he was like, "I'm just throwing you the ball." And I was like, "I know, I know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." And then I kind of had to like take a step back and then it wasn't till the next day where I said, you know what – and I just said, 'It's not that I don't trust you, like it's just my client's been very aggressive and she generally broke things like plates and glass, like it's automatically like broke, hurt, and like pieces covered my head because something hard.' And they're like, 'Oh I see.' (SUPOR-28)

The complex cycles of violence and trauma inherent in youth work cannot be fully captured in a single account, yet this particular narrative provides a glimpse into the multifaceted challenges youth workers face. The account begins with the acknowledgment of the physical abuse endured by a young person within the foster system and evolves into a tense verbal confrontation. This confrontation culminates in the youth being apprehended by police, including canine units, while the youth worker, Supor-28, self-counsels to become more aware of the post-traumatic stress responses that they are grappling with. Despite their assertion of having a good rapport with the young person and a belief that no harm would come to them, the situation escalated, revealing layers of pain and trauma that affected both parties.

SUPOR-28's narrative unveils the complex emotional landscape for both youth and frontline workers. The young person, already feeling violated by having their artwork vandalized, likely perceived a sense of betrayal from the youth worker, whom they had grown to trust. This situation was further complicated from an earlier incident (not included here) where the youth worker accidentally disrupted the youth's art piece by mistake, leading to a misunderstanding that may have fueled the youth's retaliatory behavior. The aggressive arrest of the young person by the police, compounded by feelings of betrayal, may have only deepened a sense of insecurity and mistrust for authority figures. On the other side, Y28 was caught off guard by life-threatening behavior of someone they cared for, later recognizing how the trauma and the recollection of another instance of harm that was briefly mentioned whereby objects were thrown resulting in broken glass covering her head. These instances became imprinted in their mind, surfacing involuntarily during a recreational activity during their personal time. This account highlights the emotional toll on the youth worker and the profound conflict they might feel in reconciling the damage done to their relationship with the young person and the lasting effects of this dramatic experience on their own well-being. In the case of Supor-28, while no direct physical violence occurred, the impact of the confrontation reveals significant gaps in the support systems meant to protect both the youth and the worker. This situation highlights a critical failure in how organizations may address the aftereffects of traumatic incidents, both in terms of the immediate emotional toll and the long-term consequences on mental health and professional sustainability. In Supor-28's case, the lack of such support is evident, as they explain their struggle for accessing workplace benefits:

I am fighting and advocating for myself to get that. Yeah, so that's something I have but technically because we are independent contractors – like I'm transitioning from an independent contractor to a full-time salary base. But when they did offer me my salary it didn't include any benefits. (SUPOR-28)

This statement underscores the systemic neglect that youth workers face, particularly in terms of securing basic benefits and fair compensation, even as they continue to advocate for the well-being of the youth they serve.

The aftermath of this incident should be understood within the broader context of organizational responsibility. While it is not realistic to expect conflicts and challenges in youth work to become nonexistent, there is an obligation for organizations to create safer work environments through preventive safety measures and robust protocols that do not abandon humane and social justice principles. This responsibility must extend beyond immediate crisis management to include suitable access to staff benefits, particularly mental health resources, and appropriate training for staff. These situations become even more precarious for youth workers who are often temporarily contracted. The revolving door of staff, due to the precarious work environment, creates a volatile environment where both the youth and the workers are underserved. Experienced youth workers are often forced out of the sector due to the personal financial constraints referenced earlier, leaving behind a workforce that has less lived experience on the frontline. This constant turnover disrupts the continuity of care for the young people and diminishes the capacity of youth worker teams.

In concluding this reflection on Supor-28's experience (which is varied and layered) it's important to include an additional detail that was not previously quoted which identifies another factor that contributed to the young person's decision to threaten the youth worker –

a demand for financial compensation for the damaged property. During the altercation, the young person threatened to murder the youth worker unless they were repaid (under \$80) for their loss, which adds another layer of complexity to the situation. This dynamic highlights how financial circumstances may significantly impact the lives of both youth and youth workers. The economic security of youth, who may already be experiencing substantial hardship, intersects with the financial vulnerabilities of youth workers, who are often underpaid and deprived of adequate benefits. This intersection is deeply intertwined with broader issues of economic discrimination and classism that disproportionately affect marginalized populations. These complexities are further exacerbated by intersectional identities, where race, gender, and other social factors compound the challenges faced by youth workers in the field. The confluence of these systemic inequities can undermine the economic and emotional well-being of those involved while perpetuating a cycle of obstructions and disenfranchisement. In discussing their challenges with navigating mental health and demanding work cycles, participant Inno-51 explains:

I would say like when I first started in the field it had a pretty big impact on my mental health. Most of us get into the field because we've had some kind of crazy situation happen, like either in our own lives or like witnesses it someone close to us like with mental health issues. So we're not like naïve coming in, but some – I can't say that for everyone. So I had expected to see some things but wasn't really prepared for a suicide attempt or needing to phone the cops or – you know, you can only be called so many R rated words before you're just like straight up annoyed or like dissociating. So it took an impact on my sleep cycles, especially working shift work between overnights and right, when your [taking] what you can get.

So some days you go in at 11:00 a.m. and the next day you're expected to be there for like 7:00 a.m. after you work like a 16-hour. So things like that have a negative toll on like mental health. I know that it kind of made me more aware of my anxiety and depression and I spent the last two years building coping skills to not succumb to it and some days it's a lot easier to put what happened to rest and other days it's like you're brainstorming that 8:30 on a Wednesday night, like "What can I do for this client?" It's like, "I'm not at work, I'm here," right? So that kind of stuff has an impact for sure. (INNO-51)

The weight of the work on Inno-51's health, despite entering the field with prior experiences and empathetic context that may have acclimated them to its demands, included unexpected elements and compounded pressures. These challenges were exacerbated by a work cycle that did not allow for adequate rest, forcing them to make strategic adjustments to endure in the profession. To avoid dissociation and eroding rapport with young people through detachment to cope, it took two years to develop strategies for healthier ways to manage the severe stress – a sensitive time for youth workers to decide if this career is for them. The line between physiological stress from sleep deprivation and mental health are linked as they body and mind require respite, especially in the context of high stress work; yet, time for rest and recovery is often left to youth workers to resolve as the demands from management are more focused on labour efficiency and outputs and the needs of service users can be constant. For this reason, intentional advocacy is needed to reverse the acceptance of youth worker burnout as the inevitable nature of the sector and an inconvenient casualty of the frontline. This perspective of the Social Service Industrial Complex is explained by TRAILZ-23 accordingly,

I think that's why a lot of people do it, and I think why a lot of youth also become youth workers, because there is feelings of fulfillment.... [It is] not always an emotionally safe environment because [youth workers] are usually worked overtime, and I think the nature of non-profits is – non-profit youth workers is, like, you – everybody's overworked, it's just kind of what's expected, everybody's going to get burnt out and that's just how it is. I don't think it has to be like that, you don't have to be.... (TRAILZ-23)

This statement underscores how the supportive factors that contribute to a sense of fulfillment for youth workers is undermined by the unsupportive environment which can lead to instances of harm both mentally and physically. Unfortunately, as TRAILZ-23 explains there is a sense of normalization around the experience of burnout which may be in some instances a reality of empathetic human beings caring for others in distressful circumstances, but regardless of how preventable the initial harm may or may not be, the lack of responsiveness and attentiveness from organizations to ensure that youth worker's wellbeing is regarded and that they feel supported in their work needs urgent correction. Given the lack of support in their work youth workers have often had to resort to leaning on themselves and their peers to navigate emotional challenges in the workplace as REHA-19 explains,

Definitely I think more self-care. I think a lot of – it's actually really interesting and kind of ironic. I think a couple of days ago, maybe I think Wednesday we did a training called Compassion Fatigue and that kind of falls into what I struggled most with, with kind of disconnecting and understanding what I can and can't do for youth or clientele.

But I think part of it is that burnout, right, and we need to take that time to kind of check with ourselves and see how we are and kind of remind ourselves that it's OK to – you know, if you're not OK to see a client just let them know like, “Hey, like I'm really not feeling myself today, I can't do” – like I might just be a little more disconnected.

But I think the main challenge is that I feel like we need to remind ourselves to take care of ourselves first and it's difficult to do so because you're spending a lot of time taking care and kind of worrying about your clients or colleagues and helping them out that you do forget about yourself. And I think not only as youth workers, but I think people in general need to sometimes check yourself and see how you are, really take that time to self-care. (REHA-19)

With the precarious factors of challenging work schedules, potentially working multiple jobs and lacking benefits, the lack of consideration and care for youth worker's needs increases dissatisfaction and obstructions in the role. In the interviews conducted for this study, youth workers were clear on the necessary shifts in policy and practice to address counterproductive elements of their workplaces, as they are individually tasked with managing their own risks of burn out at great costs to their personal wellbeing and hinder their ability to achieve optimum outcomes for youth. One area that youth workers emphasized was the need for more flexibility, autonomy and consideration with time management, as INTER-20 details,

We need to be able to take time off without being questioned, and we need to have good time off. Like, I think this work can be – we can fully immerse ourselves in a 24-7 but we will burn out so fast. And I think burnout is – so my view on burnout is

that it's like a regular occurrence. I probably burn out a couple times a year. Like, a huge – we reach our limit and we have to recharge. I think that's normal for a lot of fields, but it is, you know, I think very prevalent in use work that what happens is people burn out and they push through it, because they don't have access to the care time benefits in their workplace that they need.

And then it has a huge, huge impact on the sector, on the fields, because when we have a whole bunch of workers who reached their limit and went past it and haven't had time to, like, find their joy in the work again, then we see that reflected on the way that they treat the youth. So, this is actually, like, a huge – it's detrimental to the people – the whole point, right?

And because if we just get immersed in that all the time and lose ourselves, then we – again it becomes detrimental to the youth because we start treating them – we forget how to treat them nicely. People might forget to treat them in a kind way or a thoughtful way. And, like, lose that zest or joy for the job. (INTER-20)

Organizational expectations for youth workers to “push through it”, whether implied or explicit, undermine the principles of care and social service that many of these agencies profess to promote. Such contradictions compel frontline staff to “find their joy in the work again” through self-care that may at times be at odds with agency practices, thereby eroding motivating factors that galvanizes youth workers to this vocation. There is also an implication in the respondents account that a lack of trust exists between some frontline workers and their managers, as taking time off for self-care appears to be a sensitive topic that may lead to assumptions of youth workers using their recovery time in work in ways that

do not directly benefit the organizations. INTER-20 provides more insight on this concern, stating.

To the people that we work with, for workers not to have proper safe time off, that they can access, like, pretty comfortably without feeling like they need to be accountable or they have to show that they're sick or they have to, you know? Like, physically sick. Just being able to take a day or two can sometimes even be enough. But I think having access to protected vacation time and protected health time is so, so, so important. Yeah. (INTER-20)

Experiencing a lack of safety and comfort while youth workers “are helping people in crisis a lot or helping people just, like, go through really deep, hard things” (INTER-20) produces an additional barrier for frontline workers to navigate. In this context, youth workers are fighting against barriers for youth while also being compelled to fight against systemic resistance to their efforts, including resistance and barriers experienced within the youth programs themselves. To bring these social justice initiatives into greater alignment, organizations must shift their focus away from reaffirming capitalist models of employment and human resource management, which is fixated on absorbing as much time and effort as possible for the least amount of financial investment, and instead consider the importance of a healthy work-life balance for youth workers who deserve care and consideration, even if resources limitations require longer-term solutions. Organizations and management becoming more proactive and supportive in matters concerning youth worker wellbeing will still require youth workers to access strategies and resources for their self-care. This is a collaborative effort that is at this time far too unbalanced given the severity of work and the high stakes that many frontline workers engage with.

In addition to the emotional strain from worrying about the well-being of service users there are also challenges to youth worker's physical well-being that can be a direct result from this mental stress. Concluding the deeper assessment of INTER-20's experience, it is evident that their crucial work would not have been sustained if they had not taken it upon themselves to close the gaps in care that they required.

Oh my gosh. I'm such a youth worker. [Laughter] So I've had – I worked with youth experiencing homelessness for a long time, which was a lot of crisis. And I loved that work, and I actually did not burn out of it, like, completely, which I kind of like got – I moved away from it beforehand, before I burnt out. But I loved that work....

I always say, like, if that didn't have an impact, like, something – then something's really wrong, right? So, every single time there's a suicide attempt or someone has taken their life, but it's devastating. So that definitely has an impact. I have – I go to therapy regularly. I go to therapy monthly. Plus I have colleagues and support systems that know the type of work that I do. And I have very good, like, stuff in my life that helps me get through that, if that makes sense. Like, very good coping strategies. And I know how to take care of myself. I think not everyone does. Maybe that would be a good training. You know? But, like, self-care is tough for workers.

So, even in my job prior, that was very crisis-heavy and, you know, as though I didn't burn out of it, I knew I can't do this crisis work forever. Like, there's a time limit on that type of work for me – maybe for most people, I think. And that's OK, right? I think that's OK. It's good to have fresh people come in, right?

Even in that job, I miss the youth that I worked with. Like, they are – it's just getting to – and I'm not trying to go, like, all inspirational; I just mean the relational aspect. I gain from that too. (INTER-20)

Finally, INTER-20 recounts an experience where they found it necessary to leave certain employment positions to protect their well-being, highlighting the relational aspect of youth work and the importance of making meaningful contributions. However, this reflection points to a broader issue: the need to understand why youth workers leave the field and how systemic factors influence their decisions. Retention in youth work should not be about enforcing permanence but about ensuring that those who wish to remain in the sector are supported to do so without compromising their economic stability or emotional well-being. These factors are rarely studied in depth because the voices of frontline youth workers are often overlooked in discussions about policy and practice improvements.

Improving retention is not about keeping youth workers in their roles; it is about creating an environment where they can thrive, feel valued, and maintain their mental and emotional health. This requires a strategic overhaul of employment practices within the sector, informed by the direct experiences and insights of youth workers themselves. By integrating their perspectives into the conversation, the sector can develop more effective strategies to retain skilled and passionate workers, ensuring that their talents and knowledge continue to benefit the young people they serve and to ensure that the social justice values of the organizations are upheld in the way they resource and regard frontline staff and the barriers they face inside and outside of the organization.

Disenfranchising: Reinforcing Intersectional and Structural Barriers

...being racialized and being trans, that has affected my ability to get certain positions, and feeling safe, like, applying to certain positions. (TRAILZ-23)

Or, you know, if I'm working with, you know, trans or queer youth, they are always being – they're dehumanized and hurt as they are navigating the system that they still need to survive. So, it doesn't really help. So, seeing that and seeing – knowing that I've been through that sometimes, and also being exposed to, like, stories of trauma that maybe I haven't in the past, that's how there's, like, precarious trauma, because I really go very personal with the youth. So, secondary trauma I guess is how it kind of manifests. (ALZ-102)

Youth workers are often tasked with addressing the systemic inequities that affect the youth in their care, they must also contend with their own experiences of discrimination and marginalization from both internal structural barriers within organizations and external societal prejudices. This complex is particularly severe for youth workers who share lived experiences with the young people they serve, as they navigate the intricacies of providing critical support while also grappling with meeting their own needs. The subtheme of disenfranchisement and discrimination in the youth work sector highlights the systemic and structural barriers that may impact youth worker's well-being and their ability to work effectively. These barriers, often rooted in intersectional issues such as racism, classism, and even dynamics of vocational stigma, contribute to a pervasive sense of alienation and marginalization among those who are dedicated to supporting vulnerable youth.

Despite their essential role, many youth workers find themselves excluded from meaningful participation in organizational decision-making with their experience and expertise undervalued by funders, policy makers, and program administrators. This exclusion

undermines their ability to advocate effectively for the youth they serve and may exacerbate feelings of disenfranchisement, as they are forced to navigate a work environment that often fails to recognize their competencies, contributions and at times their full humanity. Many of the respondents identified the most challenging and discouraging factor of their work being systems navigation, as opposed to any difficulty in the work itself, as CHAMP-115 explains,

Working in systems makes me want to quit.... and then sometimes the personal toll it can take – the emotional toll it can take.... Heavy – sometimes that makes me want to just find a different kind of work.

And other than that, what I love – honestly I love it.... my job is quick paced. I love the fact that it's fast paced. I love the opportunity to engage with youth and be somebody that they – that can be a support to them. I love watching kids go from struggling to graduating and making it through all their struggles that they might be experiencing. I just love it. I love – and I love that it's not the same – the work is not the same every day. (CHAMP-115)

CHAMP-115 expresses a deep love for the dynamic and ever-changing nature of their work while echoing the supportive factors presented earlier in this study. However, they also highlight the significant emotional toll that the job takes on them, which is rooted in the systemic challenges inherent in the work. These systems refer to the broader structures that create restrictions, gaps, and barriers for young people and the systems within which youth workers themselves live and operate. These workers often find themselves compelled to either resist or comply with workplace dynamics that can sometimes feel counterproductive. CHAMP-115 further contextualizes this concern,

[The] part that's hard, is that you work in a system and policies. Do you know what I mean? There's policies that you need to follow and sometimes our personal ethics kind of don't always fit – you know what I mean? They don't always complement each other. But you need to find a way to work within a system – that is changing – but yet still exists in the way that it exists. (CHAMP-115)

As CHAMP-115 questions whether the interviewer grasps the conflicts between personal ethics and organizational policies, there is an underlying implication that the disjunction they are referencing is difficult to articulate in formal terms. This highlights the necessity of studies like this, which aim to delve into the concerns raised by youth workers and work towards developing a conceptual and shared language to unpack these insidious dynamics. Such dynamics often hinder the progress of both youth and youth workers who, while aligned with organizational values, may have different priorities when conflicts arise. Organizations may default to a greater loyalty to liability management rather than prioritizing community interests, as their survival is often perceived to depend more on appeasing policy and governing bodies. In this corporate framing of the Social Services Industrial Complex, service users are sometimes viewed as part of the product, or ultimately as "clients." This commerce-focused lens is incongruent with a community-focused lens, leading youth workers to “find a way to work within a system” that accomplishes multiple objectives without encroaching on the wellbeing of the youth being served and their own moral integrity. These dynamics are complex, with no easy way to label systems or organizations as entirely righteous or completely backwards, INTER-20 discusses this diversity of challenges across diverse workplace settings and systems within the youth sector.

And then I think things that are difficult throughout the field and the work that I've done are often interactions with other systems, a lot of the time, actually. So, I worked alongside shelters for a long time – youth shelters – and the way those systems are set up just seem to be – they make it really hard for, like, healing or growth or safety a lot of the time. And not all of the time, of course; not in every case. But I see it as a general statement. And then trying to navigate those systems from, you know, a healing or mental health perspective can be – it can be, like, an uphill battle.

So I'm pretty happy with the agency that I work at and the way I'm treated there and the work that – the freedom to work that I have, but I know that in my, like, close interactions with other systems, it's not the case and it can, like, hurt the youth.”

(INTER-20)

Even though INTER-20 feels a certain sense of freedom in their current workplace, they are clear that systems navigation is generally “an uphill battle” with the worst-case scenarios potentially creating more hurt than healing. In stating that health, growth and safety may be compromised within the structures of some workplaces and sub-sectors in youth work, INTER-20 underscores the danger of contradictory dynamics that may produce violent experiences and destructive consequences for young people and communities, regardless of well-meaning intentions or declarations by agencies and programs. This phenomenon will be conceptually explored in the following chapter as “BeneViolence,” a tactic to preserve social dominance by framing the structural violence of the status quo as benevolence, thereby absolving accountability and undermining the comprehension and operationalization of systemic change for social justice. This systemic violence re-produces negative outcomes for

socially disenfranchised young people and communities by re-cycling oppressive and discriminatory practices under the guise of noble social service interventions, reifying the discourse of the dispossessed as pathological underachievers in a neoliberal landscape of free and open opportunity. The vilification of exploited groups relegates them to a position of persistent “impoverishment,” restricting their access to power and the right to “empower.”

In addition to creating unjust work conditions, frontline youth workers who identify with socially marginalized groups may experience direct personal challenges in finding safety and acceptance within their organizations, particularly when their intersecting identities, such as being racialized or transgender, placing them at greater risk of discrimination. The emotional toll of these experiences, compounded by the exposure to the trauma and dehumanization faced by the youth they serve, can lead to severe emotional strain. Organizations must recognize and actively address the intersectional oppressions faced by their staff to ensure that all youth workers are supported in a manner that acknowledges their full humanity and the critical value of their work. TRAILZ-23 speaks to barriers that they encountered due to their intersectional identities,

...being racialized and being trans, that has affected my ability to get certain positions, and feeling safe, like, applying to certain positions. And maybe feeling a bit limited to, like, what my options are, what organizations can I work for. (TRAILZ-23)

TRAILZ-23 provides a stark example of blatant discrimination that limits their access to fair and meaningful work in a sector where they engage with some of the most disenfranchised groups of young people while also being part of one of the most marginalized communities themselves. The intersectional identity of racism and transphobia

combines with other factors, leading to multiple assaults on human dignity and access to essential means of survival, beyond the psychological violence housing insecurity, physical assault and social alienation are experiential risk factors. This example also highlights how frontline youth workers are often limited or restricted from accessing additional roles, particularly leadership positions, due to systemic marginalization within the very structures that utilize their labor to attempt to reduce barriers for others. Unfortunately, some organizations leverage the empathy and rapport of youth workers with shared lived experiences to establish credibility in ways that accelerate program outputs and success stories, rather than addressing or advocating for structural reform. The utilization of frontline youth workers in these contexts frame them as disposable and precarious, as the youth participation themselves are conceptually reduced to attendance numbers and evaluation reporting for funding obligations. As youth workers are restricted from advancing beyond frontline roles or contributing to policy and funding decisions, barriers and contradictions in the social service industrial complex persist. ADVO-17 addresses this tokenizing practice in a broader statement on the “indecent” nature of contemporary youth work, stating:

...think the barrier is the fact that they are often contract positions. My job is contract position and so there's a definite end date of this kind of work. It's low paying, the hours are not the greatest and so I think those are all barriers to the work being decent. And then the other piece is that, you know, people are joining organizations that want to hire people for the sake of diversity and tokenism. And that it already is a set up for people not to be able to benefit from doing the work, and so I think that's pretty indecent but that's kind of the nature of the work right now. (ADVO-17)

The structural violence of leveraging the emotional and psychological labour of youth workers without securing safety or dignity becomes further compounded when youth worker's identities are integrally tied to their outreach objectives.

Well, for me, specifically, I work in a program where that is targeting people who are close, like, population who is close to my identity. So, that makes it kind of harder to, you know, to struggle, to see them struggle... I work with *** youth who have been through war and that can be, you know, triggering or it's not easy mentally.... I've been through a lot of the issues that they are facing in terms of racism and marginalization, racialization, and, you know, being asked to change in order to access the life – in order to have access to life here. Yeah, and being dehumanized and all that stuff, and not treated with the respect of humans who are, like, more privileged or White people.

Or, you know, if I'm working with, you know, trans or queer youth, they are always being – they're dehumanized and hurt as they are navigating the system that they still need to survive. So, it doesn't really help. So, seeing that and seeing – knowing that I've been through that sometimes, and also being exposed to, like, stories of trauma that maybe I haven't in the past, that's how there's, like, precarious trauma, because I really go very personal with the youth. So, secondary trauma I guess is how it kind of manifests. (ALZ-102)

ALZ-102 describes the challenges they face in sharing experiences of oppression with the young people they serve, while also recognizing these shared experiences as an opportunity to work constructively towards addressing injustice and advocating for systemic change. However, the psychological toll of providing such specialized (and under

recognized) support requires organizations and the broader sector to be intentional about ensuring that youth workers feel more supported in these potentially vulnerable circumstances and develop better resources to motivate those who are simultaneously navigating their own direct experiences of oppression, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. It is essential that the violence and emotional injuries that youth workers endure are neither ignored nor underestimated, as these factors critically impact their well-being and effectiveness in supporting others.

In the earlier example of tokenism impacting youth workers' sense of being valued by organizations primarily for their ability to appeal to young people, VIZI-15 extends this observation by noting the lack of racial diversity within organizations that do not proportionally hire staff reflecting the communities they serve, which may approach “diverse” hiring from a tokenising practice that are more for organizational optics than accountability. These are the same communities from which organizations develop grants and secure funding, further highlighting the discrepancy between the funding priorities and the actual commitment to diversity and inclusion within the workforce.

A lot of organisations, I guess, to wrap that up, are serving communities of colour, but the organization's themselves do not have a lot of people of colour within them. So that creates its own power dynamics, cultural misunderstandings, overt and actual, anti-black or anti indigenous racism. And a lot of microaggressions. So that's not a place with people who are doing this work. That's also - that takes a toll on people. I was very intentional about the people I worked with. And the places I worked, so I wouldn't stay in spaces like that personally. (VIZI-15)

This observation underscores the broader issue of organizations leveraging the identities of frontline workers for credibility without providing them with meaningful opportunities for advancement or influence within the organization. Such restrictions stifle the inclusion of voices informed by lived experiences, thereby limiting the knowledge and insights that could benefit the entire sector. This can discourage for youth workers and impact how youth engage and envision themselves relating to these support systems and professionals, as Mentr-25 explains.

...there's not enough representation of people of colour... [in] positions, or a place in power at the schoolboard that a lot of kids can aspire to. I know that's the case for me, right. And I'll be truthful... I've been to schoolboard for a long time and I can count on my hand maybe how many other – I'm going to say this, but black – definitely black male teachers, or professors or who I worked with. I mean that's just part of my journey, but I know talking to other people they feel the same too, right. (MENTR-25)

Mentr-25 highlights the lack of proportional representation in a regional schoolboard, particularly of racialized individuals in positions of authority. Mentr-25 reflects on the underrepresentation of Black, specifically Black male, teachers and professors within the schoolboard, and exemplifies the discomfort and apprehension in addressing anti-Black racism in the field as they take a pre-emptive pause to declare “I'm going to say this...” before naming the racialized group they had in mind. The difficulty in addressing these issues more freely is indicative of a youth sector that rightly prioritizes the needs and well-being of young people, but too often takes the wellbeing of youth workers and other staff for granted, assuming that operating from a place of self-sacrifice and be its own reward. Such

framing often overlooks the systemic violence and problematic dynamics that undermine the well-being of frontline youth workers identified in this and the following sections.

Organizational culture takes pride in operating on shoestring budgets and under neoliberal austerity measures, but this approach may consequently perpetuate harmful dynamics that prioritizes organizational prosperity above the ultimate relational impact of service delivery.

Youth workers who are expected to deliver beneficial services within a structure that at times feels antagonistic to their well-being creates a complex struggle against structural violence that is often difficult to articulate or address, as the power dynamics within organizations tend to favor maintaining the status quo. Those in positions of power, who may not share the lived experiences of disenfranchised youth workers, may perceive critical perspectives and demands for change as intimidation rather than invitations for growth. This dynamic reinforces a culture of silence and compliance, where youth workers who challenge these norms are seen as disruptive rather than constructive. Moreover, Mentr-25's perspective on underrepresentation is not an isolated experience but is shared among other youth workers who they have engaged in conversation. This suggests that these issues lack effective platforms for advocacy and consciousness raising and that the nature of this work may be too siloed. The temporal and cyclical nature of programs and contracts within the sector further complicates this, as youth workers may find themselves moving from one temporary position to another, making it difficult to create lasting impact or to challenge entrenched cultural norms in the sector. These realities stand in stark contrast to the personal supportive factors what prioritize reciprocity and relationship building and gather a sense of purpose and fulfillment through cooperative gains and co-empowerment. Which demonstrates why organizations and leadership must reflexively challenge the benevolence

that may emerge amongst their good intentions and pursue a deeper, more systemic examination of the contradictions and demoralizing forces within the youth sector.

Anti-Black racism in particular which has a particular context in Central Ontario as much of the development and grants are focused on inner-city communities that face barriers which often speak to Black youth in terms of barriers, but these communities remain underserved and the systemic link to the causes and sustenance of the issues is not addressed. The racism and anti-Black racism include youth and communities which in turn includes youth workers – as experiencing these discriminatory dynamics.

Racism and tokenism creating unsafe and toxic work environments. The theme of race, anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in particular, is threaded throughout the 25 interviews and could very well constitute its own study for youth workers in local regions. More studies on this experience for Black youth workers is certainly needed as well as a complex study for Indigenous communities as well which factor in the relevant contexts of the unique experiences and shared dynamics of power through intersectional and critical lenses.

ADVO-17 discusses how anti-Black racism impacts their work with youth on an embodied and emotional level.

Yeah, it impacts my mental health. I think I support youth all day who are facing – some of them are facing the same or similar issues to me trying to survive in the city, and so the work is very close to home. And that means that I feel pretty burnt out, that my mental health suffers and at times my physical health suffers. Yeah, absolutely I think the work that I do just by way of how close I am to it as a Black guy doing this

work, working with other young Black guys, like there's so many layers for me and it definitely impacts my mental health. (ADVO-17)

While the “many layers” of systemic oppression leading to burn out and personal (and communal) suffering experienced by frontline youth workers are taxing on their mental health, ADVO-17 responds to anti-Black racism by reaffirming his relationships and identity in his work with youth. He goes on to state,

...I'm a spiritual person; I feel connected to my ancestors. And so, I think the ways that connecting with, you know, the Black youth definitely is a positive for my mental health. But like for my spirit, for my connection to Blackness for my connection to my ancestry. So that stuff is nourishing, despite the fact that the reasons we're coming together... (ADVO-17)

While there may not be much space taken up in mainstream youth programs or studies in understanding the spiritual and ancestral resiliency of youth workers operating in oppressive social contexts, youth worker's experiences and responses to their working dynamics is incredibly rich and varied. As ADVO-17 drew on his personal and interpersonal resources to benefit from his shared identity with youth and community, his situated connection became “nourishing” even though the surrounding systemic factors continued to be draining.

On a broader level, youth workers have created programs and spaces where personal and communal needs are centred to combat the toxic work environments and institutions which have tokenized and exploited Black, Indigenous and racialized communities, even under the guise of fighting for them. Returning once more to VIZI-15's perspective, who shared concerns about underrepresentation of racialized communities in the sector, she

reflects back to a full-time position that she had with an organization that better represented her community.

...I was lucky though, but I know others that didn't [like] their work environments, they found them toxic. And I'm - just I - this happened, my team was predominantly people of African descent. Our manager and high-ups were.

So we didn't have those tensions with the work that we did. Which is why we're here, and we didn't have to face any microaggressions or challenges to our work. Maybe our manager did because he was in other more white spaces. But that wasn't, that didn't have, that didn't feel toxic, or trying to advocate for our youth.... So I also have been very privileged, I was lucky that I just found myself working in really great spaces. I know a lot of people have. So I did enjoy, do enjoy when I was full-time doing that work. (VIZI-15)

VIZI-15 speaks directly to the challenges experienced in environments where underrepresentation and anti-Black racism disrupt the work. These disruptions manifest as so-called microaggressions, which may manifest as challenges to the credibility of Black youth workers, and stereotypical projections that force them to navigate their professional spaces with caution and repression. The burden of having to conform to certain behaviors or suppress aspects of cultural and shared identities to gain acceptance is particularly heavy, especially in a society where anti-Black racism persists.

Although the Black community is incredibly diverse, and no single way to express this identity exists, the racist projections and expectations placed on Black youth workers and youth often lead to them being underestimated and challenged, rather than being given the benefit of the doubt that their Caucasian or "othered" racialized colleagues might receive.

VIZI-15 also highlights that work efforts and advocating for the wellbeing of young people was compromised by the toxic dynamics of anti-Black racism, creating considerable frustration, particularly when efforts to initiate substantial change are met with resistance or are ignored altogether. Referring to the manager likely having to navigate predominantly “white spaces” in gatherings of people with greater influence, exemplifies how structural problems are deeply embedded and can only be addressed with intentional strategies.

Critical youth programs often struggle to sustain themselves and are frequently compelled to justify their existence in a sector that has historically supported the status quo rather than addressing the root causes of structural violence. The sector’s focus tends to be on responding to pathologized consequences of this violence, rather than on dismantling the systemic barriers that perpetuate the disenfranchisement of individuals and communities. Despite a profound commitment to their work and the youth they serve, many youth workers find the prevailing conditions untenable. These workers often enter the field driven by a deep sense of empathy and commitment, informed by their own lived experiences of navigating systemic barriers. Moreover, the absence of diverse and supportive leadership exacerbates the challenges faced by youth workers. Without managers and supervisors who understand the lived experiences of the communities they serve, youth workers may find themselves unsupported in their roles, leading to feelings of disenfranchisement and demoralization. This lack of support is especially concerning for those in precarious or contract positions, where the risks of burnout and turnover are even higher.

Youth worker’s dedication to their vocation often compels them to exceed the standard expectations of their roles, yet this heightened level of commitment makes it increasingly difficult to establish boundaries and decline additional responsibilities. While

there remains a strong desire among many to continue in the field, there is an increasing recognition that without substantial systemic changes, the unsustainable demands and social justice contradictions of the sector will remain as well. These issues are compounded by broader organizational and systemic challenges. The instability of funding for programs and positions generates ongoing uncertainty, while the disparity between the demands of the work and the compensation provided contributes to a pervasive sense of undervaluation among workers. There is an urgent need for enhanced support mechanisms, improved benefits, and the development of policies that more effectively promote a balance between professional responsibilities and personal well-being within organizations, in order to address these systemic challenges. Youth workers deserve to feel safe and supported within their organizations and in the broader social contexts. This requires a paradigm shift that prioritizes the inclusion of youth workers' voices in decision-making processes, ensuring that their work is valued, their well-being is protected, and their contributions are recognized as vital to the success of youth programs. By addressing these challenges, the sector can move towards a more equitable and supportive environment for both youth workers and the young people they are committed to serving.

Much recent research has raised concerns about job quality among human service workers in times of austerity, identifying threats to pay rates, job security autonomy and control in feminized care industries (Baines et al., 2014; Cunningham et al., 2014; Palmer and Eveline, 2012). Institutional theories of job quality note how power relations between employees and employers, and employees' experiences of work, are shaped by higher level institutional structures, including national employment regimes and management practices (Gallie and Ying, 2013). In this approach, new public management (NPM) is framed as a

threat to conditions of frontline human service work, as it can reshape work processes and employment relations in public organizations, and in the non-government organizations they contract with (Baines et al., 2014; Cunningham et al., 2014).”

Onerous: Unsustainable Working Conditions

...a lot of these homes take advantage of youth workers.... working the shit out of them and then coming back and not being respected. (MENTR-25)

Frontline youth workers frequently grapple with immense pressure from the demanding nature of their roles and a pervasive lack of adequate support from leadership and the broader organizational structure. This absence of support is exhibited through insufficient guidance, poor communication, and disregard for the well-being and professional development of youth workers. The disconnect between management and those on the front lines creates a critical gap in understanding the true needs and challenges of the work, leaving youth workers to navigate these complexities without adequate guidance, which also compromises morale. Furthermore, the imposition of administrative tasks and evaluative measures, often without consultation or consideration of the workers’ input or workflow, further burdens youth workers, detracting from the relational and dynamic aspects of their roles.

These working conditions have profound consequences, leading to high levels of burnout, emotional exhaustion, and potential attrition as the high demands placed on youth workers, coupled with the lack of institutional support, severely compromises the process and outcomes of their labour. These demotivating factors are exacerbated by the absence of adequate mental health resources, employment insecurity, poor compensation, and the expectation to perform under unsustainable conditions as a seemingly disposable workforce.

The onerous work and unsustainable working conditions prevalent in the youth sector are actively detrimental to the well-being and professional longevity of those who are committed to the vocation. In addition to the challenging work conditions, the effectiveness and sustainability of youth work are often undermined by a significant lack of support, leadership, and collaboration within organizations. Many youth workers find themselves in environments where management, disconnected from the realities of frontline work, fails to provide the necessary guidance and support. This disconnect is exacerbated by poor communication, a lack of transparency, and an organizational focus that prioritizes metrics over the well-being of staff.

In speaking to the challenging conditions of their work and the personal (mental health) and professional (work precarity) that comes from these contexts, VIZI-15 provides insightful detail.

And what could affect my wellness is, yeah the deadlines and everything's rushed and there's so much pressure to show up and you got - your one roll, you're doing 30 things. And then as soon as one thing wraps up before you have a time to even sit and reflect, and go over what went well, and what didn't. And even take a moment, little breaks, and say, Wow, that we just did this program after this year. And let's celebrate, and let's go over and talk about what went wrong and what went well. And not just a one two meeting and checking it off.

While we know time for real to reflect, and a break for everybody to regroup. When I've been in a spaces where that wasn't happening. And that was - I got burnt out and I left. I came back sometimes. And then as I'm only going to come back part time, are you not going to hire me as a consultant because I can't work in the capacity

nine to five in the way that you want. There needs to be pause and time to breathe in this work. This work is different than being a cashier at Metro. And so that affected my negative health mental - my wellness, I would say. That was a challenge. (VIZI-15)

VIZI-15 describes the overwhelming burden of managing multiple tasks and the lack of work-life balance, which had a significant negative impact on their mental health. This situation underscores how youth workers often have to take their well-being into their own hands to sustain their roles. In this case, the unsustainable work environment led the youth worker to make the decision to leave the program. Although they eventually returned, it was only in a part-time capacity. This choice was not driven by a preference for part-time work but rather by the recognition that the full-time environment was untenable and did not allow them to effectively achieve and celebrate both small and large successes. The inability to have their accomplishments acknowledged and effectively evaluated eroded VIZI-15's motivation and hindered a deserved sense of fulfillment. Youth work programs that fail to recognize the importance of time flexibility and the need to protect frontline supportive factors chronically miss the opportunity to leverage the experience and time of veteran youth workers more effectively, leading to a cycle of turnover where new talent is drained rather than nurtured and invested in. This may mean that organizations may have to challenge themselves in considering traditional 9-to-5 schedules and status quo workplace culture which must balance program protocol without compromising relationship-building and wellbeing. Ironically, despite youth workers' efforts to go beyond the clock with mental, emotional, and physical exertion, they are often perceived as not working hard enough, further exacerbating burnout. For VIZI-15, maintaining their well-being required stepping

away from the work altogether, as the conditions did not support sustained motivation or the capacity to perform their duties in a meaningful way.

INNO-51 shares their experience where compensation was appropriate, but the ability to keep a contract was highly volatile.

It's like very high expectations and you're putting a lot in for like little returns.... But the pay was decent. The team that I worked with was not, though. It was a lot of agency staff or getting called in, so you never really knew who you'd be working with and often you might have one permanent staff or no permanent staff, there are relief staff and agency staff that are going to man the house for the weekend and that's usually when shit hits the fan. But yeah, typically a lot of the jobs that I've seen right now for CYCs they're under paid and they don't really offer a lot of permanent positions or full-time work that I've noticed. Yeah, it's like I understand that the way the world works is typically right, you start with something on a one-year contract and if they're good, they like you, and you can stay kind of deal and those might give you permanent with benefits and stuff.

But it seems like currently that is the one year has been extended to two or three years of contract work before you maybe get in permanent if you have enough seniority or check enough boxes, it's just kind of like things aren't – it's not looked on at like the merit of the person, like how did this person work with the team, how did this person work with the clients, it's more like, well, did this person – do they speak French? Then they get an extra point in their interview. You know, it's much more – it's cold. It takes the person out of the interview and looks just at – I don't

know, I guess the qualifications which are important, but you can be a crappy child and youth worker, so it's like that in any field. (INNO-51)

INNO-51 critiques the evolving hiring practices within the sector, highlighting how the process has become increasingly "cold," with a greater emphasis on ensuring future hires meet performative metrics and standardized criteria rather than prioritizing candidates who possess a strong rapport with young people and alignment with the ethical values of the program and community. This professionalized approach to hiring may inadvertently exclude frontline youth workers who, while highly motivated and talented, may not have had the same level of access to accredited programs as their counterparts. Revisiting the four themes of common entry points into the youth sector (Experience, Empathy, Education, and Epiphany) those whose primary approach is grounded in Experience and Empathy may find fewer sustainable opportunities than those who enter through Education or Epiphany, particularly if their serendipitous entry into the sector is bolstered by academic qualifications, even in unrelated fields. Consequently, someone with an advanced degree in an unrelated discipline may have a better chance of obtaining employment than a youth worker who has been deeply embedded in the work and communities they serve for much of their life. The point here is not to suggest that any one of these workers is inherently better than another, but to emphasize the need for balancing hiring and retention practices through the recognition of lived experience, demonstrated care, and commitment, which may be validated through relational ties rather than traditional resume credentials.

Although Inno-51 acknowledges that their pay was "decent," they also note that higher qualifications are not necessarily being rewarded with higher compensation. GYDZ-

104 confirms the insecure landscape of the youth sector, sharing their feelings of fortune for obtaining employment directly out of school, but lamenting the lack of opportunities.

So, I was incredibly blessed and had this job fairly soon after I graduated. But in my search for decent work a lot of the barriers, I think, were just like – there were really only contract positions available and no full-time permanent positions. The contracts were often approaching full-time but not quite there. And so there wasn't really a sense of stability at that point. But, you know, I originally I thought I would have to kind of cobble together a couple of different contracts just to make ends meet, knowing that this seems to be sometimes how social services works. And it's simply because funding isn't available. Or, you know, you can only cover a mat leave and you can't offer full-time permanent positions that way. (GYDZ-104)

The high-demand structures in youth work, which fail to adequately appreciate the significant effort, time, and personal emotional investment required, contribute to the obstruction of those committed to the field. These structures often overlook the relational aspects of the work, further exacerbating the issue. At its worst, these conditions foster a sense of exploitation among youth workers, who may feel used by the social service industrial complex, as illustrated by Mentr-25's account of their experience in a group home setting.

So, I think a lot of these homes take advantage of youth workers. Like took advantage of me and I know certain guys who I know who work around the homes and that, so you know working the shit out of them and then coming back and not being respected. By management... right they say oh yeah you're doing the work with the kids or whatever, but when it comes to you know a fair wage, or a promotion they

say, “Oh no we can’t afford to have you”, right. “We can’t afford you”, right.

(MENTR-25)

While grievances regarding ineffective or obstructionist managers and supervisors are a common concern among the respondents in this study, the toxicity within these workplace relationships is deeply rooted in the structural factors of the social service industrial complex. Managers and supervisors often contribute to the creation of barriers (obstructions) for youth workers because they are positioned to enforce, monitor, and enact organizational policies that can sometimes feel counterproductive, exclusionary, and disenfranchising to frontline staff. However, the core issue extends beyond the personal dynamics of these roles, encompassing the broader responsibility of those in leadership positions to resist and advocate for structural change. Managers and supervisors must align with youth workers and leverage their positions to serve the interests of the most vulnerable populations and those who support them. If they fail to do so, they risk engaging in "benevolent" activities, where their actions inadvertently uphold and gatekeep the problematic dynamics of structural violence within these often-unquestioned systems. As PATHS-43 explains,

...supervisors have treated me well, but it's just the conditions have been really poor in previous workplaces. That's been kind of a big challenge. Yeah, just obscene hours, or you know, lack of staff and then safety concerns. You know, lack of support if any kind of incidents do happen. And any injuries happen.

Some agencies are not even on WSIB. So there's lack of coverage for long-term support for injuries. You know just general wellbeing. And then you care about the kids. So you put them first, and you'll kind of do anything. And sometimes the agencies take advantage of that.

So that's a challenge. And I guess also just lack of diversity, like diversified support, and diversity in general. I know that our youth, like the staff are often not reflective of the youth. And then in turn the supervisors, the leadership within organisations are not reflective of any diverse staff that you may have. And then there's a lot of issues with retention, and a lot of issues with just supervision.

Effective management of issues regarding you know, racism, or disability or like anything. If your leadership are not kind of representative of that, or understanding those issues then the staff when you're trying to bring in these diverse staff, they are also not supported. So then they may not stay within the agency. But at the same time they may not be able to support the young people again without effective kind of top, bottom support. (PATHS-43)

Capture by this participant's comment is a thorough examination of the dynamics that create counterproductive work conditions for youth workers provides crucial insights, affirming many of the personal obstruction factors mentioned earlier, including the lack of support and safety. PATHS-43 also echoes concerns about disenfranchisement, highlighting the lack of representation, empowerment, and the reinforcement of intersectional oppression (including racism and disability) that are perpetuated within the sector. Additionally, PATHS-43 points out how agencies may exploit the empathetic motivations of youth workers, using them to achieve program objectives while neglecting vital components of youth worker well-being, thereby reinforcing structural violence within the sector. In their statement, PATHS-43 stresses the critical need for effective management and accountability through "top-bottom support." While it is important not to pathologize managers in the context of youth worker grievances, their role is crucial and cannot be understated when

understanding and addressing both opportunities and challenges within the youth sector, as INTER-20 explains in their observations and proposal for what is needed to improve the sector.

A full systemic overhaul. [Laughter] That's the answer. No. But personally – you can put that in there. It's important, though. Put it in the research, or the data. [Laughter] It is the thing that has been helpful and I think would have – if I didn't have this would make it harder, is the supportive work environment. So having, you know, a manager, supervisor, that really understands and is able to support me and has the skills to support me doing all of this very intense work and also values my, like, more political perspective on all of this is very helpful. My, you know, who values, like, [AOP - Anti-Oppressive Practice] in this work and integrating it and not just like as a – like, [AOP - Anti-Oppressive Practice] training for my supervisors for me and integrating that into the work has been incredibly valuable and has helped, like, make that more possible, if that makes sense.

So if I didn't have that, then that lens or that support, then this would be much harder. And there was a period of time where I had a supervisor that was not as versed or comfortable, like, bringing that lens into the work. And it was a short period of time but during that period of time it was really difficult, actually. It was difficult to navigate things and difficult to get support or to feel, like, supported. Because when you're working, like, at a mental health agency for youth, like, all of these other factors and intersectionalities have to come into play. And if we're not thinking about them, then we're not – like, it feels a little overwhelming. But when we have that,

like, having that knowledge and understanding makes me feel more prepared to navigate all of that. (INTER-20)

INTER-20 literally writes themselves and their perspective into this research project to emphasize that work environments require supportive, understanding, and critically engaged management to cultivate healthier workplaces, as they call for systemic change and accountability. Even in their laughter, as they acknowledge the fourth wall of this research work, they speak to the political context of their work, using this response as a form of advocacy. Again, the challenge here is not based on managers or supervisors as individuals (some of whom are former frontline workers themselves or continue to engage in frontline work), but rather the unpacking of covert barriers that are structurally entrenched. However, if supervisors and youth workers alike are not being critical and actively working towards change, they risk reaffirming the status quo dynamics of latent oppression and BeneViolence in organizational structure, as Consel-54 explains.

And I think I just really lucked out with one of the few fabulous managers within the organisation. But I think overall, what I hear from my colleagues and friends who work in different departments, it is very toxic work environment. There's a lot of favouritism. If you're job developing, it's very cutthroat, because you have a target you have to meet. So instead of everyone working together to collaborate, people kind of unleash on each other and don't do what's best for the clients, they just are trying to hit their targets and it causes a lot of issues. So yeah, it's tricky, because obviously I want to be able to continue doing this work. And I think a lot of my co-workers feel the same way. And yes, we get paid OK, but we don't have a lot of the support in place that we need.

And for most of my co-workers, with the exception of people on my team, most of us don't have a supportive manager, don't have someone that they can go to when they're overwhelmed or when they need help. Yeah, it's frustrating. I know there's been a situation where someone was really struggling with their mental health and was in a really terrible place. And instead of getting support from that manager, they were penalised for it. So things like that, I just - I don't know if this is just a - I guess specific thing or if all organisations are this toxic, but yes, it's definitely a toxic work environment. We have a pretty high turnover rate. (CONSEL-54)

CONSEL-54 reflects on the rare experience of finding a manager who was "fabulous," contrasting this with the more common experiences they've heard from colleagues and friends about the prevalence of toxic work environments. These environments often emphasize metrics within a highly competitive atmosphere, which detracts from the genuine care of the "clients" and raises concerns about the sustainability of the work. Even when compensation is deemed adequate, the lack of support, especially from management, creates significant frustration and even potential harm given the lack of mental health supports. In worst-case scenarios, this lack of support can produce additional harm rather than opportunities for recovery, contributing to what might be described as an epidemic of toxicity in the sector. This environment produces high turnover rates, a clear indicator of the professional obstructions that plagues the field, accentuating the need for more work to be done to understand and reduce barriers to effective and sustainable frontline youth work.

The toxicity within these work environments stems from various factors, including poor management, uncritical staff, problematic structures, and organizational culture and policies. Each of these elements must be scrutinized, though they do not all wield the same

amount of power, influence, or accountability. Additionally, the individuals who fill these roles may not share the same personal stakes or professional investment in pursuing transformation, particularly those individuals further removed from the immediate interactions and relationships with those most negatively impacted by the barriers that these programs are designed to address. One could argue that the persistence of these negative dynamics is what provides continued employment for administrators; indeed, without these issues, their roles might become irrelevant. While many who study or build careers in this field genuinely wish to contribute to meaningful work, the counterproductive and demoralizing elements often push individuals to either resist, which can be exhausting and alienating, or to complicity and coping. This may create incentive to remain silent in order to survive, or perhaps even thrive, in the sector by being less openly critical of current power dynamics. However, this culture of silencing only serves to create more labor, concern, and burnout for those youth workers who rely on a sense of purpose, respect and positive outcomes to sustain their efforts.

Dismissive: Silencing, Devaluation and Disempowerment

a lot of times people don't know what youth workers do, they find that we're just a glorified babysitter.... It's more than that, it's really, truly about building those connections with the youth and providing them with that mentorship and those resources that they need to thrive. (PROVI-77)

The challenges faced by youth workers are deeply entrenched in the systemic silencing, devaluation, and disempowerment that pervades the perception and reception of frontline roles across the sector. Notwithstanding their critical role, youth workers may find themselves marginalized within their organizations, their voices and expertise overlooked by

management, administrators, funders and policy developers. This exclusion from decision-making processes, particularly in program design and funding allocation, highlights a significant disconnect between those who influence policies and those who implement them. As a result, youth workers experience a profound sense of frustration and demoralization, as their insights, grounded in direct experience, are dismissed or undervalued. The lack of recognition and respect for the complex and demanding work of youth workers exacerbates their sense of professional marginalization as youth workers struggle to gain acknowledgment for the vital contributions they make. This lack of recognition extends to the broader public and professional spheres outside of the youth sector, where their roles are often misunderstood or minimized.

This misrecognition diminishes the perceived value of their work and places frontline youth workers at the lowest tier within organizational hierarchies, where their voices and ideas are often discarded, as youth workers may find that their insights and feedback are not sufficiently considered by management, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful improvements in youth services. Addressing these issues is crucial for creating a more supportive and sustainable work environment that values the contributions of youth workers and empowers them to advance in their work, careers and the sector overall with positive outcomes for youth. TRAILZ-23 shares how the devaluation of youth worker's voice reduces their ability to advocate for youth effectively.

I think advocating for youth is really – can be really hard, especially when you're also a youth.... generally youth workers are at the bottom of the barrel, the hierarchy. So, it can be really hard to reason with upper management or leadership, that can be really difficult. Hearing “no” when you're advocating for things that you know would

be beneficial for the youth that you work with. To me, that, I think, is the most challenging piece. (TRAILZ-23)

Significantly, TRAILZ-23 identifies this silencing dynamic as one of the “most challenging” pieces of their work, superseding the difficulty of the work itself; therefore, organizations who fail to listen to youth workers are missing a wealth of knowledge and insights and potentially compounding attrition factors. In addition to the dismissive approach to recognizing the value of youth work within the sector, there are also elements of misunderstanding what youth workers do which contributes to a certain sense of disregard due to a lack of awareness. As PROVI-77 shares,

... actually one thing that I always had in my educational career and doing my placements is a lot of times I get called a glorified babysitter. And I’m sure you’ve heard this before [laughs], it’s something that I think a lot of times people don’t know what youth workers do, they find that we’re just a glorified babysitter, oh you’re just babysitting someone after school, because this is where they have to go to. It’s more than that, it’s really, truly about building those connections with the youth and providing them with that mentorship and those resources that they need to thrive. And a lot of people really sometimes ask me, what do I do, and it’s sometimes really hard to tell them what it is. But I think more people need to know what youth workers do and the impact that youth workers can make in the lives of children and youth.

(PROVI-77)

PROVI-77 acknowledges the difficulty in articulating their role, accenting the varied and diverse nature of youth work which this study has attempted to reconcile by presenting key principles and concepts that shape critical approaches to youth work. Even within a

single organization or subsector, youth work can manifest differently, reflecting the unique needs and dynamics of the populations served and breaking with more traditional labour practices. The underestimation and undervaluation of youth voices, often through the lens of adultification, is somewhat mirrored in the perception of those who work with and advocate for young people. This work is sometimes not taken as seriously as other professions, as the proximity to youth interests, especially youth who are facing multiple barriers and social prejudice, may illicit a certain degree of stigma for the youth workers. The nonprofit sector, especially in roles supporting social or environmental justice, is often viewed as noble but not as notable as for-profit industries. However, even in the field of education, INSPIR-92 informs us of an attitude of underestimation and lack of esteem for frontline staff.

...there's also kind of an attitude -I'm just going to keep it real. - there's an attitude in the board, not all teachers but a good portion of teachers have an attitude that kind of like support staff are beneath them and that they were supposed to - I don't feel we're respected as much. Even in the board, even when we're talking about politics, even during the strike, child and youth workers are never mentioned.

And even with Child and Youth Services, I find a lot of it, it's about the social workers or the CYC's. Who are university but the college level child and youth workers, which there's over 500 of us, we - I get a large sense of kind of underappreciated. (INSPIR-92)

INSPIR-92 continues, explaining what needs to happen to reverse the demoralizing aspects of dismissal or disregard for their work.

I think [what is needed] is being talked about and recognised and appreciated more in many conversations. So that could start in the school. That could start with - when I

mean within school, so for example, when there's a fight about to happen after school, and the child and youth workers intervene and stop that from escalating. I think that that should be mentioned and thanked and appreciated, just as other staff are in staff meetings and things like that. And then on a wider scale, I just think that the work that we do, the paperwork that we do, the caseload of kids that we have, the amount of work that goes into developing a behaviour plan, I just think we should be paid a bit more than what we are. But always I feel like the bottom of the totem pole.

(INSPIR-92)

INNO-51 provides related insight into the context of the medical sector when it comes to the underestimation and underutilization of youth workers.

...a lot of people in mental health don't really know about what child and youth workers do or can do or what our capacities are. I've had jobs where I do administer meds and I've been trained for that, but in a *** setting they wouldn't accept that even though I can. But it's kind of things like that where you're like, "I could be doing that job, but there is some policy or college ruling that has blocked CYCs from having the opportunity to be a part of that.

I've interviewed for jobs that were totally up my alley, based on my schooling and experience, and have been turned away because I didn't have an SSW, like Ontario Colleges registration, right? So, CYCs, if we were registered, that would definitely help us out a lot and put a lot more validity to us. And I know most of my classmates didn't continue in the field after a year or two after college because of the pay rate for a lot of our jobs are really low and either at like kind of the minimum living wage or just like not enough for us to survive on so we end up working like

three jobs and getting burnt out and dealing with our own mental health or health issues that have manifested because of the burnout and the stress.

So those parts are pretty real. Yeah, it would be nice if there was more awareness out there about what CYCs can do. And I know that, generally speaking, child and youth workers can work in a lot of different areas but not a lot of those areas know that it seems.... what do CYCs do? Like they have never heard of it and it's like we're not that far off from ECEs, if anything, right?" (INNO-51)

A few respondents mentioned an interest in forming a regulatory body or union (of sorts) to assist with promoting the professionalism of youth work and raising sectoral and public awareness about the work that they do and how they can better protect it. On the other hand, youth workers are keenly aware of the unique and urgent value that they bring, as ADVO-17 and VIZI-15 attest.

I think I would like people to know that this work is super deep work. I think that people think youth just show up and they go into a program and they're – I don't know, finding something to do or passing the time or going to a program [to stay out of trouble] but I think it's way, way beyond that. (ADVO-17)

So this work is, should be - that's why I say should be paid better. It is just as important as a doctor. A doctor is taking care of your physical body, but youth workers and youth work they're taking care of the heart, the minds and sometimes the spirits of young people. That's important work. That's the future. Same thing with teachers, but teachers get paid way better, and they get good pensions. So maybe we

just need to treat youth workers as teachers, because they see kids every day too.

(VIZI-15)

Youth workers are combating the invisibility of work and emotional labour which combines feelings of devaluation with practices of silencing, seeking solutions and creative strategies to educate external and internal stakeholders on the importance of regarding their expertise. VIZI-15 continues to explain what types of supports are needed in the sector.

Supporting people who have good ideas, funding. Just creating spaces. And listening to the voices of the people on the front lines, way more. And not just saying that you're listening. Some accountability, maybe by the funders, that you have to show that you are listening to your frontline workers and implementing what they say, to some extent. Not just for show because I know a lot of people have left this industry, because I'm known in this industry so people can reach out to me or I reached out to people. And they're it's so toxic working here. They didn't listen; I was trying to advocate for the youth. This is very common. So people need to listen to the people.

Just because you're getting paid more you've, you're in this high managerial position. That's so much ego. I've worked in an industry for 20 years; I could be one of those people. I would never - if I look at someone that may be new in that game or even five years, I have 20. But they're directly working with young people more than me, I think their voice is valid. So you need to listen to these people, times change. I might not know something. Even if I have way more experienced frontline. You're doing it now in this day and age. You have something to tell me, I should listen, I should implement it, whether it's about the program or whether it's about how to better support workers.

So I don't think that managers or even the higher-ups within non-profits do a good enough job of listening to their staff. (VIZI-15)

VIZI-15, reflecting on their extensive experience in the sector, emphasizes the importance of setting aside personal ego to better listen to frontline experts. They acknowledge that, regardless of their tenure in youth work, it is crucial to actively engage with and value the insights of those working directly with youth. Failure to do so, they caution, risks fostering a toxic and counterproductive work environment that undermines the effectiveness of youth work and the well-being of both staff and the young people they serve. This perspective highlights the need for leaders in the sector to remain humble, receptive, and committed to collaborative approaches that elevate frontline voices and experiences.

While identifying these lamentable issues within the sector, respondents also identified a number of opportunities to assist their work and advocacy and reduce toxic dynamics emerging from unsupportive workplaces and management. For instance, Supor-28 discussed the idea of an intermediary staff role between frontline and management to improve communication and rapport dynamics.

I think maybe a liaison between staff and – I mean we're not unionized so maybe like a position for somebody to be an advocate for staff but also, yeah to speak on the staff's behalf if that are concerns that are not being addressed and have been spoken about in multiple times to kind of like ease the ground between management and staff or [pause] like an open line of communication. I mean, I don't know. Sometimes I feel like it's people's egos....

Times have changed, TikTok, Instagram, like are we being interactive with youth... I feel like there's a lot of things we could do but at the same time like we

won't know if they'll be effective unless we try them. And there's needs to be that want to even try something new. (SUPOR-28)

Suggesting a liaison or intermediary to intercede between Frontline youth, workers and administrators or managers due to the large disconnection and disempowerment and "ego" of some of the power dynamics that play within organizations and the sector at large. Inno-51 suggested that managers and leaders raise their consciousness about the reality of youth work by directly engaging in it themselves.

I think if leadership was trained – or how do I say this? I think it would be cool if people in leadership roles or like corporate roles actually took the time to work with us or like work on the front-line to actually understand what the day-to-day is like so that when they are making policies it's not some BS one where you're like, "What?" Yeah, I think a lot of it comes down to like often I've had managers who are giving you feedback on something that they don't really know much about or haven't experienced and that can be like salt in the wounds sometimes. Or they don't really have the same perspective on a job as you do because you're in it and they're behind a desk so just more awareness like child and youth workers like front-line jobs.

(INNO-51)

INNO-51's suggestion is an attempt to break down mistrust and disfunction within program power dynamics, which can create resentment from youth workers who have had their own invaluable knowledge discredited by those who do not have comparable experience and context into the policies and practices that they are enforcing. They go on to suggest the formation of a registered body to promote the role and function of youth work through the Child and Youth Care discipline.

Being part of a registered college of something in Ontario, that has been a barrier. So not being able to apply to jobs or interviewing jobs, but being told like, because he didn't have this, we can't hire you. And then I think the lack of awareness around what CYCs do for your work is also a barrier. There doesn't seem to be a lot of common knowledge about us. And we do a lot of stuff though. (INNO-51)

Ultimately, the dismissive and minimizing practices within the youth work sector can devalue the contributions of youth workers and hinder the development of effective, youth-centered programs. The failure to engage youth workers meaningfully in decision-making processes and to provide them with the necessary support and recognition perpetuates a cycle of disenfranchisement, where the very individuals tasked with empowering young people are themselves disempowered. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to elevate the status of youth workers within their organizations, ensuring that their voices are heard, their contributions valued, and their professional needs adequately met.

Limiting: Career Stagnation and Deprofessionalization

Youth workers are at the bottom of the barrel, the hierarchy. (Trailz-23)

Youth workers often face significant barriers to career advancement and professional growth, leading to a profound sense of stagnation and deprofessionalization. The lack of access to professional development opportunities, coupled with inadequate support and funding for training, leaves many feeling trapped in their roles with limited prospects for progression. Participants in this study express concerns about the difficulty in moving beyond frontline positions, particularly in advancing to management or leadership roles, which exacerbates feelings of career stagnation. While some participants have managed to adapt by pursuing self-directed professional growth, the overall lack of structured

opportunities for advancement creates a significant risk of attrition, with many youth workers contemplating leaving the sector in search of more stable and rewarding employment. Keeping in mind that frontline youth work is the preferred career designation for many youth workers, there are also frontline youth workers who see their time in direct service as a stepping stone to other roles. Without reifying the hierarchy which frames some roles as more important than others, youth workers have a right to share their talents in the ways they deem most viable and desirable; however, it is unfortunate that many feel compelled to leave frontline youth work because of the obstruction factors expounded upon earlier. While it is not useful to oversimplify the complexity of personal and professional factors that lead individuals closer or further away from the youth sector, it is important to examine emerging themes that speak to shared experiences and structural influences. Therefore, whether an individual leaves or stays is not as important as listening to the factors that are contributing to their ultimate decision. Facila-58 explains,

I think, for me, the only thing that will make me want to quit is looking for stability, and looking for advancement in my career, you know. It's great when you're frontline, but when you want to get up and become manager or become a director, there are some challenges when it comes to that, as well. So, for me, the only way that I see myself giving up, you know, giving up the sector or maybe – and maybe making a bit of a shift outside of frontline would be for, honestly, better pay, permanent position, and something that is a bit more responsibility and kind of displays a sense of growth, so the managerial position or something a bit higher than a frontline worker. (FACILA-58)

FACILA-58 shares the pressure that job insecurity has placed upon them and their contemplation of leaving direct service to “advance” their career mobility. They provide greater detail on their desire to obtain more stability as they grow older and grow tired of the nature of contract cycles.

Yeah, I mean, for me, it's just more so I'm in a different place in my life than when I was maybe five, 10 years ago, whatever how many years ago it was, where now, I'm looking for stability, I'm looking for a job that is not just, you know, “Oh, three years, contract,” and then it's, like, it's never going to be renewed and then you're having to look – or it's one year and a half contract, and then you're having to look for a new job almost every year. So, to me, that's a lack of instability. Yes, it's good that you're – I mean, for me, I was lucky in the sense that if a contract was coming up, I was able to land another job. So, I have to be grateful for that, you know, not a lot of folks could say the same thing. But it does – it's a lot of stress to be jumping from one job to the next. So, for me, stability is very important, especially as we age, you know. We're not going to be young forever [laughs]. So, at some point, we need to kind of, you know, if that's your desire, it's my desire, put down some roots, and it's really important to have that stability. (FACILA-58)

For Facila-58 the reason for considering a career shift within the sector is based at least partially on economic necessity and also a “desire” for the stability that comes with many non-frontline roles. For VIZI-15, the lack of financial security was an early indicator that youth work may not be a sustainable career option for them, so they chose to engage strategically and not to the point of compromising their long-term goals for stability.

So for me, I kind of realised earlier on that this work was really heavy, and it didn't pay well, when you were directly working with youth. So I probably wasn't going to be in this industry forever in that way. That I would decide how I would choose to be in this industry. But still be able to be OK with - my family. (VIZI-15)

For PROVI-77, this realization came a few years into the work where they felt their work began to become stagnant but were unable to find comparable options to transition to with their skillset without taking a cut in pay.

The reason [for wanting to quit], it's because I've been here for three years now and I'm not, I don't feel challenged anymore, so I want more challenge. I feel like I kind of come to work and it's kind of the same thing every single day, so I want something new. But every time I look at something, every time I look for something new or something that I feel like I'd be interested in, the pay is significantly lower than what I'm making now and just at this point in my life, I can't make lower. (PROVI-77)

With the scarcity of accessible and accredited professional development opportunities for frontline youth workers who are susceptible to experiencing overload, burnout and limited time for self-investment, in addition to resource limitations, the prospect of needing to advance their credentials to move their career forward can be daunting, asInno-51 shares what they believe to be one of the most challenge aspects of youth work.

Probably the pay. Yeah, I guess there's – the pay and room for growth, because as a child and youth worker it's like you either have to go back to school if you're going to move forward in your career in like a higher capacity, so those parts are annoying. (INNO-51)

While many youth workers are constantly engaged in informal and formal learning throughout their careers, the gap in professionalization capacity which forces youth workers to consider an exit strategy in order to avoid becoming trapped in a low paying job continues to carry a heavy toll, as revisiting VIZI-15 experiences attests.

So I do often still look online and see positions and see OK, that's decent pay. I think I would qualify. I don't have a master's. So sometimes that's a block but I don't have an interest in going back to school, I have enough lived and real-life experience to do most of those jobs. Sometimes, oh, yeah, education, I just didn't end up doing my Masters or PhD.

So some positions to get really paid well, you need to have that. But I probably feel sometimes if they're willing to be flexible with the Masters, I can do that job easily. Just based on my almost 20 years' experience, and I bring a lot to the table. So I'm pretty confident in what I bring to the table but some of the work if I wanted to continue it, I guess I've mentioned a few times in the way that I liked. I kind of like to be frontline in a lot of those ways. That wouldn't be able to pay me what I'm worth to be honest. So I'm very picky and choosy now with how I, who and how I work. (VIZI-15)

In contrast to the near 20 years of experience that VIZI-15 has amassed, which provided them with the ability to be more selective of the work they engage in and avoid, CHAMP-115 bemoans the loss of competent workers to poor compensation and poor regard and valuation of youth work by the social economy overall.

...I feel like say in Residential Treatment Homes, it's always the 20 somethings or the people who are in their early 20s working there, because no-one stays there

because it's hard work and the pay isn't great. What we need is – what those kids need are the experts in the field. We don't need people who are learning how to do a good job. You know, you need – they're the most vulnerable – some of these kids in group homes. So we're working with people who are vulnerable. We want the best working with the kids and we know how the world works. We still work in a capitalist system. The best – money attracts the best – but when it comes to children, and working with them, it just doesn't seem to apply.

It applies in the business world and everywhere else, yes. [Laughs] (CHAMP-115)

Despite these significant obstacles, many youth workers remain committed to the field due to intrinsic motivation and a deep passion for the work, often driven by personal lived experiences. The fulfillment derived from witnessing the growth and progress of the youth they serve plays a crucial role in their resilience. However, the need for systemic changes that address these demoralizing factors cannot be overstated. Organizations must recognize the importance of peer support, self-care practices, and policies that prioritize worker well-being. For some, the decision to shift careers may be influenced by the desire for greater stability, better compensation, and improved work-life balance, factors that are often lacking in the youth work sector. This study aims to bring to light these critical issues, advocating for changes that support youth workers in both their personal and professional lives, thereby enabling them to sustain long and fulfilling careers in the sector. The challenges of career stagnation and deprofessionalization among youth workers underscore a more significant and systemic issue within the sector. Despite the intrinsic value of youth work, characterized by its relational, holistic, and transformative nature, the reality is that

many youth workers face precarious, unsupportive, and limiting work environments. This inconsistency between the ideals of youth work and the lived experiences of its practitioners reveals deep-rooted structural and administrative flaws that cannot be overlooked.

Moving into the discussion chapter, the focus on the personal and professional experiences of youth workers expands into the political realm to critically explore the socio-political and systemic factors that contribute to these dynamics, of what will be explained as “Apraxis.” Specifically, we will examine the administrative, funding, and policy structures that perpetuate these contradictions within the sector. The discussion will introduce and elaborate on the concepts of BeneViolence and Apraxis, which serve as crucial theoretical tools to understand the inefficiencies and harms perpetuated by these systems. This transition to a broader socio-political analysis invites a critical inquiry: if the youth sector genuinely seeks to improve outcomes for young people, why do some of the most significant stressors and barriers continue to stem from systemic forces within the sector itself? By highlighting these counterproductive dynamics, the discussion will advocate for a more just and effective investment in the youth sector, urging policy and funding bodies to re-evaluate and revise the outdated models that prioritize control and cost-containment over care and effectiveness. Ultimately, the testimonies of youth workers can bring these issues to light and reinforce the importance of collaboration between researchers and practitioners. By leveraging the credibility of academic institutions, we can amplify the concerns and strategies already identified by youth workers, fostering a shared language and conceptual framework that drives meaningful change in the sector.

Findings and Analysis Summary

Obstructive factors can profoundly disrupt the effective enactments of critical practice, as exemplified in the figure below which demonstrates the complex interlinking that exists between these elements. Within the **relational** sphere, the dynamic between youth workers and their employing organizations is often marked by a significant erosion of trust and respect. Youth workers frequently experience a lack of value and respect, both materially and symbolically, as precarious employment and inadequate remuneration create substantial pressure. This fosters a pervasive sense of being **unsupported**, undermining the integrity of relationships with influential stakeholders, individuals who control policy, funding, resource allocation, and the overall direction of the youth work sector. The **disenfranchising** obstructive factor actively negates holistic critical practice by failing to recognize and cultivate a sense of belonging for youth workers, preventing them from fully integrating their personal and professional identities. The **onerous** obstructive factor actively interferes with the reflexive component of critical practice. Feelings of disenfranchisement, lack of voice, and exclusion from meaningful participation in the work can lead to disassociation and detachment from the organization. This stems from a fundamental inability to express oneself authentically, to receive appropriate recognition, to experience genuine empowerment, or to achieve a deep sense of fulfillment. This lack of integration undermines the potential for sustainable and critically practical approaches rooted in praxis (Kemmis, 2008). Restrictive organizational factors, including the **dismissive** suppression of youth workers' voices, perspectives, and their ability to advocate for systemic change, further diminish the possibility of transformative action and hinder the potential for growth and development among all stakeholders. This loss of potential is directly connected to structural violence, as it maintains **limitations** on individuals' capacity to fully realize their potential, especially for

service users who are often caught within cycles of systemic disadvantage while simultaneously being blamed for a perceived lack of resilience in overcoming these persistent and deeply entrenched barriers. These divergences between formally prescribed practice and the real actions that take place creates a significant disconnect, demonstrating the concept of Apraxis and highlighting the urgent need to support Critical Practice across the youth sector.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Implications

This chapter synthesizes the theoretical and empirical insights from the previous sections, critically engaging with the findings. While Chapters 5, 6, and 7 presented the findings of this study with embedded analysis, the following discussion engages with the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter 3, consolidating the empirical data with the literature and situating the study's contributions within the broader discourse on critical youth work. The goal of this chapter is to interrogate the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities emerging from the findings and explore how they inform a more robust understanding of systemic barriers and pathways toward transformative practice in Ontario's youth sector. At the core of this discussion is the analysis of how youth workers navigate the interplay of supportive and obstructive factors in their practice. The model of supportive and obstructive factors in critical practice, introduced in this chapter, illustrates the ways in which systemic conditions enable or constrain the full realization of youth work's critical principles. Rather than framing these dynamics as binary oppositions, this model recognizes the fluid, interdependent relationship between structural forces and frontline praxis, demonstrating that critical youth work is constantly being shaped, interrupted, and reconfigured by institutional and political realities.

This chapter argues that the contradictions embedded within youth work, where practitioners are expected to provide holistic, justice-oriented care while operating in structurally unsupportive conditions, are not incidental but constitutive of the field itself. These contradictions manifest in multiple ways, from the precarity of employment that undermines long-term relationship-building to the managerialist oversight that strips youth work of its reflexive and relational depth. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that

youth workers continue to carve out spaces of resistance and possibility within these constraints, deploying strategies of care, advocacy, and subversion to sustain their commitments to social justice. By engaging these findings through the lenses of Structural Violence (Galtung, 1969; Ruíz, 2024), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 2013), and the Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC), this chapter highlights how the conditions that obstruct critical youth work are deeply embedded within broader systems of economic and political control. The persistence of funding precarity, the devaluation of relational labor, and the imposition of outcome-driven frameworks are reflections of a structural logic that prioritizes efficiency and compliance over genuine youth empowerment. The concept of BeneViolence (Cromwell Simmonds, 2007) speaks to this paradox, capturing how well-intentioned interventions within the SSIC can reinforce the very hierarchies they claim to disrupt. Similarly, the notion of Apraxis, the disjuncture between theory and practice, helps to explain why youth work, despite its radical possibilities, is often co-opted into institutional mechanisms that neutralize its transformative potential.

The model introduced here visualizes these dynamics by mapping how supportive factors, namely the fulfillment youth workers find in relational engagement, are continually interrupted by obstructive forces, limiting their ability to fully actualize critical practice. For instance, while reciprocity is identified as a sustaining force, allowing youth workers to build meaningful relationships, it is often compromised by the precarious nature of employment, which restricts long-term relational commitments. Similarly, while youth workers derive empowerment from witnessing young people's growth, this sense of agency is constrained by institutional cultures that devalue their expertise and impose rigid bureaucratic structures. Yet, as the findings reveal, these obstructions do not entirely negate the possibility of critical

engagement. Instead, youth workers employ strategies of resistance, whether through informal peer networks, subversive programming adaptations, or advocacy efforts, to push back against systemic constraints. This chapter explores these strategies in depth, examining how youth workers navigate institutional limitations while striving to sustain ethical and justice-oriented practice.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual practitioner experiences to the structural conditions that govern the youth sector. Policy discussions must move beyond generic calls for worker resilience and instead address the material and institutional realities that make sustainable, critical practice difficult to maintain. This requires rethinking funding structures that privilege short-term impact over long-term engagement, challenging managerialist policies that prioritize surveillance over support, and recognizing youth workers not as expendable labor but as key agents of social change. Through this analysis, the discussion chapter situates this study's findings within existing scholarship, working to chart a path forward and offering critical insights into how the sector might be reimagined to better align with its foundational commitments to equity, relational integrity, and transformative justice.

Support and Obstruction: A Dynamic Framework

Youth work exists within a tension between sustaining and obstructing forces, shaping how practitioners navigate the sector. The push and pull between these forces determine whether youth work remains a site of humanization and critical engagement or succumbs to the pressures of bureaucratic regulation, economic instability, and depoliticized service provision. The findings suggest that while youth workers remain deeply committed to

their practice, their ability to sustain meaningful engagement is contingent upon structural conditions that either support or undermine their work.

Sustaining Factors

The supportive factors identified in this research affirm that critical youth work is upheld by reciprocity, a sense of necessity, empowerment, fulfillment, and responsibility. These factors reflect the humanizing aspects of youth work, offering practitioners a source of meaning and relational depth that extends beyond contractual obligations. The relational dimension of youth work is central as workers emphasized that the ability to build trust with young people, foster long-term connections, and contribute to community well-being provided intrinsic motivation and resilience in the face of systemic constraints. Workers also described holistic and responsive approaches as essential for sustaining effective practice. Being able to address young people's needs in ways that are flexible, person-centered, and contextually grounded allows youth workers to operate beyond rigid institutional parameters. When programs recognize that young people's challenges do not exist in isolation from systemic conditions, they create space for meaningful intervention and long-term impact. Empowerment and fulfillment also function as core sustaining principles, with youth workers highlighting that their work is most effective when they are trusted as professionals, encouraged to innovate, and supported in their personal and professional development. This extends beyond professionalization debates to a broader assertion that youth work is not just a service but a practice of co-empowerment that allows both workers and young people to challenge systemic inequities. A sense of responsibility further reinforces sustainability, as many workers articulated a commitment to justice and community well-being that transcended institutional constraints. Workers consistently positioned themselves as

advocates, connectors, and educators, recognizing that their role was not merely to administer services but to actively contribute to structural change.

Obstructing Factors

The obstructive factors identified in this study mirror broader structural conditions that undermine critical youth work. Youth workers described precarity, administrative barriers, and hierarchical decision-making structures as significant impediments to their ability to practice in alignment with their values. One of the most pervasive issues raised by participants was the chronic instability of employment and funding. Many described holding multiple contracts, experiencing job insecurity, and navigating inconsistent funding cycles that left them unable to engage in long-term planning. The reliance on short-term, project-based grants reinforces a model of youth work that prioritizes deliverables over depth, forcing organizations to allocate resources based on funder priorities rather than community needs. Administrative and bureaucratic constraints were another frequently cited obstacle, with workers detailing how managerial oversight, excessive documentation, and compliance-driven policies restricted their ability to build authentic relationships with young people. The push for standardized performance measures and risk-averse programming created environments where workers felt surveilled rather than supported. These conditions reduced their autonomy, eroded trust between workers and management, and emphasized control over care.

The devaluation of lived experience was also a key theme. Many youth workers, particularly those with nontraditional backgrounds, noted that their expertise was often overlooked in favor of individuals with formal academic credentials, even when those credentials did not necessarily translate to effective practice. This tendency to prioritize

professionalization over experiential knowledge reinforced classist and exclusionary barriers, making it harder for workers from marginalized backgrounds to access stable career pathways despite their deep-rooted connections to the communities they serve. A culture of depoliticization further obstructed youth work, with many describing how systemic critiques were discouraged within institutional settings. Workers expressed frustration with how conversations about structural inequities, racial justice, and decolonization were often reframed as divisive, impractical, or outside the scope of youth work. This narrowing of discourse reflected broader trends within the nonprofit and social service industrial complex, where the language of empowerment is often mobilized without material commitments to structural change. Finally, the erosion of trust through surveillance and risk management frameworks emerged as a critical obstructive factor. Many workers detailed how organizational cultures of liability management created an atmosphere of distrust, where frontline practitioners were micromanaged, required to justify their every action, and discouraged from taking the relational risks necessary for meaningful engagement. This directly contradicted the values of relational care and co-empowerment that youth workers identified as central to their practice.

Supportive and Obstructing Factors in Practice

While the dichotomy of Supportive and Obstructive factors is useful in identifying complex dynamics which may be otherwise difficult to qualify, the relationship between supportive and obstructive factors is neither fixed nor unidirectional. The cross-sections of the Supportive and Obstructive factors are in a state of constant flux as the intricacies of personal, professional and political factors multiple with each stakeholder involved. This dissertation does not claim that all funders, managers, or directors of programs are

predisposed to an allegiance with neoliberal ideals, nor does this research assume that all frontline youth workers are committed to or interested in critical practice. The intention in devising distinctions for what youth workers have identified as beneficial, enriching and rewarding in their frontline work and distinguishing the factors that make their work more difficult or completely untenable, is to amplify conversations concerned with the ethics of care; a discourse that does not fail to consider and at times centre care workers themselves. To demonstrate the utility and relevance of the six factors that fall under Supportive and Obstructive labels respectively, the following section will contrast Reciprocity (Supportive) with Precarity (Obstructive), Fulfillment and Unsupportive dynamics, Empowerment and Disenfranchisement, Necessary and Onerous work, Limiting and Effective factors and Dismissive experiences with a sense of Responsibility. As these interdependent dynamics are examined, the ways youth workers experience and navigate these dynamics will be centred.

Reciprocity and the Constraints of Precarity. Reciprocity is foundational to youth work, enabling practitioners to foster relationships based on trust, co-learning, and mutual engagement. It is essential for building sustainable connections with young people and ensuring that human service work remains a practice rooted in relational ethics and social accountability (Freire, 1970/2000; Giroux, 2013). Yet, the precarious nature of youth work frequently undermines the ability to cultivate and maintain reciprocal relationships. Short-term contracts, inconsistent funding, and unstable employment conditions create disruptions that prevent long-term engagement (Baines, 2011). Youth workers describe the emotional strain of having connections with young people interrupted due to the limitations of program funding, or their positions being terminated. In Chapter 1, I mentioned my own departure from the sector. The most difficult part about choosing to leave my frontline role was

reflecting on the impact this action would have on my relationship and rapport with the youth. Of course, there is no intention to insist that relationships must be evergreen and sustained, but the way relationships end can have a profound impact that may even compromise the mutual progress accomplished together. However, what I would now identify as moral distress and conditions of Apraxis meant that staying in a role that felt disingenuous and exploitative (for the young people and my coworkers) would have been a greater disservice. For many social service frontline workers, the instability of employment introduces stress and uncertainty, making it difficult to commit fully to relational work while navigating personal and professional insecurity (Wilson et al., 2011). Frontline youth workers actively find ways to maintain relationships beyond the formal constraints of their roles. Many continue mentoring young people informally, build alternative networks of support, and advocate for funding stability to mitigate the disruptive effects of precarity. While structural conditions introduce barriers, the principle of reciprocity remains central to the work, ensuring that youth engagement is not entirely dictated by institutional limitations.

Fulfillment and the Barriers of Unsupportive Structures. Youth workers frequently describe their work as deeply fulfilling, deriving purpose from their ability to support young people, facilitate leadership development, and contribute to community well-being (Goggin, 1994). The relational aspects of youth work create meaning and professional motivation, reinforcing the ethical commitments that sustain engagement despite difficult conditions. On the other hand, this fulfillment is regularly obstructed by institutional structures that fail to recognize or support the labor required to sustain meaningful practice. Bureaucratic oversight, excessive administrative burdens, and a focus on quantifiable outcomes reduce opportunities for youth workers to engage in relational care (Karabanow,

1999). The emotional labor required in youth work is largely unacknowledged, placing additional strain on workers who are expected to manage organizational inefficiencies while maintaining high-quality engagement (Wilson et al., 2011). In response, many youth workers create their own support systems, build informal networks of solidarity, and seek professional spaces that align with their values. The fulfillment that comes from the work itself is not entirely negated by structural barriers, but the lack of institutional support places additional pressure on youth workers to sustain ethical commitments without adequate resources.

Empowerment and the Contradictions of Disenfranchisement. Empowerment is central to critical youth work, guiding practitioners in fostering young people's autonomy, leadership, and social consciousness. Many youth workers see their roles as facilitators of agency, working to equip youth with the tools needed to navigate and challenge systemic inequities (Dlamini, 2015). However, the findings illustrate that youth workers themselves are frequently disenfranchised within their organizations. Many report being excluded from decision-making, denied access to leadership roles, and subjected to managerialist oversight that limits their ability to engage in potentially transformational work (Ruíz, 2024). This disenfranchisement is particularly pronounced for racialized and economically marginalized youth workers, who are often concentrated in frontline roles with limited pathways for career advancement (Banerjee et al., 2015). Despite these conditions, empowerment is not entirely dependent on institutional validation. Youth workers build alternative spaces of power through peer-led initiatives, sector-wide advocacy, and independent organizing. While professional disenfranchisement presents obstacles, many practitioners continue to assert their expertise, cultivate leadership, and challenge exclusionary practices that undermine their contributions.

Necessity and the Burdens of Onerous Workloads. The necessity of youth work is widely reaffirmed by practitioners, communities, and young people (Road & Kingdom, 2008). Youth workers engage in essential relational, educational, and advocacy efforts that contribute to individual and collective well-being (Mananzala & Spade, 2008). Their work is critical in addressing systemic barriers faced by marginalized youth, providing direct support and at times structural interventions that challenge cycles of exclusion. However, the necessity of youth work does not always translate into adequate institutional support for their relational work. Many youth workers describe experiencing excessive workloads, unrealistic expectations, and administrative burdens that detract from their ability to engage in meaningful practice (Banerjee et al., 2015). The demand for comprehensive support often exceeds available resources, creating conditions where workers must manage multiple roles without appropriate compensation or recognition. In response, many practitioners engage in collective advocacy, pushing for improved working conditions, and developing organizational strategies that prioritize youth and youth worker well-being. The burden of onerous workloads remains a significant challenge, but critical youth workers actively seek ways to reduce structural contradictions while pursuing better supportive conditions that align with the necessity and sensitivity of their roles.

Effective Impact and Limitations on Potential. In contrast to the prevalence of moral distress in the sector, interview participants emphasized that the outcomes of their work often inspire and motivate their involvement in the field. The effectiveness of youth work is reaffirmed by workplaces that allow for employee agency and provide some respite from overburdening circumstances and workloads. By having a reciprocal relationship, not just with service users, but also with administrators and sector influencers, a healthier work

environment is created that balances productivity with ethical processes. This framing of the workplace is by no means a call to imagine a romanticized utopia, but to create working environments that validate youth worker's effectiveness and allow for frontline staff to take more pride in the outcomes and methods of their efforts. Opposite this critical stance is the "Limitation" Obstructive factor, which compromises youth worker's ability to actualize critical work practice. Limitations in this context include youth worker's professional mobility and the ways they navigate roles and responsibilities throughout the sector. When youth workers are bound within short-term contracts, or relegated to roles that do not allow them to utilize their full knowledge to inform program design and development, the whole sector suffers (Banks, 2010). Furthermore, those who do occupy the most influential roles in the youth sector have traditionally not come from communities that share the lived experiences of those who are utilizing services (Coussée et al., 2009). In fact, in the context of Apraxis there may be a certain degree of gatekeeping that presents barriers for community members with live experience to access roles of influence and power within the institutions that are purportedly designed to serve them. In this status quo state, it is not only a matter of job security that may trigger a sense of threat or competition for those who are defending their leadership positions, but it may also involve a sense of well-meaning condescension, which reinforces the stigmatizing devaluation that is imposed on those who encounter structural discrimination and by extension for those who work in closer proximity to them. The stigmatization of Frontline youth workers themselves come with tropes of underestimation and patronizing positioning. The outcome of Cultural and Structural violence deprives individuals and communities from the full humanizing experience and interventions of critical youth work, which youth workers continue to combat.

Sense of Responsibility and Dismissive Demoralization. Understandably, a fulfilling vocation is tied to a sense of purpose, duty and contribution, a desire that often goes beyond the lure of lucrative salaries (Bonello, 2012; Vasudevan, 2019). For many youth workers, their sense of responsibility and duty to youth and community are strong drivers in their motivation to enter and remain in the field. In essence, this factor of accountability can encompass the other five Supportive factors, since responsibility inherently implicates relational engagement, the potential for fulfillment, opportunities for empowerment, and a desire to believe in the necessity of one's contribution and the value of their effect. The counterposing forces to responsibility and accountability are found in the opposing Obstructive factor of Dismissiveness. While youth seeking services rely on the youth worker's sense of ethical responsibility to do their job with integrity, youth workers often do not have the same expectations for the institutions they work for or the sector at large (in terms of policy, funding, and administration). Beyond accountability in human resources, organizational policy, and at times public opinion, most organizations are unable to articulate policy and practices that identify their equitable and ethical responsibility to community stakeholder that supersede their measured deliverables. In a more extreme case, this lack of communal commitment can replace interests in social transformation with an obligation to Social Return of Investment transactions. It is within these "business as usual" contexts that youth workers can feel dismissed and disposable, revolving with the rotation of contracts and temporary project-based initiatives. Due to youth worker's self and collective advocacy, calls for institutional accountability continue to surface and increasingly, as the findings have shown, youth workers are finding inspiration in opportunities to lead programs that are more

in line with their value system, expanding the sense of responsibility to care “for” youth to a shared approach of mutual responsibility and respect.

The Dynamic Relationship Between Supportive and Obstructive Factors

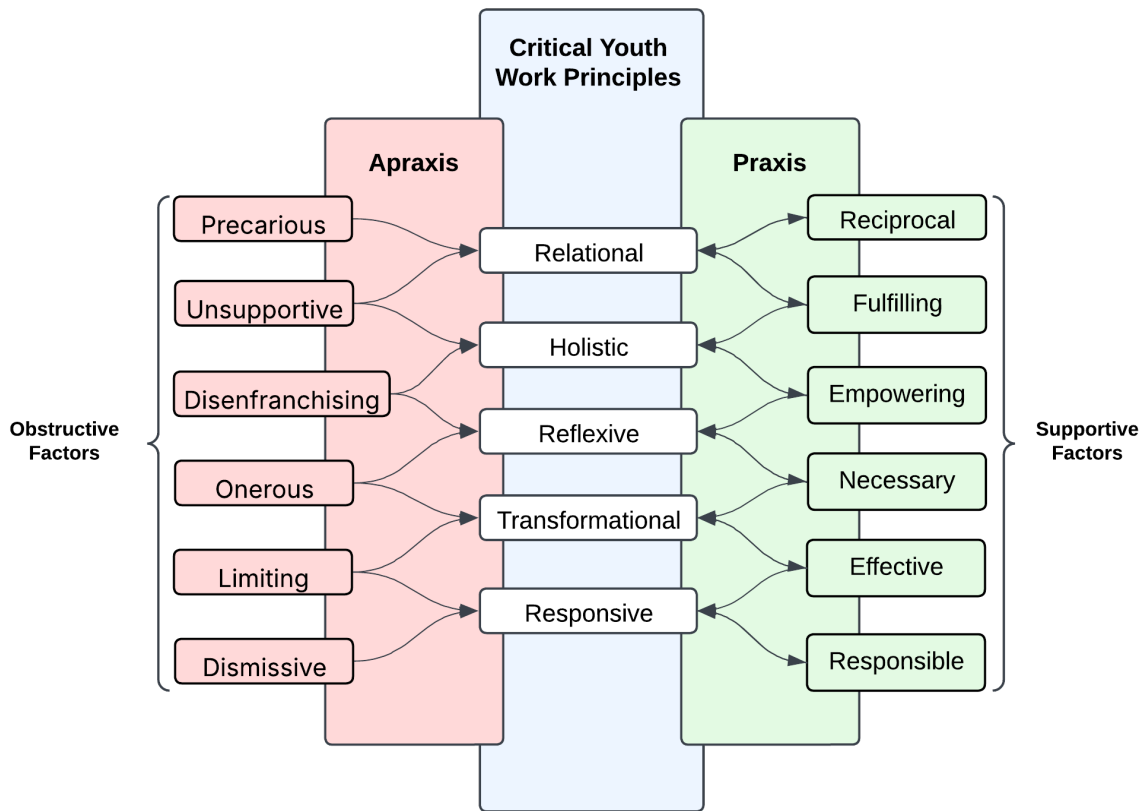
The agency, resilience, and strategic adaptations of youth workers shape the field in ways that reaffirm the foundational commitments of critical practice. The findings underscore that the presence of obstructive factors does not equate to a complete foreclosure of transformative engagement. While precarious employment, administrative control, and professional disenfranchisement create significant obstacles, youth workers remain active in resisting these limitations. Their ability to sustain ethical commitments, foster reciprocal relationships, and challenge systemic inequities highlights the ongoing process of negotiating power, agency, and justice within the field. This framework serves as an analytical tool to critically assess how youth work is structured within broader systems of power while recognizing the necessity of strengthening the conditions that enable justice-oriented practice. By acknowledging the interplay between supportive and obstructive factors, this framework can be incorporated into a model to further discourse on how youth work can be better structured, valued, and supported in ways that align with its core ethical and socio-political commitments.

A Model of Critical Factors in Youth Work

The model below provides a conceptual framework designed to elucidate the complex interplay between supportive factors, indicative of Praxis, and obstructive factors, leading to a state termed Apraxis, which collectively shape critical youth work practice.

Figure 10

Critical Factors Model



Central to this model are five core principles of critical youth work which encompass relational, holistic, reflexive, transformational, and responsive practices identified by research respondents as fundamental to ethical and effective engagement. The realization of these principles, however, is frequently challenged by pervasive systemic issues, including the precarious nature of employment, the prevalence of unsupportive work environments, experiences of professional disenfranchisement, burdensome bureaucratic demands, restrictive operational conditions, and the dismissive treatment of frontline practitioners. Such obstructive factors critically impede the conditions requisite for youth workers to sustain meaningful, justice-oriented engagement, thereby cultivating conditions of Apraxis. The introduction and application of novel terminology and conceptual frameworks, notably

the concept of Apraxis, serve an important function in advancing critical discourse within the field. Such constructs facilitate the articulation of structural contradictions that are often deeply embedded within organizational or sector-wide cultures and, consequently, difficult to explicitly name. A crucial step towards mitigating counterproductive policies and practices involves a rigorous separation of espoused good intentions from an objective assessment of actual outcomes, an assessment that must be firmly grounded in the perspectives of both service users and frontline workers.

The Critical Factors Model, depicted in the Figure, attempts to synthesize the study's principal findings with the conceptual architecture derived from the theoretical review. The model is structured with a central column itemizing the six pivotal principles of critical youth work. Flanking this core, the corresponding supportive and obstructive factors are presented as interconnected through the overarching dimensions of Praxis and Apraxis, respectively. This visual representation illustrates how obstructive factors, encompassing precariousness, unsupportiveness, disenfranchisement, onerousness, limitation, and dismissal, can precipitate negative consequences, obstructing the enactment of critical youth work principles and fostering Apraxis. Conversely, the model demonstrates how supportive factors cultivate Praxis, thereby reinforcing and advancing the ethical and social justice aims of the field. This model delineates how the foundational principles of critical youth work are either substantially aided by the dynamics of Praxis or systematically undermined by the encroachment of Apraxis. Praxis corresponds with those Supportive factors that reaffirm and propel critical youth work, strengthening its ethical commitments and its capacity for actions that promote social justice. Apraxis, in stark contrast, is intrinsically linked with the aforementioned Obstructive factors, which serve to interrupt and subvert the core values of

critical youth work practice as articulated by the respondents. The model further suggests specific linkages between particular themes within these supportive and obstructive factors, thereby illustrating their tangible consequences and the opportunities for intervention.

The dimension of Apraxis, for instance, poses a significant threat to the relational integrity fundamental to critical youth work. Precarious employment, characterized by unpredictable and often unsustainable contractual arrangements, can severely disrupt the continuity of working relationships with young people and among colleagues. This inherent instability extends beyond the professional sphere, placing considerable strain on youth workers' personal lives as the insecurity stemming from insufficient or unreliable employment pervades non-work hours, thereby diminishing capacity for self-care and increasing vulnerability to burnout, particularly in the absence of adequate systemic support. Furthermore, an unsupportive work environment significantly contributes to Apraxis. Youth workers may experience profound alienation if managerial and administrative tiers, often enjoying greater remuneration and operational agency, fail to adequately recognize their frontline contributions, especially amidst conditions of job instability and escalating bureaucratic expectations. Such dynamics can breed resentment and negatively impact professional interpersonal relationships, thereby eroding the holistic potential of critical youth work, a potential that relies on youth workers themselves feeling seen, valued, and possessing a sense of belonging.

In contrast, Praxis is cultivated when organizational cultures and structures intentionally emphasize elements that reaffirm relational and holistic approaches. Supportive factors, such as the experience of reciprocal and fulfilling work, are paramount in this regard. Reciprocity, understood as a multidirectional exchange, implies that youth workers invest

their energies and expertise in young people while experiencing a reciprocal sense of being invested in and enriched by their interactions and shared experiences. This relational reward is instrumental in fostering a profound sense of fulfillment in the quality of the relational bonds formed and in the perceived opportunity to address critical service gaps. Consequently, youth workers are better positioned to be highly supportive of young people, their colleagues, and the organization at large, thereby strengthening relational connectivity and promoting a holistic practice that transcends merely transactional exchanges. Similarly, feelings of disenfranchisement constitute a potent obstructive factor under the umbrella of Apraxis, adversely affecting the application of all critical principles. While the diagrammatic representation employs arrows to illustrate specific examples of these interconnections, the relationships between factors, elements, and principles are inherently fluid and multifaceted, extending beyond any singular depiction. Disenfranchising dynamics, such as the imposition of depoliticized or depersonalized professional work environments, can alienate youth workers from holistic practice by failing to acknowledge and support them in their entirety as individuals. This can limit vital relational and advocacy components integral to their work. Such disenfranchisement also critically impedes the practice of critical reflexivity.

Oppressive conditions that alienate youth workers often compel them into modes of survival and resistance, leaving scant opportunity for the comprehensive reflexive practice that could otherwise inform and enhance organizational development. Within contexts dominated by Apraxis, a discernible fracture often emerges between the espoused rhetoric and intentionality of program stakeholders and the lived operational realities on the ground. The perception of work as excessively onerous further undermines the capacity of youth workers to engage meaningfully in critical reflexivity at an organizational level. Although

personal reflexivity may persist as an individual practice, its translation into broader project improvements and systemic change necessitates an organizational environment wherein youth workers feel genuinely empowered to effect change. Praxis directly counters these obstructive tendencies through the deliberate infusion of empowering and co-empowering initiatives. Such efforts are designed to ensure that youth workers do not feel disenfranchised and powerless but rather experience a tangible sense of agency, enabling them to influence the work they deeply care about, and which impacts them on multiple levels. This fosters relational and holistic opportunities for cooperative reflexivity, thereby aligning broader social interventions more closely with principles of integrity and effective practice. The obstructive perception of work as onerous is also significantly disrupted when youth workers understand their roles as fundamentally necessary. A clear and compelling sense of purpose is a key component here, facilitating potentially transformational outcomes. Instead of feeling discouraged by working on "downstream" issues or feeling disempowered and disenfranchised while performing tasks that seem neither urgent nor transformative, youth workers must be consistently reminded of the urgent necessity of their contributions and feel that their work is indeed resulting in meaningful change.

A reactionary response, often symptomatic of youth workers feeling limited and dismissed, obstructive factors firmly situated within Apraxis, undermines the pursuit of effective practice. When youth workers perceive their career trajectories, insights, and contributions as being unfairly restricted or systematically undervalued, perhaps through implicit assumptions of incompetence or overt practices of dismissal, their capacity to influence and inform transformational work is significantly muted. This directly obstructs their ability to be responsive and relevant within the youth sector, a core tenet of critical

youth work. Their ability to provide responsive supports is thereby corroded. Conversely, the supportive factor of youth workers feeling that their work is effective is intrinsically linked to the achievement of effective practice. Transformational opportunities for young people often emerge from the nexus of youth workers' reflexive engagement, their activism, and their capacity to be responsive in ways that are proactive rather than merely reactionary. This, in turn, cultivates a strong sense of responsibility, derived from their contributions and their demonstrated capacity to address urgent matters appropriately and effectively, thereby enhancing the potential for impactful, supportive interventions. It is evident that all the delineated obstructive and supportive factors are interconnected in complex, non-linear configurations, manifesting differently for various youth workers across diverse contexts and even at different junctures in their professional careers. Nevertheless, this model serves a crucial purpose in elucidating the conceptual frameworks that underpin critical practice. Critically, it introduces and frames Apraxis as a vital conceptual tool, enabling a more intentional and nuanced discourse concerning the counterproductive, obstructive factors that youth workers frequently encounter. The explicit recognition and understanding of these dynamics represent an indispensable first step towards their cooperative dismantlement, a process that necessitates the active support and collaboration of administrative bodies, funding agencies, and governing institutions, thereby fostering environments genuinely conducive to the flourishing of Praxis in youth work.

Implications for Practice

Prioritizing Relational Engagement

Organizations and programs should prioritize relationship building, creating an environment where time, space and resources are allocated to allow youth workers and youth to connect authentically. This includes reducing demands that pull youth workers away from direct service to complete bureaucratic reporting or compliance documentation, and it also means empowering youth workers to have greater autonomy in structuring their time. By valuing the relational aspects of the work, youth programs can more effectively support youth through mentorship, counseling, advocacy, and a sense of shared support. This approach includes mentorship programs, opportunities for informal interactions, and structured collaborative activities that foster connections between staff and service users.

Adopting Holistic and Responsive Approaches

Programs should adopt a comprehensive and flexible approach to supporting youth, ensuring they address the many inter-connected layers and dimensions of their lives. This requires recognizing the influence of societal, political and economic forces that have a bearing on wellbeing. To effectively incorporate this type of intersectional approach to care, youth programs should be tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of youth, acknowledging the importance of trauma-informed care, culturally appropriate practices, and community-based supports. This holistic focus goes beyond just addressing specific issues by focusing on overall wellness and development by engaging with a network of community-based services, rather than only what is available within an organization's immediate infrastructure.

Creating Supportive and Transparent Work Environments

The creation of a supportive work environment that recognizes the human elements of care work requires that organizations prioritize the well-being of their staff, while valuing their perspectives and contributions. This means creating transparent administrative protocols, providing access to resources, and promoting opportunities for professional growth and development. These practices should be implemented through regular mentorship, open communication channels, and active involvement in the decision-making processes for policies, initiatives and program changes. This will create a workplace culture where youth workers feel valued and empowered, thereby enhancing both their effectiveness and retention in the field.

Implications for Policy

Funding and Resource Allocation

Policymakers must move away from short-term, project-based funding models and toward long-term stable funding that supports youth programs and staffing. Short-term funding cycles create a sense of instability that undermines the ability of youth organizations to build trusting relationships and create continuity of care for service users. A transition towards long-term funding models will also better account for adequate compensation, professional development, and comprehensive benefit packages that are necessary to attract and retain qualified and committed staff. Funding priorities must also shift away from quantitative output and performance metrics, to prioritize more humanistic evaluations that consider the holistic and relational dimensions of quality youth work.

Ethical Professionalization

Administrative bodies should prioritize exploring opportunities to enhance training programs, while simultaneously ensuring that lived experience and community expertise are not devalued in the formal certification process. The value of lived experience and tacit knowledge needs to be recognized, while also creating access to accredited educational programs and professional development opportunities that ensure youth workers have access to continuous learning and career progression. Regulation efforts for developing clearer standards for youth work practice and organizational accountability must endeavor to maintain youth worker flexibility and responsiveness to support critical engagement and meeting the needs of young people and the community. As professionalization effort advance, youth, community, and youth worker voices must be involved at all stages of development, evaluation and refinement.

Equity and Social Justice

Government and policy should be actively committed to addressing classism, sexism, racism and all forms of systemic discrimination in the sector. All policies must be evaluated for their potential to perpetuate inequity and for disproportionately harming marginalized communities. New policy frameworks should be created through active engagement with Indigenous, Black, and other equity priority communities, with the goal of creating policies that are informed by their unique experiences and perspectives. This includes implementing policies that promotes culturally relevant and community-based approaches that promote social justice and that challenge existing power imbalances and resource distribution, specifically for marginalized communities.

Implications for Research

Expanding on Critical Youth Worker Theory

Future research must focus on developing a theoretical framework specifically for understanding the lived experiences of frontline youth workers in the social service industrial complex. This framework should explore the systemic challenges and institutional barriers that shape their professional lives, and amplify their unique perspectives and amplify their voices in policy discourse and systemic reform. A critical youth worker theory should actively engage youth workers as co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge, acknowledging their expertise in their lived experience and in the field, and in recognizing their contributions as both necessary and central to a comprehensive understanding of effective practice.

Exploring Concepts of BeneViolence and Apraxis

Further research is needed to explore and refine the concepts of BeneViolence and Apraxis, and to develop a deeper understanding of how these dynamics manifest in real world practices. Studies should also focus on identifying the mechanisms through which well-intended policies, practices, and programs may unintentionally perpetuate harm while also developing strategies to create interventions that effectively counter these forces. These should also be studies that engage youth and youth workers as collaborators, creating opportunities to explore the ways that systems can be redesigned to promote transparency and create genuine, positive and impactful change.

Longitudinal Studies on Career Sustainability

Further research should take an opportunity to focus on the long-term professional experiences of youth workers and the impact of work conditions on career pathways, as well as their overall mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand the long-term effects of working in the SSIC, while also exploring the factors that promote wellbeing, professional development and how to navigate burnout and other work-related barriers. There should be an effort to collect data that includes the diverse experiences of youth workers across a variety of demographics and backgrounds, and to be sure that those who are part-time or not in formalized organizations are also being heard and included in the processes of analysis and reporting.

Comparative Studies Across Care Sectors

Comparative research is necessary to explore shared dynamics and specificities across different care sectors, such as education, health, and social work, as many of these areas face similar challenges related to system navigation, resource limitations, burnout and social inequity. Comparative analyses will provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding the broader impacts of neoliberalism and the limitations of social service, while also identifying avenues for cross-sectoral collaborations that can benefit all professions in this space.

Implications for Administrators

The findings and analysis in this study illuminate a critical need for a more explicit, theoretically robust framework for supporting youth work, as the present systems do not adequately address the specific and complex needs of those on the front lines of care work. The experiences shared by the youth workers in this study highlight the inherent challenges

and ethical dilemmas of trying to do social justice work within systems that prioritize compliance, performance, and funding goals over relational and community-based care. The concept of a Critical Youth Worker Theory provides a strategic pathway for addressing these contradictions by creating mechanisms for ethical and collaborative dialogue, and by creating a system where it is possible to name and challenge harmful dynamics, as well as celebrate best practices. The following is an outline of some of the critical pillars of this proposed framework:

Centering Lived Experience

A foundational premise of a Critical Youth Worker Theory must be the centering of lived experiences of frontline youth workers, as their voices and insights are indispensable in shaping policies and practices that better support their work. This will require a significant shift in traditional research and development practices, where the expertise of youth workers is heard, regarded, and treated as equally valuable as the expertise of policymakers, managers, and administrators.

Emphasizing Reciprocal Relationships

This theoretical approach must be rooted in the acknowledgement of relationality, and how the mutual exchange of care, knowledge, and shared efforts are necessary for fostering growth among all stakeholders. Therefore, programs must adopt a practice of reciprocity that is demonstrated in their treatment of both service users and service providers.

Challenging Systemic Power

By acknowledging that the very systems that are designed to promote good and justice often fall prey to structural violence, this theory must also address these issues of

power within organizations and advocate for a more equitable resource distribution, more ethical administrative practices, and a focus on transparency and accountability.

Promoting Collective Agency

Recognizing that a single solution does not exist to address issues of systemic oppression, this theory will prioritize shared ownership and responsibility in addressing issues and promoting change. This approach should include collaboration with communities, organizations, policy makers and the young people that are most affected by the decisions that are made within these areas.

Reflections

Reflexivity

Reflexivity has been a foundational element of this research, guiding both the methodology and the interpretation of findings. Critical reflexivity is not a neutral or abstract exercise; rather, it is a deliberate and necessary act of accountability, ensuring that the research process does not replicate the very power structures it seeks to critique (Pillow, 2003). This chapter serves as both a synthesis and a reflection on the contributions of this dissertation, reviewing the problem statement, key findings, and critical gaps in the literature. Throughout this study, the focus has been on naming and analyzing obstructive factors as violations of volition, illustrating how these systemic limitations constrain the capacity of youth workers and programs to fully enact ethical, humanizing, and transformative engagement. The central argument highlights that the conditions under which youth work is structured undermine its potential by limiting autonomy, reinforcing precarious labor conditions, and embedding youth work within bureaucratic and managerialist systems that prioritize compliance over care (Baines, 2017; Spolander et al., 2014). A significant gap in

existing scholarship is the absence of critical engagement with the deeper philosophical, political, and structural tensions that shape contemporary youth work in Ontario and Canada more broadly. While the sector is expansive and deeply embedded in both community and institutional contexts, critical scholarship has yet to fully interrogate how power operates within these systems and how frontline practitioners navigate the contradictions of their work (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). This chapter reflects on these structural constraints while moving toward a broader call for transformation, arguing that discussions of decent work and professionalization must be situated within a larger framework of social and historical analysis that challenges the underlying conditions shaping the youth sector (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004).

Beyond identifying systemic barriers, this dissertation contributes new conceptual tools, BeneViolence and Apraxis, that offer a shared language for understanding the contradictions within youth work. BeneViolence names the paradox of harm enacted through the mechanisms of care, capturing how well-intended interventions often reinforce the very inequities they seek to address (Cromwell Simmonds, 2007; Blackstock, 2011). Apraxis, in contrast, reflects the systemic disconnection between critical knowledge and institutional practice, illustrating how youth workers are equipped with the skills, relationships, and commitments necessary for transformative engagement yet are continually obstructed from enacting these principles (Freire, 1970/2000). These frameworks provide a means of articulating the lived contradictions of the sector and challenging the ways harm is obscured within dominant institutional discourses. This chapter is also deeply reflective and creative in its approach, drawing on Jermaine Henry's poem, *Long Story Short* (2024), to anchor its analysis in the lived realities of youth workers. By weaving together poetry, empirical

findings, and theoretical insights, this section explores the emotional, political, and ethical dimensions of youth work. Henry's words act as both a mirror and a provocation, calling attention to how the sector extracts labor, diminishes agency, and fails to honor the depth of relational care that defines meaningful practice (Muhammad, 2019; Mackenzie, 2020). Ultimately, this chapter extends beyond critique to engage in a broader discussion on how youth work must be reimagined, restructured, and redefined in ways that honor relational care, sustainability, and justice. The concluding sections outline implications for practice, policy, research, and administration, offering a path forward that resists the reproduction of systemic harm and instead fosters conditions that support the full realization of youth workers' commitments to social change.

The final reflection of this research will be structured around the stanzas of Jermaine Henry's poem, "Long Story Short" (Henry, 2024). This poem serves as both an artistic reflection of the lived realities of youth workers and a conceptual anchor for the analysis, connecting the emotional weight of the work to the broader systemic issues at play. This analysis will weave together the findings, theoretical insights, and the visceral, lived experiences of navigating the Social Service Industrial Complex. The poem reads:

Long Story Short (Poem)

LONG STORY SHORT (Henry, 2024)

“I was at a point where:

I was mad.

I was sad.

It was bad.

I was sick;

Mentally.

Emotionally.

So, I’ve been healing.

The world’s been sick.

Locally.

Globally.

We all need healing.

Community work is heart work.

Community work is hard work.

Community work is an honor.

Community work is not honored.

The nonprofit industrial complex is:

Disrespectful.

Disgraceful.

Disturbing.

Distrusting.

It’s not ‘profiting’ us.

Often taking advantage

of the ‘vulnerable’.

Extracting brilliance from the resilient.

Offering pennies in payments.

Banking on the generosity

of the ‘vulnerable’.

This? Is so-called charity?

Reality,

we are working in a colonial state.

So-called Canada has violently set up

this system on stolen land.

The nonprofit industrial complex

is intentional.

I burnt out fighting against it.

Now, I’m accepting it; to change it.

Henry’s observation that “the world’s been sick” situates these personal struggles within a broader context of systemic neglect, economic dispossession, and political inertia. The poem

vividly presents the vesical and emotional turmoil that lies beneath the surface of the social service sector, exposing the weight of critical youth work that emerges from contradictory structures of inequity. The depiction of being “mad, sad, and bad” speaks to the disillusionment, frustration, and exhaustion that many youth workers experience when navigating a sector that demands emotional investment while offering little investment for youth worker wellbeing in return. The assertion that the “intentional” (politicized) Nonprofit Industrial Complex is “disrespectful, disgraceful, disturbing, and distrusting” disrupts dominant discourses that frame social services as benevolent while obscuring the systemic constraints imposed on those working within them. Henry’s description of the SSIC as “disrespectful” reflects the ways youth workers’ expertise is largely unseen by sectoral leadership.

As this research has argued, this exclusion is particularly evident in discussions about professionalization, where formal credentials are prioritized over lived experience, effectively shutting out many of the very people who have the deepest understanding of youth realities and systemic barriers (De St. Croix, 2016). This erasure is compounded by the ways youth workers’ labor is often appropriated without recognition or reciprocity. Youth workers are often asked to contribute their insights to reports, grant applications, and policy discussions, only to see their voices co-opted and reframed to align with institutional priorities rather than advancing advocacy against the root causes of structural violence. This dynamic mirrors what scholars have critiqued as “knowledge extraction” where grassroots expertise is leveraged to legitimize institutional agendas without fundamentally shifting power dynamics (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The business of youth work in the Social Service Industrial Complex adheres to funding mechanisms that reinforce a system in which frontline workers must constantly justify their literal worth, while most funders and policy bodies (in leadership and staff) remain insulated from the direct consequences of their decisions.

Henry's use of "disturbing" demonstrates how the SSIC can perpetuate harm under the guise of care. Youth programs that rely on risk assessment tools, behavior monitoring, and "crime prevention" initiatives often reinforce punitive structures, ensuring that young people, especially those from marginalized communities, remain under institutional supervision rather than achieving genuine self-determination (Wacquant, 2009). This logic of "distrusting" extends to both workers and service users, reinforcing hierarchies in which decision-making power remains concentrated in the hands of those furthest from the realities of youth work (Kaba, 2021). The constraints of SROI logic create an environment where relationships are instrumentalized, programs are restricted, and youth worker's active agency is not appropriately supported (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Henry's poem speaks to the pervasive exhaustion that can interrupt critical youth work when systemic failures introduce obstructive factors rather than supportive reinforcement. The "sickness" he describes extends beyond personal and embodied conditions, implicating extensively entrenched structural harm. The weight of these personalized circumstances cannot be separated from the historical trajectories of structural violence, nor from contemporary political decisions that prioritize cost efficiency over ethical accountability (Evans, 2011). The sparsity of critical frameworks addressing the SSIC in Canada has created a gap in scholarship, one that this research seeks to contribute towards. Community-engaged research must explore the cycles of burnout as well as moral distress, which weakens efforts to sustain wellbeing for workers and the communities they serve (Harrison & Weber, 2015). The disconnect between policy and practice intensifies moral distress, as workers are expected to do more with less, while being judged for efficiencies rather than ethical effectiveness (McCarthy & Deady, 2008).

The expectation that youth workers should be self-sacrificing, giving endlessly of themselves without adequate institutional support, creates a structure where care itself becomes a

mechanism of control (Baines, 2017). This dynamic is not exclusive to youth work but extends across care professions, where labor stratification entrenches hierarchies that privilege managerial oversight while obscuring the expertise of frontline practitioners (Cortis & Eastman, 2015). As the second chapter noted, similar tensions exist in health care, education, and social work fields, as frontline staff and youth do the “hard work” and the “heart work” for “pennies in payments.” Henry’s work does not shy away from naming the exploitation of vulnerability focused on economic profits at the cost of moral bankruptcy. The violation of volition (structurally violent undermining of full human potential) in youth work is a consequence of deeper ideological structures. The framing of care work as altruistic and sacrificial sustains the expectation that youth workers should bear the weight of systemic failures without resistance or regards to the emotional toll (Hochschild, 1983). As Henry testifies, this contestation compromised his mental health and emotional wellbeing, to the point of being sick. The call for healing in Henry’s poem is not just a recognition of individual exhaustion but an invocation of collective resistance against the forces that make this work unsustainable, emphasizing the necessity of addressing the conditions that produce burnout, moral distress, and professional instability. This study contributes to this ongoing conversation by centering youth worker experiences and critically interrogating the systemic forces that shape their conditions. By situating this analysis within both local and global contexts, this research reaffirms the urgency of dismantling structures that undermine care and advocates for an approach to youth work that is rooted in justice, sustainability, and community accountability.

Henry’s phrase “so-called charity” serves as a direct critique of a nonprofit sector that continues to operate through hierarchical, extractive relationships rather than true reciprocity, aligning with Freire’s concept of false charity, which describes how well-intentioned but non-critical interventions can reinforce existing power imbalances instead of dismantling them. The

exploitation of youth workers' knowledge, time, and emotional labor is inseparable from the broader logic of BeneViolence, where organizations maintain an image of benevolence while perpetuating the very inequalities they claim to challenge (Incite!, 2007). The poet's words capture the sobering reality that the youth work sector did not emerge outside of colonial conditions that structured Canadian society. The assertion that "the nonprofit industrial complex is intentional" forces a reckoning with the fact that these systemic contradictions are not accidents of history but deliberate features of the socio-political and economic frameworks that have consequences for youth work. State-funded youth programming, from its inception, has been entangled with colonial governance, particularly in its relationship with Indigenous communities. From residential schools to contemporary child welfare interventions, state-sanctioned "support" has consistently functioned as a means of regulating Indigenous populations, severing cultural ties, and enforcing assimilationist policies under the guise of care (Simpson, 2017). This legacy persists in contemporary funding models, which dictate the parameters of Indigenous-led initiatives, often limiting their ability to define success on their own terms. Instead of resourcing community-led transformation, funding remains tethered to state-defined priorities that reinforce dependence rather than fostering self-determination. Henry's acclamation that "so-called Canada has violently set up this system on stolen land" underscores the importance of deconstructing social services through a lens of decolonization, as the third chapter explicated. This call for decolonizing frontline working conditions in the nonprofit and social service sectors has additional implications for racialized and marginalized workers, who are disproportionately relied upon to bridge service gaps while being denied institutional care and regard (Gutiérrez & Lewis, 2022).

The final line from Henry's poem, "Now, I'm accepting it, to change it," is not a passive appeal but a directive, an acknowledgment that transformation requires both recognition of harm

and an active commitment to shifting the conditions that sustain it. Following a period of disillusionment and burn out with the sector, Henry's resurgence in critical awareness connected to his critical practice, allowing for opportunity to flourish in a reimagining of the sector's potential to authentically and ethically fulfill its mandates. These professional challenges cannot be separated from the political and personal consequences. Returning to my own dilemma discussed in the first chapter, where I made a decision to leave my full-time frontline job, the heaviest deciding factor was the wellbeing of the young people engaged in the programs, my communal reputation and my personal sense of integrity. How could I continue to work for (not with, given the frequent silencing of my advocacy and concerns) an organization that disrespected my colleagues and habitually failed to challenge the exploitative dynamics of the sector's complexes? My precarious economic circumstance was also a factor in this decision, but my social capital obtained through my affiliation with post-secondary institutions offered me an alternative pathway to explore. While no employment was awaiting me after resignation, at that time I had the privilege of family support for housing; therefore, I was able to remove myself from that space of contradiction and dissonance, which would either demand a great amount of emotional energy to continue to navigate or make my work far less critical in order to cope with the organizational culture and milieu. Prior to this pinnacle moment, I had found ways to navigate bureaucratic dynamics of dehumanization against myself and the young people, often times through exercising agency directly in the programs where I could promote ethical engagement and reaffirm community values. However, once the lines were drawn following the exploitative-laden termination of my co-worker and fundraising usurpation of youth engagement, my resistance could no longer take place underground.

As a result of this groundswell, the organization fractured and years later disband. Many youth, who were upset by apparent disposability of caring frontline staff, left the program on

mass, despite former management staff being called upon by the organization to pull the programs together. My colleague and I held debriefing spaces and made ourselves available to young people who were of age. It was a great disappointment when the organization refused to allow me to say goodbye to the youth in the neighbourhood programs, I complied and later heard from the young people who reached out to me that the organization implied that I had suddenly decided to depart on my own volition. This was lamentable and speaks to the lack of ethical and critical consideration for youth wellbeing in contexts where a sense of abandonment can be particularly triggering. My communication attempts with organizational leadership and board members to flag concerns weeks before the fallout (including a request for my coworkers contract viability to be met with much more regard) were ignored, and the only letter that was sent by the board after the youth exodus was a disclaimer that absolved the organization from liability and responsibility for the young people who had decided not to continue with the program. For the few young people that remained in the program and for those that left, my colleague and I remained a voluntary resource from a community-based disposition. This was the first time I had decided to leave an occupation due to an ethical dilemma with my sense of vocation, but it was not the last as I (and many others) continue to struggle with optimizing vocational contributions in an environment of vulture capitalism. As I consider the complexity and consequences of my decisions (and privilege) to be led by principles of social justice, I feel abundant and wealthy in the sense of my integrity and community relationships. When I see my former colleague and the young people and that I had worked with all those years ago, many who are now raising young people of their own, I have a great deal of pride and joy. If only, structures of governance and finance were able to better appreciate the importance of relational and communal integrity beyond the confines of human resource management and the social economy (social returns of investment). On the other hand, if I had stayed in this role, my contributions

would be no less valid if I continued to prioritize a critical approach that pushed back against external and internal practices of injustice. The integrity of community relationships is not connected to contexts of staff retention, but to the five principles of critical engagement (relational, holistic, responsive, transformational, reflexive) which form the gage by which purposeful engagement should be assessed.

I share this anecdote to demonstrate the intimate relationship between the personal, professional and political spheres when engaging in social service work; not to present a case of being on a moral high ground, but to share how the spark of inquiry that initially drove this research emerged. Everyday critical frontline workers, whether they leave, remain, resist, or reimagine programs are doing the necessary work. The ultimate question presented here, is can those working in systems of policy, administration, funding and other spheres of institutional influence make this necessary work less burdensome and ethically conflicting for those in direct service? Throughout my ten years of working with the Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) which eventually followed my full-time frontline resignation, I continued to hear echoes of the aforementioned concerns. As I led in-person certificate programs and community of practice sessions focused on frontline practice across the province of Ontario, concerns of precarious, unsupportive, disenfranchising, onerous, dismissive, and limiting experiences contested the equally resonating accounts of reciprocal, fulfilling, empowering, necessary, responsible and effective relationality. The joy and passion that youth workers share is encouraging, but the structural barriers that create obstacles for critical work carries a massive toll on the sector and on the lives of individuals which must no longer be ignored. This dissertation's recommendations are not intended to be prescriptive, but conversation starters which should center critical youth worker voices in discourse that is designed to better align theory and action.

Towards Shared Language and Conceptualizations

The findings of this study highlight the structural contradictions, ethical dilemmas, and institutional barriers that shape youth work, demonstrating the need for intentional strategies to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The implications outlined in this chapter provide a roadmap for strengthening the sector by prioritizing relational engagement, holistic service delivery, and structural accountability. By examining the intersection of policy, research, and administration, these recommendations seek to address the systemic constraints that limit the transformative potential of youth work. To promote more effective dialogue and strategic planning within the youth sector, the use of shared language is indispensable. To move forward it is important to intentionally name and reclaim the definitions of terms that have been co-opted by the Social Service Industrial Complex. This is not to imply that there is a correct definition, but to make clearer the often-invisible power dynamics that subtly influence how social policy and service is conceptualized, implemented and evaluated. The concepts of "BeneViolence" and "Apraxis," must be further explored and applied to address the inherent limitations of the current structures. BeneViolence, which describes unintended harm stemming from well-meaning intentions, serves as a potent reminder that all strategies of engagement must be rigorously and ethically examined with respect to their actual impact, rather than simply accepting their proclaimed objectives as good enough. Apraxis, which recognizes the disconnect between theory and practice, challenges all stakeholders to be aware of how structural limitations impede progress toward intended outcomes. These concepts can be used as tools to inform organizational change, policy making, funding models and evaluation efforts. These concepts are also intended to serve as a way for youth workers to better articulate their experiences with ethical dilemmas and a framework for working towards creating more equitable and humanistic practices in a sector that is so easily co-opted by capitalist and bureaucratic demands. By creating a shared

language and a unified understanding of how the system functions, we can collectively work towards building a more ethical and equitable sector for all.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: List of Terms

Apraxis: This term refers to a dissonance between theory or social justice ideals, policy or espoused intentions, and the actions of practices and implementation within the youth sector, which may often lead to unintended counterproductive consequences that create additional barriers for young people and the communities the youth sector aims to serve. It underscores how well-meaning initiatives can have negative outcomes if their structures are not continually assessed to ensure a holistic and human-centered approach.

BeneViolence: This term, which I have developed in my previous work, describes the phenomena of harm that is perpetuated through well-meaning intentions and ostensibly benevolent policies, programs and practices. It refers to actions or systems that, while purporting to serve the best interests of individuals or groups, inadvertently cause harm, perpetuate injustices, or reinforce existing power imbalances.

Critical Praxis: This refers to a practical approach to youth work that prioritizes authentic relationships, relational trust, and collaborative action to address the systemic factors that impact youth and workers alike. It emphasizes the need for an ethical framework that elevates human dignity, promotes social justice, and rejects dehumanizing and commodifying approaches to care. This term is used to describe an alternative framework that aligns with the goals of social justice that are in contrast to the dominant paradigm of neo-liberalism and capitalism within the sector.

Social Service Industrial Complex (SSIC): This refers to the interconnected network of governmental, nonprofit, and corporate entities engaged in the provision of social services. This framework emphasizes how care work is commodified by neoliberal and capitalist values that prioritize efficiency, productivity, and compliance over meaningful human connection and relational care. It also encompasses how the sector is influenced by long standing systems of structural violence rooted in colonialism.

Appendix 2: Naming Conventions

ID	Descriptive Profile	Attribute	Pseudonym
YW15	Reflects leadership in the non-profit sector and a focus on cultural empowerment.	Visionary	Vizi-15
YW17	Focus on sexual and mental health advocacy for young men and masculine-identifying individuals.	Advocate	Advo-17
YW19	Passionate about rehabilitation and supporting youth in conflict with the law.	Rehabilitator	Reha-19
YW20	Committed to holistic care, integrating mental health services with support for homelessness.	Integrator	Inter-20
YW23	Advocates for marginalized 2SLGBTQ+ youth, overcoming sectoral barriers like racialization.	Trailblazer	Trailz-23
YW25	Significant experience mentoring marginalized youth, driven by personal experiences.	Mentor	Mentr-25
YW28	Balances multiple roles, committed to helping youth transition to independent living.	Supporter	Supor-28
YW38	Dedicated to anti-human trafficking and mental health, protecting vulnerable youth.	Protector	Protek-38
YW43	Shifts from traditional to adventurous outdoor-focused youth programs.	Pathfinder	Paths-43
YW51	Specialized in vocational training and youth employment, creatively navigating youth work and forensics.	Innovator	Inno-51
YW53	Deeply involved in youth transition programs, connecting with various outreach initiatives.	Connector	Connex-53
YW54	Focuses on supporting youth in crisis, navigating employment services and systemic challenges.	Counselor	Consel-54
YW58	Leverages leisure and civic engagement for positive youth development.	Facilitator	Facila-58
YW59	Focuses on community building and cultural integration for Latino newcomer youth.	Builder	Buildz-59
YW65	Specializes in transitional housing for human trafficking survivors, driven by passion.	Guardian	Guardz-65
YW77	Provides comprehensive services across domains, advocating for stronger sector support.	Provider	Provi-77
YW80	Experienced in navigating child welfare systems and case management.	Navigator	Navi-80
YW82	Long-standing commitment to child protection and systemic change.	Defender	Defen-82
YW87	Dedicated to co-empowering young women and girls through education and skills development.	Activator	Acti-87
YW89	Committed to restorative justice and mental health support for youth offenders.	Restorer	Restor-89
YW92	Inspired by personal experiences to support students with autism and navigate systemic challenges.	Inspirer	Inspir-92

ID	Descriptive Profile	Attribute	Pseudonym
YW100	Long-term role in autism support, passionate about life skills and behavior management.	Educator	Educ-100
YW102	Uses personal identity as a key asset in mentoring newcomer and refugee youth.	Ally	Alz-102
YW104	Developed a strong foundation in educational support, guiding youth through academic challenges.	Guide	Gydz-104
YW115	Deeply committed to supporting youth through education and addressing systemic racism.	Champion	Champ-115

Appendix 3: Consent Form

The Ontario Youth Sector Compass

Youth Worker Interview Consent Form

We want to be sure that you are aware of the details of this research study and are comfortable with taking part. Please review the information provided below. Once you have read through the details, you can sign your name at the bottom of this form indicating your consent.

> WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

The Youth Work in Ontario interviews aim to better understand what youth work looks like in Ontario including who is doing the work, the conditions surrounding this work, and the wellbeing of youth workers. These interviews are part of the Ontario Youth Sector Compass research project by Youth Research and Evaluation Exchange (YouthREX) that is focused on understanding the experiences of young people and youth workers in Ontario.

> WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO?

Your participation will involve a telephone interview with a trained researcher. In the interview, you will be asked questions about your work in the youth social service sector and the conditions surrounding this work. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we will ask you. We will only ask you to answer as honestly as you can. The interview will last approximately 1 hour. You can take a break at any time during the interview. You should also feel free to skip any question you do not feel comfortable answering. With your consent, all interviews will be audio recorded so we have an accurate record of what was discussed.

> WHAT DO I GET?

All interview participants will receive a \$50 cash honorarium for their participation in the research.

> WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

This research project is led by Dr. Uzo Anucha, Provincial Academic Director of YouthREX, Associate Professor and York Research Chair in Youth and Contexts of Inequity at the School of Social Work, York University.

> ARE THERE ANY RISKS INVOLVED?

There are minimal risks to participating in this interview. You might feel uncomfortable when discussing your opinions or answering certain questions. These feelings are normal and should be temporary. You can take a break at any time during the interview. You should also feel free to skip any question you do not feel comfortable answering.

> IS PARTICIPATION VOLUNTARY?

Yes. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to not volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer questions without the need to provide any explanation. If you choose to withdraw from the study all associated data collected will be removed from the study.

> WILL PEOPLE KNOW I TOOK PART?

Any information you provide us in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential. Your name will not appear on the collected data, nor will your name or any identifying information appear in any writing that will arise from the research. All collected data will be stored on a password-protected folder on a secure server and accessible by only the research team. The data will be used for academic and research purposes only.

Audio-recording: With your consent, we will be recording the interview, which will be transcribed. All personal and identifying information will be removed from the transcripts.

Quotes: We may use direct quotes from you and the other participants in reports, publications, and presentations. Again, all personal identifying information will be removed from the quotes, and we will ensure that the quotes cannot be linked to you as an individual.

> WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH MY ANSWERS?

Your answers will be combined with those of other youth workers in Ontario who take part to build a picture of what youth work in Ontario is like, what challenges youth workers experience and what supports they require to do their job as healthily and effectively as possible. The findings will be available to policy makers and youth programs across Ontario so they can understand how to better support youth workers.

> WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Uzo Anucha either by telephone at 416-736-2100 extension 66329, or by email (anucha@yorku.ca). This research has been reviewed by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact Ms. Alison Collins-Mrakas – Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University or telephone 416-736-5914 or email acollins@yorku.ca.

Everything sounds good and you would like to take part?

Great! Fill out the form below to provide your formal consent to take part. Once you have provided your formal consent, a researcher will contact you to schedule a date and time for the interview.

LEGAL RIGHTS AND CONSENT:

I consent to participate in the Ontario Youth Sector Compass research project conducted by Dr. Uzo Anucha. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent to the following:

- I consent to participate in the Ontario Youth Sector Compass interview by the Youth Research & Evaluation eXchange Research based at York University.
- I consent to have the interview recorded.
- I consent to my de-identified quotes being used in reports and other publications that arise from this research.

Participant Signature

Date

Appendix 4: Interview Questions

ONTARIO YOUTH SECTOR COMPASS Youth Work Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE CONTENT

1. Introduction
2. Warm Up
3. Current Role in the Youth Sector
4. Conditions of Youth Work
5. Wellbeing of Youth Workers
6. Why Youth Work and What Youth Want People to Know about Your Work
7. Final Thoughts
8. Demographic Questions
9. Wrap up

INTERVIEWER INSTRUCTIONS

All of the questions below require some degree of probing. Please encourage the participant to provide details. Probe for concrete examples; for example, what makes you think that? What do you mean? Examples:

- Can you please be specific? Can you please give me an example?
- Why? What for? When? How many?

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking part in this interview.

My name is [interviewer name] and I am interviewing you on behalf of the Youth Research & Evaluation eXchange, or YouthREX, and the Institute for Social Research based at the School of Social Work at York University. If you want to learn more about YouthREX, please check out their website: www.youthrex.com.

This interview is part of the **Ontario Youth Sector Compass Research Project** that YouthREX is conducting about youth and youth workers in Ontario. Your answer will shed light into the realities of youth workers in Ontario and help us understand what youth work is like and how youth workers can be better supported to carry out their work.

The interview will last about an hour and will be recorded. We will ask questions about you and your work. There are no right or wrong answers. You just have to tell us how you really feel about these things.

Just a reminder that taking part in this interview is entirely up to you. It is voluntary. You are free to take break at any point, stop the interview, or refuse to answer questions without explaining to us why.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Once any questions have been answered and participant is happy to continue]

Great, let's begin the interview. I will now start the recorder.

SECTION 2: WARM UP

1. Thank you for participating in this interview. Just a bit curious about how you found out about this study?

- We are happy that you found out about it. Thank you again for participating.

2. Before this project, were you familiar with YouthREX and what they do?

- Have you used any of their services before? Which of the services have you used?
- What was the experience like for you?

Great, thank you for letting us know. Let's start off the interview by talking about your current work.

SECTION 3: CURRENT ROLE IN THE YOUTH SECTOR

3. Can you tell me about your current job as a youth worker and what it involves? If you have more than one job, tell us about your main one.

- How long have you been doing this job?
- What kinds of programs or activities does your organization have for youth?
- How did you become involved in working with youth?

4. Did you have this job before COVID-19? If so, how has COVID-19 affected the way you work?

SECTION 4: CONDITIONS OF YOUTH WORK

Now let's move on to the conditions surrounding youth work, including the challenges you face and the opportunities you have as a youth worker.

5. What do you like about your work and what do you find challenging?

- What are the benefits of being a youth worker?
- What are the most challenging aspects of being a youth worker? Is there anything that makes you want to quit working as a youth worker?
- What would help you overcome these challenges?

Decent work is described as work that provides fair wages and benefits, is stable, respected and valued, provides a sense of fulfillment, and occurs within a physically and emotionally safe environment.

6. Based on this definition of decent work, would you describe your current job as *Decent Work*? Why do you say so?

7. What has been your experience of finding *Decent Work* in the youth sector? Have you experienced any barriers to obtaining Decent Work?
8. Has COVID-19 impacted your work as a youth worker?
 - How has COVID-19 affected your work and how you work? (e.g., following COVID-19 safety protocols, youth engagement, remote/virtual programming etc.)
 - Are there any good aspects about the way your work has changed because of COVID-19 that you would like to see continue?
9. What supports do you and youth workers need to do your job in a healthy and effective way?
 - What kind of supports do you need?
 - What kind of training supports do you need?

SECTION 5: WELLBEING OF YOUTH WORKERS

In this next section, we want to understand how your work impacts your mental health and overall wellbeing. We would also like to know whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had any impact on you, and on your wellbeing.

10. How does your job as a youth worker impact your mental health?
 - How does it impact your mental health positively?
 - How does it impact your mental health negatively?
11. Since COVID, has the impact of your job on your mental health changed?
 - If yes, how so?
 - If no, why not?

SECTION 6: WHY YOUTH WORK AND WHAT YOU WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR WORK

12. What makes you want to keep working as a youth worker?
 - Why do you do what you do?
13. Why are youth programs needed in Ontario?
 - How do they contribute to youth wellbeing?
14. Can you share a story about any of the youth you have worked with that has touched you?
 - What is it about this youth?
 - What do you think youth like this need to do well?
 - What are things that make life difficult for them?
15. What would you really like people to know about your work as a youth worker?
 - What would you like the public to know about your work?

- What would you want the people who fund your youth program(s) to know about what you do as a youth worker?

16. If you could, what is the one thing you would change about the youth sector in Ontario?

SECTION 7: FINAL THOUGHTS

We are almost at the end of the interview.

17. Is there anything you would like to add about your work or any of the topics discussed today that we haven't covered so far?

SECTION 8: DEMOGRAPHIC

In this last section, we want to know more about who is doing youth work. I will ask you a few questions about yourself.

18. Which city in Ontario do you work?

19. What are the *first three digits* of your postal code? _____

20. How old are you? _____

21. What racial or ethnic group do you identify with most? I will read you a list of categories for you to select from.

- Arab or Middle Eastern
- Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, North American)
- Central Asian
- East Asian
- Hispanic or Latin American
- Indigenous (e.g., First Nations, Metis, Inuit)
- Pacific Islander
- South Asian
- Southeast Asian
- White
- Multi-racial/ethnic (please specify): _____
- I prefer not to answer
- I identify with another group (please specify): _____

22. Which *best* describes your gender identity? I will read you a list of categories for you to select from.

- Cis
- Gender non-conforming/non-binary
- Man
- Questioning or exploring

- Trans
- Two-spirit (Indigenous)
- Woman
- Prefer not to answer
- Other: _____

23. Which best describes your sexual orientation? I will read you a list of categories for you to select from. Please select all that apply.

- Asexual/Ace
- Bisexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Questioning or exploring
- Straight
- Two-spirit
- I prefer not to answer
- I identify with another sexuality (please specify): _____

24. What is the highest level of education you have completed? I will read you a list of categories for you to select from. Please select all that apply.

- No formal schooling
- Elementary school
- High school/G.E.D.
- Some college or university
- College diploma
- University degree
- Professional or graduate degree (e.g., MSW, M.A., Ph.D., MD, etc.)
- Other (please specify): _____

[FOR THOSE WHO HAVE COMPLETED SOME POST-SECONDARY]

What did you study? _____ (e.g., Social Service Diploma, Master of Social Work etc.)

SECTION 9: WRAP UP

We are at the end of the interview.

25. Is there anything else you would like to tell us before we conclude?

Thank you very much for taking part in this interview.

Appendix 5: Interview Questions Suggested By Cyril

Interview Questions Suggested By Cyril (February 12, 2021)

Youth Workers:

What is needed to make your job more enjoyable/sustainable?

How is youth work personal?

In what ways does youth work become political?

What is your motivation in doing youth work? Why? (we have a question like this already - this is just breaking it out a bit more rather than a subquestion)

What are your thoughts about popular youth culture now (please describe what youth culture means to you and how it influences your work with young people)?

What has been the most important lesson you have learned about supporting young people?

If you could change one major thing in the youth sector - anything at all - what is the one thing that you would change? Why is this important?

If you were able to give major funders in the youth sector one message, what would that message be?

What would you say to all parents/caregivers if there was one message that you could share with them?

What would be your message for EDs, managers and administrative staff of youth serving organizations?

What would you say to other youth workers who are feeling frustrated or helpless in their work, though they want to be able to do more for young people and the community?

If you could give yourself one piece of advice before becoming a youth worker, what would that be?

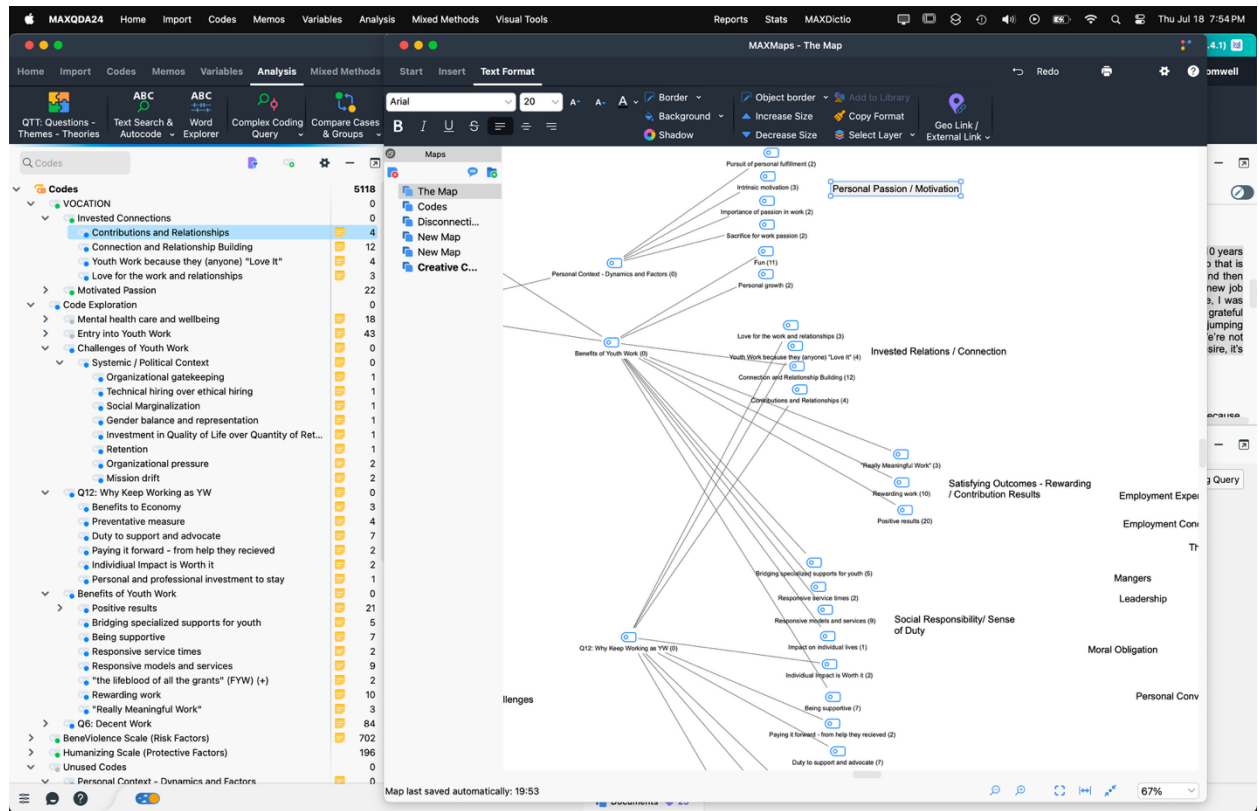
What is the greatest support you can give to a young person - what does that look like?

What have you seen as the greatest harm a youth worker or supporter can do to a young person (outside of criminal actions)?

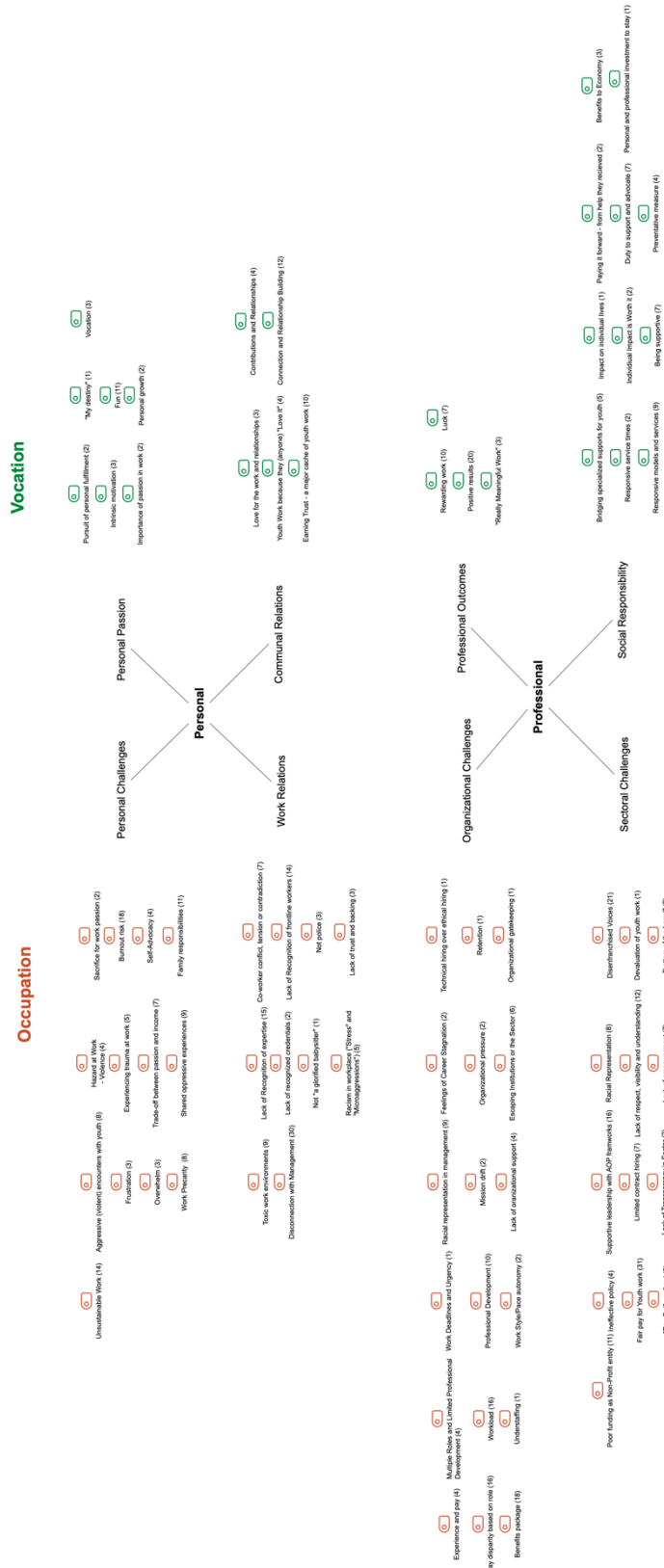
Do you believe that sharing similar lived experiences with young people is required to be the most effective youth worker (agreeability scale)?

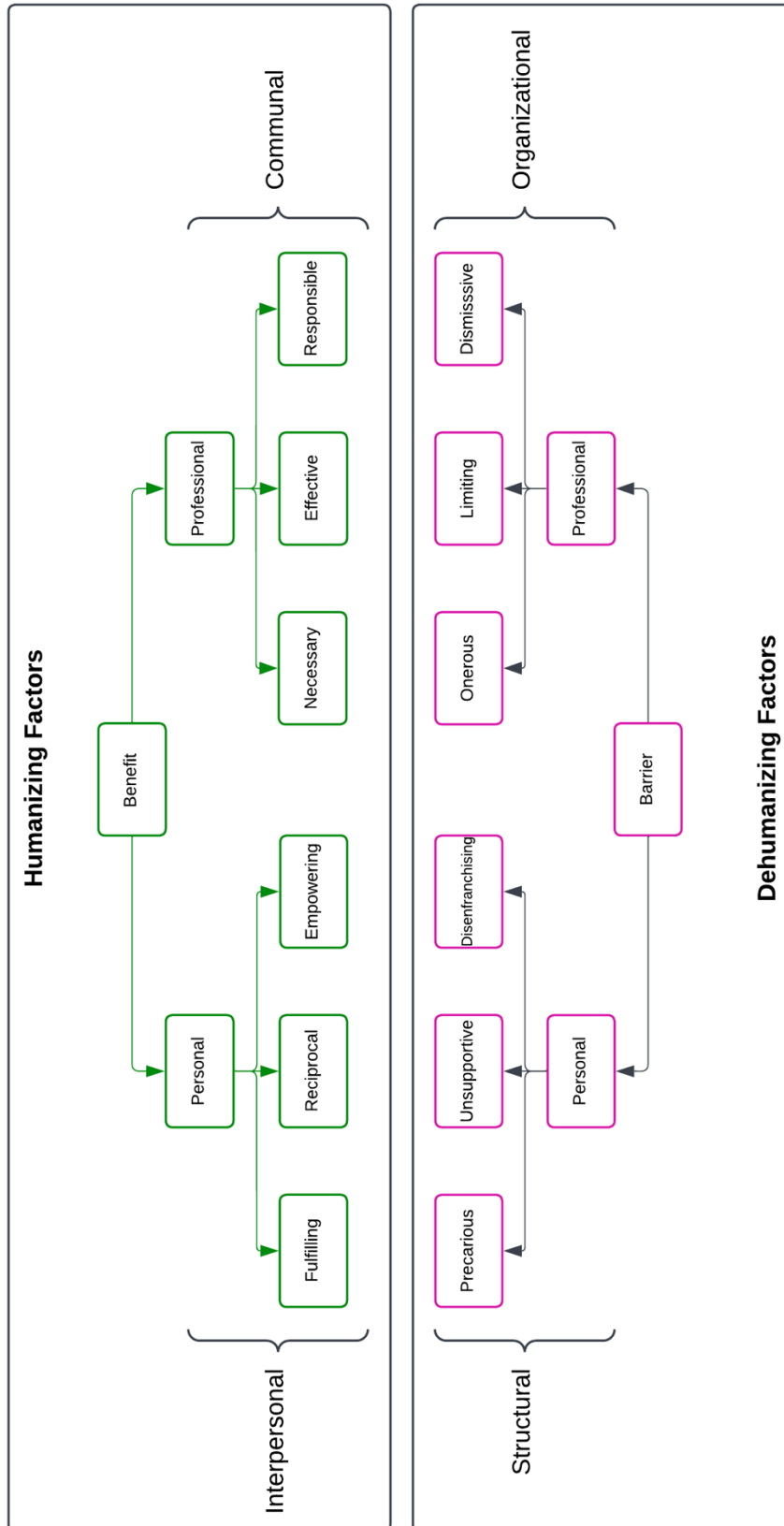
Appendix 6: Coding Process Screen Captures

Early Creative Coding Map (MAXQDA) Screen Capture: July 18, 2024



Creative Coding (MAXQDA) Screen Capture: July 19, 2024





Appendix 7: Poem by Jermaine Henry

@jermainehenry.ca Poem: Long Story Short.

<p>I was at a <i>point</i> where:</p> <p>I was mad.</p> <p>I was <u>sad</u>.</p> <p><i>It was bad.</i></p> <p>@jermainehenry.ca</p>	<p>I was sick; Mentally. Emotionally.</p> <p>So, I've <i>been</i> healing.</p> <p>The world's been sick; Locally. Globally.</p> <p>We <i>all need</i> healing.</p> <p>@jermainehenry.ca</p>	<p>Community work is heart work.</p> <p>Community <i>work</i> is hard work.</p> <p>Community work <u>is an honour</u>.</p> <p>Community work is not honoured.</p> <p>@jermainehenry.ca</p>
<p>The <u>nonprofit industrial complex</u> is:</p> <p>Disrespectful.</p> <p>Disgraceful.</p> <p><u>Disturbing</u>.</p> <p><i>Distrusting</i>.</p> <p>It's not 'profiting' us.</p> <p>@jermainehenry.ca</p>	<p>Often taking advantage of the '<i>vulnerable</i>'.</p> <p>Extracting brilliance from the resilient.</p> <p>Offering <i>pennies</i> in payments.</p> <p>Banking on the generosity of the '<i>vulnerable</i>'.</p> <p><u>This? Is so-called charity?</u></p> <p>@jermainehenry.ca</p>	<p>Reality, we are working in a <i>colonial state</i>.</p> <p>So-called Canada has violently set up <u>this system on stolen land</u>.</p> <p>The nonprofit industrial complex is intentional.</p> <p>I burnt out <i>fighting</i> against it. Now I'm accepting it; to change it.</p> <p>@jermainehenry.ca</p>
<p>Learn more at www.JermaineHenry.CA</p> <p>Offering:</p> <p>Inspirational quotes Books Coaching & Consulting Master Facilitation Community Engagement</p> <p>Main Themes:</p> <p><i>Arts, Culture, Mental Health & Leadership</i></p>		