Youth Workers' Professional Development: The Importance of Youth Development Certificate Programs

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Submitted by:

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Military REACH, a project of the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families, utilizes a multi-disciplinary approach integrating both Research and Outreach to support those who work with and on behalf of military families. Through our three-fold approach, we provide empirical research that identifies and addresses key issues impacting military families and the programs that serve them, offer outreach and professional development through online resources, and host a Live Learning Lab for program staff seeking constructive professional development feedback for their programs.

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Executive Summary

Youth development has emerged as an important field within the study of human development in recent years and includes topics such as prevention of youth problem behaviors and promotion of positive youth development (J. Lerner et al., 2013). High-quality youth programs foster positive development of children and adolescents and, subsequently, minimize the likelihood of youth developing problem behaviors (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Based on youth programs' task of promoting positive youth development, it is important to ensure the quality of these programs. Multiple studies support a link between quality youth programs and positive youth outcomes (e.g., Paluta, Lower, Anderson-Butcher, Gibson, & Iachini, 2016; Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010). A core component of quality youth programming is having well-trained and competent workers (Silliman & Schumm, 2013; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Well-trained workers are created in part by participation in high-quality youth development certificate programs and professional development trainings (Evans, Sicafuse, Killian, Davidson, & Loesch-Griffin, 2009; Shockley & Thompson, 2012). Moreover, quality youth development certificate programs are characterized by the ability to train youth workers well, strengthen youth programs, and promote positive youth outcomes. Given how interrelated youth programs are with youth outcomes, youth workers, and youth certificates, a better understanding of the nature of these relationships is needed.

A broad review of empirical articles, literature reviews, research reports, and book chapters was conducted using databases that included PsycINFO, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Academic Search Premier. A variety of search terms were used that included: youth workers, youth programs, youth outcomes, positive youth development, and youth certificates. This search resulted in the identification of numerous articles and other materials that were used to inform this report.

This report presents a comprehensive review of the literature regarding the links between youth outcomes, youth programs, youth workers, and the importance of youth development certificate programs. To better understand these links, three influential models of youth development are discussed as these provide frameworks for these relationships. These models suggest that positive youth outcomes are a result of quality youth programs and competent youth workers within those programs. Specifically, high-quality youth programs have been associated with improved academic outcomes (e.g., Wade, 2015), more prosocial behaviors (e.g., Pierce et al., 2010; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007), fewer delinquent behaviors (e.g., Sanders & Munford, 2014), healthier adult and peer relationships (e.g., Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011; Shernoff & Vandell, 2007), and positive socio-emotional functioning (e.g., Bowers, Wang, Tirrell, & Lerner, 2016; Mueller et al., 2011). Although there have been mixed findings in the literature (Taheri & Welsh, 2015), the overall trend is that most youth programs have a meaningful impact across multiple domains of youth development (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Based on youth programs' goal of promoting positive youth development, it is important that youth programs: meet or exceed high quality standards, reflect the components of positive youth development, and consist of competent youth workers (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010).

In order for youth programs to be successful, youth workers must participate in formal and informal trainings to learn skills and gain resources to enhance their competencies. Many youth programs or organizations affiliated with youth programs have created certificates and other offerings that indicate youth workers have received advanced training (Bouffard & Little, 2004). Attached to this document is a

listing of six youth development certificate programs that are available to youth workers (see Appendix A). The programs vary in cost, location, and curricula. Although each certificate program has various strengths, the certificate programs included in this report vary widely, and some programs do not incorporate key components related to important knowledge and skills of youth workers (e.g., do not explicitly include training on cultural diversity). As a result, the findings of this report indicate there is need for a high-quality, evidence-based, and standardized youth development certificate program to help ensure the quality of professional development of youth workers, the youth programs where they work, and the outcomes for youth and families they serve.

Introduction

The positive growth and healthy functioning of youth has been the responsibility of families and communities across time and cultures. In the modern era, the systems and programs that support positive youth development are varied and range from religious groups and non-profit organizations to sports leagues. Youth programs vary widely in goals and practices (Lauer et al., 2006) as these are a reflection of the growing diversity of youth, their families, and their needs during childhood and adolescence. Quality youth programs aim to partner with youth and their families to enhance positive and minimize negative outcomes. To achieve the best youth outcomes, quality programs require competent youth workers. A reliable way to ensure youth programs have competent youth workers is for workers to participate in a youth development certificate program. Studies consistently suggest that the expertise of youth workers is an important factor in the success of youth programs (e.g., Hirsch et al., 2011; Jones & Deutsch, 2011). The competence of youth workers and the quality of their relationships with young people are among the most beneficial predictors for youth outcomes (e.g., Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002). Given these findings, it is essential that individuals who work with young people have the knowledge and skills to do so effectively. As such, the necessity of professional development and the ways in which youth workers obtain their knowledge and skills are the foundation of this research report.

Upon a review of the literature, it is evident that the study of youth programs, youth outcomes, youth workers, and youth development certificate programs are interconnected. The goal of this document is to discuss how the research on youth outcomes, youth programs, and youth workers has contributed to youth workers' professional development, generally, and youth development certificate programs, specifically. To achieve this goal, there is a discussion of the interrelationships of positive youth outcomes, quality youth programs, and competent youth workers, and, that, when well-integrated, form the basis for high-quality youth development certificate programs. To better understand these interrelationships, it is important to clearly define terminology related to youth programs.

Youth programs are diverse in their structure, goals, and the youth they serve. These programs foster personal development, participation, and empowerment of youth (Davidson, Evans, & Sicafuse, 2011) while fostering relationships between supportive adults and young people (Zand et al., 2009). Specifically, youth programs promote young people's social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies (Borden & Perkins, 2006). 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. The term "youth worker" refers to volunteers and paid staff who engage in youth development work as their primary career; the term includes individuals engaged in direct service, as well as administrators (Borden & Perkins, 2006). There are a variety of terms used to refer to youth workers, such as 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. Youth workers are employed in a variety of settings and programs and provide services outside the regular school day. The next step in discussing the interrelationships among youth outcomes, youth programs, and youth workers is a review of a selection of models of positive youth development that serve as the foundation of these associations.

Models of Youth Development

There are numerous models of youth development (J. Lerner et al., 2013) and most encompass a combination of people, program characteristics, and environments that impact the well-being and development of youth. Positive youth development is a strength-based perspective that provides a model of the multitude of experiences and settings that lead to growth and positive changes for children and adolescents until adulthood (R. Lerner, 2009). Quality youth programs and competent youth workers are responsible for contributing to the positive development of youth so as to increase the likelihood of positive youth outcomes. As such, it is important to briefly review influential models that broadly discuss human development (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and specifically address positive youth development (e.g., Benson, 2002; R. Lerner, 2009) to better understand different ways youth outcomes, youth programs, and youth workers are connected.

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Bioecological Model and Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development models were preceded by more general models of human development. A well-cited example is Bronfenbrenner and colleagues' (1977, 2006) bioecological model of human development. Although this model is not explicitly related to positive youth development, it can be used to understand how youth develop strengths and competencies. Moreover, it can provide a model for how youth workers and youth programs fit into the environment and influence the development of youth. This model explores how various components of youth's lives interact throughout their childhood and adolescence. In this model, there are four systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) that interact and contribute to child development. Positive youth development can be said to be a direct product of the microsystem (the relationships between the child and family, peers, mentors, and other important individuals) and the mesosystem (the interactions among the various components and settings within the child's life). For youth, interactions within and between these systems increase as they develop and have more engagement with the people and settings in their environments. For youth who attend youth programs, youth workers are part of their microsystem, while youth programs are a setting within their mesosystem; therefore, both are important pieces to their overall development and well-being.

Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development

Lerner, Lerner, and colleagues (2003, 2005, 2009, 2013) have presented the "five Cs," a model of positive youth development that proposes five characteristics that describe primary attributes of youth who thrive in their environment. The "five Cs" are competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring and represent traits that indicate positive development across multiple domains (R. Lerner, 2009). This theoretical model proposes that youth's strengths (e.g., prosocial behaviors) and environmental assets (e.g., youth programs) contribute to their positive development (i.e., "five Cs") and, as a result, decrease the likelihood of negative and delinquent behaviors. Moreover, the "five Cs" increase the opportunities for contributions to self, family, and broader environment (J. Lerner et al., 2013). As such, the development of the "five Cs" is a result of frequent and consistent interactions with positive adults, peers, and structures within the environment. Youth who develop the "five Cs" are thriving and, across adolescence, will acquire competencies that lead to the sixth "C:" contribution. "Contribution" refers to

positive contributions to self (e.g., maintaining good health, developing a career) and to family, peers, community, and societal institutions (R. Lerner, 2009). Also, youth workers have an important role in the development of the characteristic "contribution" because they provide experiences that teach youth a variety of competencies to contribute to their environment (R. Lerner, 2009).

Developmental Assets Model of Positive Youth Development

Benson and colleagues (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011; Benson, 2002) put forth the developmental assets model that proposes how youth develop strengths and qualities that form the basis for positive youth development in adolescence. This model is based on the premise that developmental assets are health-promoting characteristics of an individual and their environments (e.g., family, peers, school) that increase the likelihood of positive outcomes and behaviors in the life of the adolescent. Specifically, the model is divided into internal assets (e.g., positive identity, social competencies) and external assets (e.g., social support, constructive use of time). According to this model, developmental assets occur as a result of repeated positive contact with caring and responsible adults and peers in varied and numerous contexts. Furthermore, these exposures are reinforced by community networks and institutions (Benson, 2002). Also, increases in developmental assets have been associated with increases in prosocial or "thriving" behaviors and decreases in risk behaviors (e.g., Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). Youth programs provide environments that allow youth to build and strengthen various developmental assets, such as social competencies and skills that enhance their overall well-being.

The three aforementioned models are not a comprehensive list of development models, but rather a representation of models that are prominent in the positive youth development field and have important links to the area of positive youth development. Moreover, all three models have had a significant influence on the structure and goals of youth programs. Based on models of youth development, youth who thrive have positive and constructive interactions with the people and social structures in their environments. Further, adaptive interactions and positive outcomes are indicators that youth are on a positive developmental trajectory.

Youth Outcomes in the Context of Youth Programs

High-quality youth programs are based on the components of positive youth development theories and can help improve youth outcomes. Youth outcomes are often organized into academic, behavioral, interpersonal, and socio-emotional functioning categories. Theories of positive youth development, when utilized within a youth program, emphasize and encourage youth to strengthen personal characteristics and experiences in their lives (Hirsch et al., 2011). The following section provides descriptions of several studies regarding the previously mentioned categories of outcomes. These studies offer support for how youth programs can positively contribute to youth functioning.

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Academic Outcomes

Academic improvements, interest, and experiences are a few of the outcomes that emerge from the literature when studying positive youth development and academic outcomes. In general, academic outcomes are defined as positive academic-related experiences, grade point averages or grades, or homework completion (e.g., Leos-Urbel, 2013; Schwartz, Rhodes, & Herrera, 2012). Quality

of experiences in youth (after-school) programs may be a more important factor than the quantity of experiences (i.e., dosage) in predicting positive academic outcomes. For example, feeling engaged, challenged, and important during youth (after-school) programs was associated with higher English and math grades in some students than among students who did not feel engaged, challenged and important (Shernoff, 2010). Increased homework persistence and completion were also positively associated with more youth workers' engagement in after-school activities (Leos-Urbel, 2013). In addition to increased youth workers' engagement, positive youth worker-youth relationships were associated with better academic outcomes (Pierce et al., 2010; Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, & Grossman, 2010).

Behavioral Outcomes

> **Delinquent behaviors**. Along with academic-focused outcomes, there is evidence that participation in youth programs is related to decreases in externalizing or problem behaviors. For example, adolescents participating in a youth (after-school) program were significantly more likely to view drugs as harmful after 7 months of participation. A subsample of youth also demonstrated a significantly reduced incidence of past 30-day use of alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs, as well as reduction in any drug use one year after program enrollment (Tebes et al., 2007). Programs and services using positive youth development approaches were related to higher levels of resilience in at-risk youth (Sanders & Munford, 2014), as well as behavioral improvements over time (Vandell et al., 2007).

> **Prosocial behaviors**. Engagement in youth programs can promote an increase in prosocial behaviors (Evans et al., 2009; Hirsch et al., 2011). For example, regular participation in high-quality youth (after-school) programs was linked to significant gains in work habits as well as reductions in behavior problems (Vandell et al., 2007). Similarly, youth attributed becoming more responsible with consistent engagement in youth programming and after-school activities (Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). Some youth programs have used interventions and activities that promote healthy lifestyles. In a comparison of middle school students' experiences while in youth (after-school) programs with their experiences in other settings during weekday, after-school hours, participants reported higher quality of experiences (e.g., feeling more challenged, utilizing more skills, and having positive mood states) when in youth (after-school) programs compared to other settings after school (Vandell, Shumow, & Posner, 2005).

Positive peer and non-parental adult relationships

A vital aspect of youth outcomes stems from a wide range of positive relationships with peers, staff, and other adults, such as community partners (Dawes & Larson, 2011; Hirsch et al., 2011; Pierce et al., 2010). Positive relationships with competent youth workers are critical to supporting positive youth development (Bouffard & Little, 2004; Evans et al., 2009). When youth were connected to both peers and adults, they had higher overall engagement in youth programs than if they were connected to only peers or only adults (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). In addition, youth involved in programs that promoted participation from family and community members had increased academic success (Vandell et al., 2007) and greater well-being (Paluta et al., 2016; Silliman & Schumm, 2013).

Socio-emotional well-being

Socio-emotional well-being, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and positive self-regulation, has also been studied as a youth outcome in youth programs. For example, data that assessed quality of youth-adult

relationships at one time significantly predicted youth's intentional self-regulation at a later time (Bowers et al., 2016). Youth who participated in a youth (after-school) program were more likely to engage with other peers and activities that allowed youth to report increased feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Bowers et al., 2016). When a program promotes meaningful involvement, youth have opportunities for connection to others, self-discovery, and empowerment, which in turn leads to more positive youth outcomes. Hirsch (2011) discussed the academic and psychosocial outcomes of youth involved in quality youth programs and posited that both are increasingly positively impacted while participating in quality youth programs.

In sum, youth program quality is linked to improved youth outcomes, such that higher quality programs have resulted in more positive outcomes for youth (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). The characteristics of youth programs that will have the strongest link to youth outcomes are described in the next section.

Components of Quality Youth Programs

Youth programs are housed in a variety of settings and sponsored by a variety of organizations. Some of the common settings and sponsors include schools (e.g., athletic, academic, and drama clubs), faith-based programs (e.g. missions and community service projects), community-based programs sponsored by national organizations (e.g., 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs of America), and community programs (e.g., summer camps). What constitutes necessary components for creating a quality youth program continues to be debated in the literature. Measures that assess youth programs have demonstrated discrepancies among characteristics that constitute quality programs (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Nevertheless, the following section represents constructs that have consistently emerged from recent research on quality youth programs.

Quality relationships between Youth Workers and Youth

Quality relationships between youth workers and youth are vital to program impact (Hirsch et al., 2011). Positive relationships with youth workers, peers, and other community partners create an environment that promotes a sense of belonging for youth, which can increase self-efficacy and positive self-worth in the environment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Most youth who reported increased engagement in their youth program did so as a result of personal connections and meaning they made with the youth workers and peers (Dawes & Larson, 2011; Shernoff & Vandell, 2007).

Program Structure and Design

Effective youth programs have various developmentally-appropriate activities and programming to meet youth's numerous needs. These youth programs use activities to create opportunities to empower youth to engage in leadership roles that increase self-efficacy as well as promote a sense of physical and psychological safety for all youth within the setting. Therefore, youth workers must be skilled in offering structured, predictable experiences for youth, including clear boundaries and expectations in the program environment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

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Many programs have used developmental constructs from early childhood programming in order to provide more uniformity in their curriculum (Baldwin & Wilder, 2014; Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazevski, & Akiva, 2010). However, due to different developmental needs, youth programs must create activities and design programming that are centered around foundational adolescent and young adult milestones (Baldwin, Stromwall, & Wilder, 2015; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Program design has received less attention than other areas within youth programs, such as youth competency and program leadership, which is unexpected given that program design is cited as a component imperative in creating high-quality youth program environments (Baldwin et al., 2015). Further, program designs that have age-appropriate activities that promote prosocial behavior, encourage academic and community skills, and create quality, healthy relationships were factors in youth's decisions whether or not to engage in youth programs (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2015; Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010).

Evaluation and Assessment

Youth programs that excel in quality programming and youth outcomes utilize measures that evaluate workers' skills, program outcomes, and activities. For example, an increase in consistent youth workers' skills and quality programming was found as a result of the coaching, continued observation, and targeted trainings provided to youth workers (Sheldon et al., 2010). However, a review of evaluation measures that assess youth programming showed minor inconsistencies among definitions of quality and core concepts related to youth program quality (Hansen & Larson, 2007; Larson & Walker, 2010; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). Appropriate structure of evaluations is deemed necessary, as it provides clear and consistent rules, boundaries, and expectations for both workers and youth within their setting (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Evaluations can also provide insight to inform decisions about the youth program, and to ensure activities are acceptable, accessible, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant.

Well-trained and Competent Youth Workers

> Overall competency and skills of youth workers can determine the quality of service provided by youth programs.

Well-trained and competent youth workers have consistently been identified as one of the most important factors in program impact (Silliman & Schumm, 2013). To retain a quality workforce, youth workers must be skilled at assessing various "dilemmas of practice" and responding effectively to those dilemmas (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Larson & Walker, 2010). For example, one study revealed 250 different situations that may require a youth worker to address numerous, often contending, considerations during the course of their career (e.g., responding to youth's personalities and unique needs; working within the constructs of limited time and resources; Larson & Walker, 2010). Moreover, low-quality programming can be related to a lack of expertise and understanding of youth workers (Cross et al., 2010).

Overall competency and skills of youth workers can determine the quality of service provided by youth programs. Eccles and Gootman (2002) posit that there are eight critical factors that lead to quality youth programs: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill-building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts. These eight factors are contingent upon the competency of youth workers. Even though a quality structure may be in place within youth

programs, without well-trained and competent workers, the programs may falter. Since there is a heavy reliance on youth workers and their ability to manage relationships, program structure, conflict resolution, familial issues, and developmentally appropriate activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), inadequately trained workers will likely contribute to poor-performing youth programs.

Youth Workers' Skills and Knowledge

As previously mentioned, youth workers are a vital part of the success of any youth program (e.g., Jones & Deutsch, 2011). Part of this success is that youth workers are as varied and diverse as the programs where they work, which helps build connections with a wide range of youth and their families. Moreover, not only do youth workers represent multiple backgrounds, but they also often serve youth programs in multiple roles. In addition to nurturing positive relationships with young people, youth workers foster relationships with youth's caregivers, provide referrals to additional resources, and collaborate with other programs and agencies to bolster youth outcomes (Vance, 2010). There are several common standards for youth workers' competencies that multiple government, non-profit, and policy organizations put forth to ensure high quality training of workers (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009; Vance, 2010). The following section provides a review of common competencies of youth workers.

Youth Workers' Competency

Youth programs serve a variety of young people in a wide range of settings; therefore, identifying the requisite knowledge and skills for youth workers is challenging (Vance, 2010). In fact, much of the variability among expected competencies for youth workers is due to the different settings in which programs are located (e.g., urban or rural communities, programs on military bases). First, it is important to distinguish between competencies of youth workers and characteristics of high-quality youth programs. Characteristics of high-quality youth programs refer to the standards and offerings of the programs (i.e., what the programs do) to create an environment where youth can thrive, while competencies of youth workers refer to what workers need to know to achieve the programs' goals (Starr et al., 2009).

The following are a list of competency areas that have emerged as common across multiple frameworks and designs among government, non-profit, professional development, and youth policy programs and organizations: curriculum implementation, managing the environment (within the youth program), child and adolescent development, cross-cultural competence, guidance, connecting with families, connecting with communities, health, safety, and nutrition, professionalism, professional development, and program management (Starr et al., 2009; Vance, 2010). The description of youth workers' competencies are divided into two categories in this document: knowledge and skills. Since quality youth programs and competent youth workers are closely aligned (Borden & Perkins, 2006), it is helpful to review commonly agreed upon youth worker competencies in the context of characteristics of high-quality youth programs (as proposed by Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

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Knowledge. Youth workers are expected to obtain certain knowledge to excel in their roles and responsibilities in youth programs. Professional development and program management are two

competencies that relate to youth workers' demonstration of professionalism and management skills in their roles. Both competencies reflect the importance of complying with policies, managing time efficiently, and enhancing one's own skills. Another competency area, curriculum, is reflective of youth workers who are able to execute program goals by designing activities that meet youth's developmental needs. Competency in the area of curriculum indicates youth workers have the knowledge to create a setting that has opportunities for skill building and appropriate structures (e.g., rules, expectations, and boundaries; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Starr et al., 2009; Vance, 2010).

Environment, another competency area, suggests youth workers know how to maintain a safe environment and an atmosphere that promotes well-being. Moreover, youth workers who create a safe environment will help to develop a setting with physical and psychological safety for youth. That knowledge is also reflected in competency related to health, safety, and nutrition, which reflect workers' ability to promote wellness and healthy lifestyles. To apply that knowledge appropriately requires an understanding of healthy child and adolescent development. Knowledge of child and adolescent development, another competency area, allows workers to develop age-appropriate activities and recognize normative and non-normative skills and behaviors among youth. An understanding of child and adolescent development will help youth workers maintain a setting that provides opportunities for skill-building and support for youth's self-efficacy and empowerment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Starr et al., 2009; Vance, 2010).

Skills. Building connections with youth's families and establishing relationships with their communities are two areas that are generally recognized as necessary competencies in the field of youth programs (Vance, 2010). Further, building connections encourages the families' and community members' support and involvement in youth programs. Also important in building connections is cross-cultural competence. Cross-cultural competence, another competency area, is a skill that involves sensitivity to and awareness of youth's differences and the creation of an environment that reflects and is sensitive to that diversity. Youth workers who have this skill are able to foster an environment that includes supportive relationships, opportunities for youth to belong, and synergy among the multiple systems in youth's lives (e.g., family, school, and community; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Starr et al., 2009; Vance, 2010).

Positive guidance and communication are two competency areas that are interrelated and often cited as important skills for youth workers (e.g., Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004). Workers who are skilled at positive guidance manage behavior by using constructive, non-punitive techniques that empower youth. They also have verbal and nonverbal communication skills that are respectful and lay the foundation for positive interactions with youth, their families, colleagues, and community members (Starr et al., 2009; Vance, 2010). Based on a review of research documents, the competencies described in this section are considered a comprehensive list and reflect the complex role youth workers play in youth programs.

In order for youth workers to obtain competencies in the areas previously outlined, they need to participate in formal and informal education, such as certificate programs, workshops, seminars, and experiential training. The importance of professional development has been documented among the research on youth programs (e.g., Quinn, 2004), and there are data to support its utility (e.g., Rana et al., 2013). However, few workers have received formal training in the knowledge and skills needed to be effective in their roles (Shockley & Thompson, 2012). A comprehensive national survey comprised of two national studies, the Next Generation Study and the Afterschool Association Study (Yohalem &

Pittman, 2006), provided insight into the educational characteristics of youth workers. More than half of the youth workers had a four-year college degree, which suggests that many youth workers were highly educated; however, other research (e.g. Borden et al., 2004; Vance, 2010) discovered that many of these degrees were not explicitly in youth development. Therefore, youth workers' knowledge and skills did not always easily apply to youth work. For example, although a majority of youth workers in one study had a bachelor's degree or higher, only one-third received training in youth development or a related field (Hartje, Evans, Killian, & Brown, 2008). The previously mentioned findings present concerns about youth workers' ability to engage in professional development before beginning youth work or while employed at a youth program. For example, youth workers were surveyed regarding current sense of competency and professional development and low levels of agency support were found for involvement in continuing professional development. In addition, 56% of youth workers stated that "increasing professional development" was imperative to move the youth development field forward (Evans et al., 2009).

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Taken together, many youth workers are insufficiently prepared for the complex environments in which they work (Borden et al., 2004). Youth workers are often asked to quickly make decisions that involve recognizing, understanding, and addressing complex situations that arise when working with young people, such as resolving conflicts between youth, other youth workers, and management. Youth workers who are new to youth programs or have not participated in any trainings often lack the knowledge and skills needed to effectively address these problems (Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker, 2009). As a result, the need for more training for youth workers is often addressed by improving professional development efforts.

Youth Workers' Professional Development

As youth workers represent a diversity of training and experiences, it is important to have standards regarding the professional development of youth workers so that they learn the same concepts as well as become confident in their roles.

Professional development is vital because it enhances youth workers' abilities to relate effectively to youth and to develop and implement curricula for youth programs (Bouffard & Little, 2004). As such, youth workers' competence and knowledge is positively impacted by professional development training. For example, youth workers who completed training to improve implementation of healthy eating and physical activity programming at a youth (after-school) program had significant improvements in their abilities to include those topics in the curriculum (Weaver, Beets, Saunders, Beighle, & Webster, 2014). Furthermore, youth workers who became certified as youth workers were rated as more competent at their jobs by their supervisors compared to those who did not become certified (Curry, Eckles, Stuart, Schneider-Muñoz, & Qaqish, 2013). The results of these studies, as well as other research (e.g., Thompson & Shockley, 2013), suggest there are multiple types (e.g., trainings, certifications) of professional development for youth workers. However, certificate programs appear to be emerging as the standard in the field of professional development of youth workers (Borden et al., 2004).

Two studies illustrate the impact of a certificate program to enhance professional development. Youth workers from the Building Exemplary Systems for Training (BEST) Youth Worker Certificate Program reported improvements in their knowledge and skills in curriculum development, health and safety issues, diversity, and methods of engaging children and other workers after completion of the program (Fancsali, 2002). In a qualitative study of youth workers who completed a youth certificate program, the Youth Studies Certificate, at the City University of New York (CUNY), workers reported more confidence, increased self-efficacy, better approaches to their work, and a broadened view of the principles and practices of youth development work (Thompson & Shockley, 2013). Although not yet presented in a published report or study, the University of Minnesota's Military Center for Research and Outreach (REACH) has professional development training as the basis for a certificate program for youth workers interested in increasing their knowledge and skills on positive youth development and youth work.

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As the studies in this section suggest, professional development is imperative for the success of youth, youth workers, and youth programs. Certificate programs provide more in-depth information and additional opportunities for skill development in the ongoing professional development of youth workers (Shockley & Thompson, 2012). Furthermore, certificate programs provide foundational knowledge and skills that are necessary for entry-level and advanced youth workers to work effectively with youth and increase youth program outcomes. Therefore, it is important that youth development certificate programs are continuously evaluated to ensure the effectiveness of their curriculum and its relevance to the field.

> Certificate programs provide foundational knowledge and skills that are necessary for entry-level and advanced youth workers to work effectively with youth and increase youth program outcomes.

Review of Youth Development Certificate Programs

Youth programs play an important role in positive youth outcomes (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010), and ongoing professional development plays an important role in preparing youth workers to deliver quality programs (Hirsch et al., 2011; Vance, 2010). In order to understand what opportunities are available to youth workers, a thorough review of higher education, government, private, and nonprofit organizations and institutions that offer professional development for youth workers was conducted. This review yielded multiple combinations of trainings, workshops, classes, certifications, and certificate programs, all with slightly different requirements. For example, certifications (e.g., Curry et al., 2013) require youth workers to complete an exam as well as submit documents and other supportive materials (e.g., number of completed hours in direct service) to meet certification requirements. In contrast, certificates (e.g., Borden et al., 2004), require youth workers to participate in courses, trainings, etc. to acquire standardized knowledge and skills, usually accompanied by an evaluation method to assess what the youth worker has learned.

This comprehensive review identified 55 professional development programs that offer education and/or trainings for youth workers. Inclusion of programs was determined by evaluating: portability of

education and training materials, education materials based on empirical research, clear training objectives, and a process of evaluation of youth workers' competency. Specifically, programs were required to be portable for youth workers, such that the programs were offered as an online or hybrid format (a combination of online and in-person). Programs had to have clearly defined objectives so that youth workers are aware of the aims of the certificate. The programs also needed to be derived from evidence-based research and evaluative measures of workers' knowledge and skills. These two requirements relate to research that informs the certificate programs' goals and data that demonstrates youth workers' competencies.

After applying the previously mentioned criteria to the 55 professional development programs, they were classified into two major categories: programs that result in a degree (i.e., Masters or Bachelors) and programs that result in a certificate. As such, 33 programs were classified as certificate programs. Of the 33 programs, only six were found that were offered entirely online and did not require youth workers to pay tuition (most certificates are offered free of charge; see Appendix). Among the six youth development certificate programs, a variety of audiences, methods to measure completion (i.e., modules or hours), and cost were found. Further, the different youth development certificate programs target slightly different audiences (e.g., direct service youth workers or administrators).

> The overall variability among the certificate programs in completion measures, programmatic themes, cost, and curricula is evident and represents a need for one comprehensive certificate program.

While targeting a variety of youth workers and/or professionals, the certificate programs also include a variety of programmatic themes encompassed within the curricula. The themes range from child and adolescent physical and emotional developmental stages, interpersonal skills, safety, leadership and advocacy, and community resources. In sum, the overall variability among the certificate programs in completion measures, programmatic themes, cost, and curricula is evident and represents a need for one comprehensive certificate program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As this review indicates, youth programs, youth outcomes, and youth workers are directly linked such that high-quality youth programs employ competent and well-trained youth workers that significantly contribute to positive youth outcomes. As a result, youth programs provide an important opportunity for youth to obtain healthy and adaptive characteristics and behaviors to aid them on a positive developmental trajectory. For youth to thrive in youth programs, youth workers must meet high standards of knowledge, skills, and professionalism to implement high-quality youth programs as well as to contribute to the positive development of young people. Youth development certificate programs are a crucial component of youth workers' training and education because of the high standard of quality and content of the information taught in the certificate program. Moreover, youth development certificate programs lay the foundation to enable workers to become competent in their roles and design and implement programming that promotes the positive development of young people.

Therefore, a necessary next step in the expansion of youth development certificate programs is to create a comprehensive certificate that would enable all types of youth programs (i.e., local, state, national, and international) to ensure their youth workers have standardized education and training.

Further, doing so would create a widely agreed-upon curriculum for youth workers. Based on the findings from this research report, there are several recommendations to advance the field of youth development certificate programs so that youth workers can continue to deliver the highest quality services and improve the lives of youth and their families. Recommendations for a comprehensive youth development certificate program include:

> A necessary next step in the expansion of youth development certificate programs is to create a comprehensive certificate that would enable all types of youth programs to ensure their youth workers have standardized education and training.

1. **Use positive youth development theories as a framework for youth development certificate programs.** Positive youth development theories provide a conceptual understanding as to how and why youth workers and youth programs positively impact youth outcomes. Youth development certificate programs are designed to provide youth workers the knowledge and skills to have the biggest, most positive impact on youth. Therefore, certificate programs must be based on theoretical research that has data to support the rationale for the knowledge and skills on which the certificates are founded.

2. **Develop portable, hybrid learning formats.** Youth workers are employed in diverse settings that require them to apply their skills and knowledge in numerous ways. It is important to have a certificate program that allows youth workers to access training information in multiple formats that include in-person, online, telephone, mobile apps, etc.

3. **Incorporate assessments of youth workers' competencies throughout the process of earning the youth development certificate.** It is important to create opportunities in the certificate program training to supply feedback to youth workers' and their youth programs. These assessments can include how the youth workers progress through the trainings as well as strengths and areas of growth once they complete the certificate.

4. **Develop a continuous improvement plan to evaluate quality and effectiveness of the youth development certificate program.** In addition to feedback for youth workers and their youth programs, it is important to obtain data on the quality and effectiveness of the knowledge and skills gained as a result of the youth development certificate. It is recommended that data collection include feedback on the technology and content of the training materials and utility and relevancy of the knowledge and skills learned at different time points upon completion of the certificate.

In conclusion, youth development certificate programs are an important component of developing youth workers' competencies, strengthening youth programs, and contributing to youth's positive outcomes. It is recommended that a comprehensive youth certificate program is developed with the aforementioned characteristics (i.e., positive youth development framework, portability with multiple formats, regular assessments of workers' competencies, and evaluation plan for continuous improvement). Furthermore, a comprehensive youth development certificate program would support the efforts of researchers, administrators, and youth workers to maintain high-quality standards of youth programs' services provided to youth and their families.

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Appendix - Online certificate programs

Arkansas Out-of-School Network
Youth Worker Orientation Certificate

http://www.aosn.org/youth-development-institute/index.html

Audience: Youth service providers working in out-of-school (after-school) programs for elementary to high school students

Overview: Topics covered include youth development, bullying prevention, and cultural competency

Number of Hours or Modules: 17 hours

Cost: Free

Colorado After-School Network
Certificate of Completion from the Youth Development Institute

http://www.netnewsdesk.com/partnersinprevention/index.cfm?PID=901&ID=4357,14877,15631

Audience: **Entry-level youth workers training in working with youth**

Overview: **Positive child and adolescent development, working with culturally diverse youth and bullying prevention**

Number of Hours or Modules: **7 hours**

Cost: **Free**

Bolster Collaborative
Youth "Thrive" Training and Certificate

https://bolstercollaborative.com/youth-thrive

Audience: Educators, youth workers, social workers, law enforcement, foster parents, and any other adults in the community who regularly interact with young people

Overview: Youth development and promoting youth resilience

Number of Hours or Modules: 5 modules

Cost: $375.00

University of Minnesota- Military REACH
Youth Development Learning Modules

https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/prodev/track/foundations-positive-youth-development-programs

Audience: Professionals who work with youth ages 9-18 years

Overview: Focused on youth development, programming strategies, supervision and leadership, and community integration and resources

Number of Hours or Modules: 9 modules

Cost: Free

Appendix – Online certificate programs (continued)

The Care Courses School Inc.	Academy for Competent Youth Work
After-school Programs Certificate of Completion	**Child and Youth Care Certificate**
http://www.carecourses.com/Ecommerce/ CourseDetail.aspx?ItemID=45	https://collabornation.net/youthworkacademy
Audience: Professionals who work with school-aged children	**Audience:** Youth workers, supervisors, and administrators
Overview: Reviews characteristics and needs of school-aged children as well as youth conflict and social functioning	**Overview:** After school development, human development, and child youth care
Number of Hours or Modules: 8 hours	**Number of Hours or Modules:** 36 modules
Cost: $40.00	**Cost:** Range from free to $25.00