



## Module 6: Appropriate Structure Research Review

Appropriate structure and supervision are important for the execution of the other features of high-quality youth programs such as safety, supportive relationships, and opportunities for skill-building (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Moreover, there are several other factors, such as youth's developmental age and youth programs' goals, that have an impact on how the structure and supervision within youth programs are determined. Youth programs that have appropriate structure and supervision enable both youth and youth workers to better understand each other's roles within the program and improve their ability to work collaboratively. Further, structure and supervision are related in that the level of adult supervision helps to determine the amount of structure in the youth program. Although there is consensus that appropriate structure and adult supervision are important aspects of youth programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), there is limited empirical research that explores how both concepts are related to positive youth development within youth programs. In order to provide context on the role both structure and supervision have in youth programs, the following review will focus on three main areas. First, there will be a review of the definitions structure and supervision from the literature. Second, the child and youth development literature exploring theories related to structure and supervision will be reviewed. Third, there will be a discussion of how these concepts have been found to relate to aspects of positive youth development and of the methodological issues to consider when collecting data. The paper concludes with a review of the implications of structure and supervision for youth programs.

### **What Does It Mean to Have Appropriate Structure and Supervision?**

Structure and supervision are important aspects of the foundation of any youth program and are often two of the first characteristics that are observed by new participants (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Within the context of youth programs, structure refers to the rules and expectations that regulate and govern participants' behaviors as well as how relationships and activities are arranged within the program (Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Vest Ettekal, & Okamoto, 2017). Features of highly structured youth activities include participation schedules, rule-guided engagement, emphasis on skill development, and activities that require sustained attention (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). In addition, the level of structure of a youth program determines contextual parameters for how much support adults provide and the extent to which youth are allowed to self-direct (Baldwin, Stromwall, & Wilder, 2015) such that it is a balance between the amount of control youth workers exercise and the opportunities youth have for autonomy and decision-making. The structure of a youth program is directly evident by limit setting within the program, adult guidance, and explicit rules and indirectly evident by factors such as youth-to-staff ratios, size of the program and group activities, and schedule of activities. For the structure to be "clear and consistent" youth workers and administrators must be transparent and direct while reliably enforcing rules and expectations as well as any consequences (Baldwin et al., 2015).

Supervision is an aspect of the structure of a youth program and refers to monitoring youth's behaviors within the program setting and age-appropriate leadership and/or facilitation of youth's programming and activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Supervision can be provided by youth workers, administrators, youth's family, or community members (e.g., Brandt, 2016). Regardless of who supervises, structured youth activities tend to include some degree of adult supervision (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012). Although some youth programs have activities that are "youth-controlled spaces" that have no structure and minimal adult supervision (e.g., Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000), many of those type of activities are embedded within broader, more structured programming.

### **Theories Related to Structure and Supervision**

The importance of structure and supervision for healthy development has been well-documented throughout the fields of child and youth development (e.g., Steinberg, 2001), and most of the research suggests that children and youth experience optimal healthy development in stable, predictable environments (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). For example, positive environments are believed to contribute to optimal healthy development of internal processes by allowing children to "assimilate and accommodate" their cognitive structures (Piaget, 1971; Piaget & Inhelder, 1973, c.f., Eccles & Gootman, 2002) while environments structured by healthy interactions and relationships (e.g., authoritative rather than authoritarian styles) are believed to positively influence children's and youth's interpersonal functioning (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). In addition, environments that aren't stable and predictable (e.g., chaotic and crowded) can have a negative impact on the amount of structure and supervision adults can provide as well as on a variety of children and youth outcomes (e.g., academic outcomes, interpersonal functioning; Evans, 2006). Lastly, the importance of structure and supervision is reflected by models that explore how children and youth are influenced by multiple systems within their environments (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Specifically, environments that lack structure and predictability have the potential to interfere with healthy development and maintenance of processes (e.g., relationships) that promote competence and other positive outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

Three different areas of research are briefly reviewed in order to provide context to the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts of structure and supervision as they apply to youth programs. One research area pertains to scaffolding learning environments for children and youth in order to support and challenge them to progress across multiple areas of development (e.g., social, emotional, cognitive, etc.). Scaffolding is based on the premise that structuring activities that meet children and youth just beyond their current skill level will help them progress to develop more complex skills and competencies (Bruner, 1975). Scaffolding also requires supervision, which varies depending on children's and youth's ages, abilities, and learning goals (Puntambekar & Hubscher, 2005). Furthermore, scaffolding complements positive youth development goals, especially in youth programs, because this theoretical approach to programming allows for flexibility in design and implementation and the ability to tailor the structure of activities to youth's needs.

The second area of research to provide context is parenting styles (e.g., authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful) and the various dimensions (e.g., level of structure, amount of supervision and/or monitoring) that impact not only parent-child relationships but also any adult-child

relationships (e.g., teachers, youth workers). Throughout much of the child and youth development literature, the authoritative parenting style (e.g., high structure, high warmth) has been associated with positive outcomes for youth (Baumrind, 1967, 2005). Furthermore, research has yielded evidence that aspects of different parenting styles (e.g., discipline, structure, warmth) also occur in non-parental adult relationships with children and youth outside of the home (e.g., teachers; Trickett & Moos, 1974; Walker, 2008; Wentzel, 2002). From this line of research, a new concept, “authoritative teaching,” has emerged. Authoritative teaching refers to “firm enforcement of school rules and a concerted effort to communicate warmth and concern for the well-being of each student as an individual” (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 484). Although goals and objectives differ between classrooms and youth programs, there are several parallels that make authoritative teaching applicable to youth programs. Notably, the role of structure and supervision as it arises from adult-youth interactions is similar across different settings (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004). For youth workers and youth program administrators, authoritative teaching is an important model that can be used to demonstrate how to build relationships with youth that combine high regard, warmth, and concern with enforcement of rules and expectations to create the structure necessary for optimal youth outcomes.

The third area of research is related to schools’ classroom structure and management. Within the classroom setting, structure refers to teachers’ abilities to maintain order, effectively communicate expectations and goals, and successfully convey to children and youth the means by which to attain their goals (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). When teachers give youth guidance and constructive feedback, they provide structure by scaffolding youth’s experiences so they reach their learning objectives and maintain their engagement. Qualitative data suggests that youth feel increased motivation and learning when their settings (e.g., classrooms) are well-managed, the definition of which included monitoring/supervision and variation in participation structures (e.g., hands-on activity, group discussion) in which the youth can engage (Anderman, Andrzejewski, & Allen, 2011). Also, teachers’ abilities to effectively manage their classrooms have been positively associated with teachers’ competencies such as conflict resolution skills (e.g., Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006). Structure, as viewed through classroom management, also reflects the dynamics of youth programs as regulation of the setting where the activities occur provides a conducive environment for youth workers to teach new skills and competencies. In summary, the concepts of structure and supervision are related to the aforementioned theories in ways that, either directly or indirectly, influence the design and goals of youth programs. As such, youth’s outcomes can also be directly or indirectly influenced by the structure and supervision within a setting (Eccles & Templeton, 2002).

### **Structure and Supervision and Positive Youth Development**

Many youth programs have some degree of structure and supervision that is largely determined by the program’s goals and objectives for youth. Specifically, many programs are intentional about the positive youth development outcomes they would like to foster among their participants (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005) and, as a result, develop programming and activities consistent with those goals. There is minimal quantitative or qualitative research that examines the relationships among a youth program’s structure, youth workers’ supervision, and youth outcomes (e.g., functioning, skills, competencies, etc.). As such, the following section provides a brief review of several studies that gathered data from both youth program and education (i.e., school) settings.

## **Youth Outcomes**

Specific infrastructure in youth programs, such as designated roles for youth (e.g., group leader of a certain activity), have been associated with youth feeling an increased sense of individual and group responsibility (Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009) as well as helping to create a stronger, more positive self-concept (Salusky et al., 2014). Furthermore, youth programs that were structured to intentionally teach life skills (e.g., healthy relationships, self-regulation) yielded more positive reports of program quality and higher reports of youth outcomes (e.g., prosocial values) than programs that were less structured in teaching life skills (Bean & Forneris, 2016). According to some youth, both adult-led (directive assistance, structured) and adult-facilitated (facilitative assistance, semi-structured) programs and activities had positive impacts on youth's development of agency (Larson & Angus, 2011). Greater structure in youth programs (Gerstenblith, Soule, & Gottfredson, 2005; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000) and smaller group sizes for youth activities (Gottfredson & Cross, 2007) have been linked to fewer youth antisocial behaviors. Similar to youth programs, increased structure in educational settings was positively associated with students' engagement (i.e., attention, effort, and persistence; Jang et al., 2010). The mechanisms by which more structure may be associated is unknown; however, it is possible that this link is in part due to increases in monitoring and supervision of youth (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

One type of structure in youth programs involves engaging youth in autonomous and challenging activities and using those activities as leverage for youth to develop certain competencies. For example, youth workers might develop programs with less structured, primarily self-directed activities to help youth build self-regulation skills (Morgan, Sibthorp, & Wells, 2014). However, youth workers tend to exercise more control (e.g., setting limits) when preparing for or during activities when their goals are to keep youth safe, meet deadlines, or avoid pragmatic problems (Larson, Izenstark, Rodriguez, & Perry, 2015). Yet, within structured activities for youth, roles that are open-ended (allow youth to define the roles themselves), offer a lot of support, and cultivate mutual (youth and youth worker) ownership are very well-received by youth and facilitate youth learning (Salusky et al., 2014). One overarching theme of the research regarding structure is that youth value having structure that allows for their autonomy while also encouraging active contribution to rules, expectations, and culture of the youth program (e.g., Ward & Parker, 2013). Of note, although there is an abundance of supervision that occurs by youth workers within youth programs, a review of the literature did not yield empirical research on the relationship between the concept of supervision or related constructs such as monitoring and youth outcomes in youth programs. However, in the parenting literature, youth outcomes such as academic achievement have been positively related to parental monitoring (e.g., Criss et al., 2015) while outcomes such as substance abuse have been negatively associated with parental monitoring (e.g., Lippold, Greenberg, Graham, & Feinberg, 2014).

## **Methodological Considerations**

Structure and supervision of youth programs can be measured by assessing the type of activities, staffing and the parameters set on adult- and youth-directed programming, and enforcement of rules and expectations by youth, youth workers, and administrators (e.g., Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Data are often gathered by observation of direct or indirect indicators of structure or by soliciting self-completed reports from youth, youth workers, and administrators (Gerstenblith et al.,

2005). When assessing youth's involvement in structured activities, it is also helpful to assess their qualitative experience (e.g., how meaningful and valued was the experience; Ellis, Taggart, & Martz, 2016) of those activities and contrast those data with reports of their experiences during unstructured activities. One methodological concern with gathering data regarding structure and/or supervision in youth programs relates to operational definitions of these constructs. There are instances where structure and/or supervision are assessed by youth-to-youth worker ratios while other times they may be measured by the number of unstructured activities in a program (Simpkins et al., 2017). Another methodological issue relates to lack of research testing the validity and reliability of measures, which is also a concern regarding research of other characteristics of youth programs (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010).

### **Implications for Youth Programs**

Based on a review of the positive youth development literature, there is a consensus that clear and consistent structure and supervision are important aspects of youth programs (e.g., Theriault & Witt, 2014). In addition, there is emerging research that structure and supervision will vary across youth programs as a result of differing objectives, goals, staffing, and demographics of the youth and families who attend the program (Simpkins et al., 2017). Consequently, implications for youth programs based on structure and supervision are also diverse and vary widely. In general, the data gathered in this review suggest that youth programs can benefit from implementing a variety of structures (e.g., adult-led and youth led activities, highly organized and "free play" activities) as youth have reported enjoying and benefitting from several types of formats (e.g., Larson & Angus, 2011). Another general implication based on the literature is directly related to youth workers' goals and constraints (e.g., a youth program in a dangerous neighborhood) that determine the structure of the activities as well as staffing in the program (e.g., Larson et al., 2015).

Due to significant variations in the training of youth workers, how effective youth workers are at determining and executing age-appropriate structure and supervision varies (Richmond et al., 2016). As such, a third implication is that many youth workers may need enhanced training on how to implement different structures and apply different models of supervision, both of which should be included in frameworks for youth workers' competencies (e.g., Vance, 2010). For example, many youth workers find it challenging to determine how much and what type of structure to impose on youth programs, including how to guide and structure youth's work and how best to address youth's violations of a program's rules (Larson & Walker, 2010). Specifically, several have verbalized uncertainty over structuring activities where their role is predominately as a leader or a facilitator and knowing which structure is most appropriate for youth's desired outcomes (e.g., responsibility, efficacy, etc.; Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014). Moreover, there are concerns that imposing too much structure might risk overpowering youth's abilities to express their interests and direct their own activities (Baldwin et al., 2015).

Lastly, there is evidence to suggest that how youth workers enforce rules or develop expectations may relate to their own biases and comfort levels when discussing difficult topics. For example, some youth workers feel unable to address participants' use of inappropriate and offensive language (e.g., racial slurs), even if the use of the language violates program's rules or expectations (Gutiérrez, Larson, Raffaelli, Fernandez, & Guzman, 2017). Youth workers who feel uncomfortable may



be less likely to impose structure or be directive when youth want to discuss difficult topics. Therefore, when youth workers are hesitant to consistently enforce rules because of their own discomfort or biases, additional training and professional development may be necessary to help youth workers feel better equipped to address difficult topics so that the structure and expectations of the youth program aren't compromised.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

In summary, theory (e.g., Baumrind, 2005) and empirical data (e.g., Morgan et al., 2014) support the idea that different levels of structure and supervision are important to the facilitation of healthy development and outcomes for children and youth. For decades, structure and supervision have been important components of theoretical models of child and youth development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) generally and parenting (e.g., Darling & Steinberg, 1993) specifically. As such, the ways adults structure children and youth's environments and supervise their behaviors and activities is understood to impact areas of growth such as skill-building, socioemotional functioning, and autonomy. Although the influence of structure and supervision from certain theories (e.g., parenting styles) on youth programs is somewhat removed, the association between youth program settings and educational classroom settings is much closer. For example, the skills youth workers need to structure a variety of activities and provide adequate, age-appropriate supervision overlap with similar skills teachers rely on to manage their classrooms and teach skills (Jang et al., 2010). There is opportunity to apply lessons from educational research regarding relationships between these concepts and youth outcomes for the continued development of youth programs.

Even though the research on structure and supervision within youth programs is limited, there is evidence that both aspects of a youth program's setting are influential on the experiences and outcomes of youth (e.g., Bean & Forneris, 2016). The limited findings signal the need for more nuance within the research to better identify the underlying mechanisms related to structure (e.g., Is there a point where highly structured programs are counter-effective?) and supervision (e.g., Are youth outcomes related to youth workers actively monitoring youth as opposed to simply knowing in what activities they are involved?) in youth programs. Future research could also include more reliability and validity studies of measures used in assessing youth programs' structures and levels of supervision. Further, additional research could use different methods (e.g., observational methods, self-report) to establish more support of the operational definitions of structure and supervision. Also, more research is needed from youth workers' perspectives as to how structure and supervision are applied with different age groups, across different activities, and in different settings. As youth programs become more inclusive of youth and their families (Theriault & Witt, 2014), there are increased opportunities for researchers to examine how youth programs' structures and levels of supervision can be used to enhance and expand efforts of inclusivity. Overall, current literature suggests that sufficient structure and age-appropriate supervision are vital for youth programs and that without them, other characteristics of high-quality youth programs (e.g., safety, positive relationships, opportunities to belong, etc.) become less relevant (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

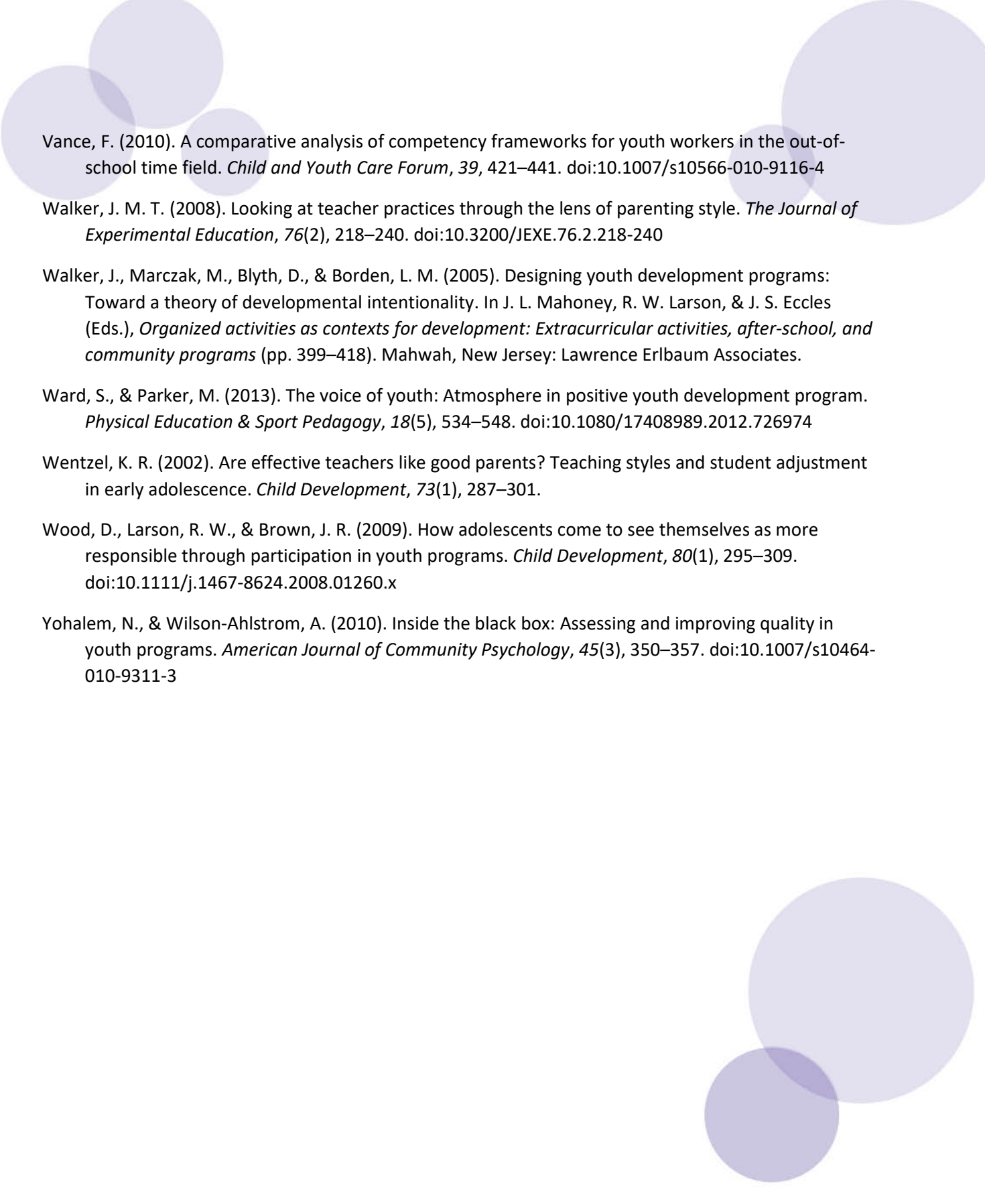
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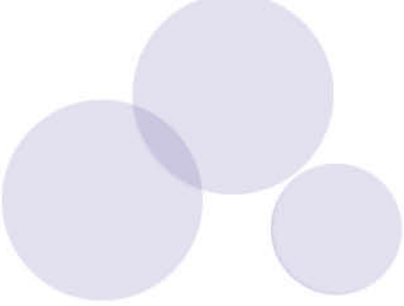
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## Appendix A

### Glossary of Terms

**Positive youth development:** a strengths-based, holistic approach to studying and working with youth that focuses on promoting healthy development. Positive youth development research and practice tends to emphasize environmental rather than internal influences on development, altering systems that may foster positive and healthy youth development. In research and practice, the term “positive youth development” may refer to a developmental process, an approach to youth programming, or a specific program or organization.

**Youth programs:** programs that foster youth’s personal development (e.g., social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies), participation, and empowerment while fostering relationships between supportive adults and young people. Youth programs are diverse in their structure, goals, and the youth they serve. These programs may be referred to as after-school, out-of-school, and/or youth programs; throughout this report the term “youth program” refers to any of these programs.

**Youth workers:** volunteers and paid staff, including administrators and individuals engaged in direct service, who engage in youth development work in a variety of settings and programs outside the regular school day. Similar terms include youth development professionals, after-school providers, and youth leaders. For the purpose of this paper, the term "youth worker" will be used to describe all professionals who work in youth programs.



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