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"It's All Connected": Critical Bifocality and the Liminal Practice of Youth Work

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to transform educational systems advocate for shifting and expanding the voices of those who generate research. This study was part of a project that brought together mathematics teachers, youth workers, and researchers to create equity-centered noticing frameworks for mathematics instruction. We explore youth workers' understandings of the relationship between local educational equity problems and larger structural forces. By applying the framework of critical bifocality, we explore how youth workers demonstrate praxis where their pedagogical responses are animated by an understanding of the inherent linkages between broad social, economic, and political forces and educational equity issues in the local community.

KEYWORDS

Youth work; critical bifocality; noticing; out-of-school time

On a hot July afternoon at a local research university in Southern California, a group of mathematics teachers, youth workers, and university researchers gathered together to take part in a multi-day summer institute to discuss how mathematics instruction perpetuate inequities and how to generate more equitable mathematics teaching practices. It was the second day of the institute and as the evening approached, one of the last activities of the day revolved around a student film called "*Silent Beats*." The film begins as a young Black man walks into a corner store staffed by an adult Asian man. The narrative shifts throughout the film between the two characters. First, we witness the perspective of the shopkeeper as he projects anti-Black tropes of criminality onto the customer. Conversely, the film swaps narrative perspectives as the young Black man walks toward the register to make his purchase. As he looks at the shopkeeper, we see through his eyes, which are colored by an orientalist lens (Said, 1978), that he constructs the cashier as a perpetual foreigner.

In the dimly lit classroom, the participants watched quietly, shifting their gazes, fidgeting in their seats, and frowning at the images on the screen.

After the film, Sarah, a white mathematics teacher, expressed discomfort with the explicit racialized depictions:

I have interactions with people that are different from me all day long, every single day and by and large they are totally normal beautiful interactions - and yet this (gestures to the screen) is where we've put a lot of our focus when we talk about race or when we talk about our interactions with society and this is what we report on and this is what we hear reported, and it just makes me sad that we've put so much of our energy into talking about the negatives and less energy talking about the positives.

Manuel, one of our participating youth workers and a person of color, responded to her concern, in a calm but forceful tone:

I spend a lot of the time in the juvenile halls in Los Angeles; all the boys are either Black or Brown so for me, I get into it in here and I'm like this is the end result of something [...] I've had like a white teacher who bought me a printer, like, who was there for me throughout a lot of big transitions in my life, and so for me, I'll never say, oh all white people are horrible, right, because of that interaction, but because [...] a lot of the men in my life are incarcerated or not present I always think about, like why is this the case?

This interaction between people who occupy different spaces within education—and thus have different perspectives due to their participation in these communities—offers insight into how such individuals may differ in their understanding of issues of educational equity. Specifically, this vignette provides a window into how community-based youth workers have an understanding of educational problems as located not only at the interpersonal level, but also as created and influenced by broader social and structural forces. While Sarah's initial reaction to the film focused on individuals, Manuel contextualized this incident (and others within his own life) as emblematic of larger systems of oppression. In his final question (“why is this the case?”) Manuel offers a particular viewpoint as to why the educational system fails some youth and supports others, digging deeper into the root causes of these societal problems, rather than ending his examination at the surface level. This perspective can offer novel insight into advancing educational equity, by understanding the problems that manifest within classrooms as a part of much larger systems that extend well beyond individual students or teachers.

This research is situated within the Southern California based CoATTEND initiative, a participatory research project that brought together equity-focused mathematics classroom teachers, community based youth workers, and university researchers to co-create equity-centered noticing frameworks that were more closely rooted in the cultural and historical milieu of local communities. In the study of teaching, the construct of noticing refers to both what and how teachers attend to and make sense of events and interactions as they unfold in classroom contexts (Sherin et al., 2011). More recently, the field of teacher noticing has attended

to the influence of dominant ideology (Louie) and social structures (Shah, Hand). Research finds that teachers' noticing is tied to their instructional knowledge and practice that have implications for improving student learning outcomes (Blömeke, et al., 2015; Kersting et al., 2012; Sherin et al., 2011). Recognizing the centrality of teacher noticing to practice, more recent research has begun to theorize the relationship between teachers' moment-to-moment noticing and the broader institutional structures that serve to disenfranchise students who are largely underrepresented in mathematics (Hand, 2012; Jackson et al., 2018; Louie, 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2019), as well as consider how to design learning environments to develop teachers' noticing to advance more responsive and humanizing classrooms (Freeman & Jurow, 2018; Jilk, 2016).

The CoATTEND project aims to contribute to this line of research by drawing on the expertise and perspectives of community-based youth leaders—who have histories and experiences that mirror those of disenfranchised students—to expand and disrupt teachers' noticing about learners and learning in order to advance more equitable and humane forms of mathematics instruction. The purpose of this paper is to underline how youth workers within the CoATTEND project injected structural analyses into discussions of mathematics teaching and pedagogy. Moreover, we highlight how the youth workers' praxis and analyses sharply attended to the interconnections between structural forces and settings such as classrooms and local communities. Said differently, these youth workers demonstrate a liminal quality as individuals who are both educators as well as meaningful activists and organizers in their communities. In this study, we explore how their liminality affords them a perspective that attends to the interconnections between structural forces, local phenomena, and individual practices.

In doing so, we aim to unsettle the tired assumption in education research where “education” is reduced to “schooling” (Baldridge, 2019; Stovall, 2018). Decades of research have highlighted the positive impact of out-of-school activities, especially for historically marginalized youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Larson, 2000; Ngo, 2017). Moreover, the work of our community-based youth worker colleagues remind us how educators who operate in out-of-school contexts practice particular forms of pedagogical praxis that are qualitatively distinct from classroom teaching, and therefore should be engaged on its own terms. With this context in mind, this study is animated by two specific guiding questions:

1. How do youth workers construct their views of education and social problems?
2. How do their understandings of social problems inform their praxis as educators?

We seek to uplift how community-based youth workers within this research project rooted their noticing and their concomitant pedagogical practices through the lens of *critical bifocality* — an approach that simultaneously attends to the interconnectedness of structural forces and localized phenomena.

Theoretical framework

Community-based youth work expertise

Community-based youth organizations have been important sites for paying back what Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006, p. 5) described as our nation's "education debt" by providing young people with enriching opportunities and addressing broader opportunity gaps that produce inequality along the lines of race and class within and beyond education: housing and food insecurity, lack of quality healthcare, and lack of living wages (Carter & Welner, 2013). Moreover, out-of-school education has a long history of being tied to social justice efforts within racially marginalized communities in response to a history of racial segregation in schools and alienating forms of schooling (Anderson, 1988; Boggs, 1998; Ginwright, 2007). The growing body of academic literature on youth work outlines how out-of-school organizations and youth workers can offer unique forms of support for students, especially those who have been marginalized in traditional school settings (Baldridge, 2019; Fusco, 2012; Ngo, 2017). Because poor and working-class young people of color are disproportionately involved in community-based programs, youth work continues to be relevant for addressing educational inequality in the United States (Baldridge, 2014; Bouffard et al., 2006; Gutiérrez et al., 2017; Williams & Deutsch, 2016).

While many researchers emphasize the essential role of youth workers in determining the quality of virtually all organized activities within out-of-school time contexts, there is still little understanding of how localized and socio-political constraints shape the experiences and work of practitioners (Baldridge, 2014; Larson et al., 2016; Simpkins, 2015). For example, youth workers have noted the lack of available pathways for preparation and professional development relative to other education and care professions (Evans et al., 2010). Researchers have also found that youth workers often feel that their work is discounted and rendered "invisible" by mainstream educational policy discussions (Baldridge, 2014; Pittman et al., 2006).

Researchers have also begun to explore the professional competencies of youth workers, focusing on what qualities make for a skillful youth program facilitator and highlighting the unique skillset these individuals hold. Such work has illuminated qualities such as understanding and implementation of child development principles, positive guidance of behavior, family

engagement, program management skills, professionalism, a commitment to diversity, and strong communication skills (Vance, 2010). Other work has identified the elements of the professional setting that support youth worker competencies, notably finding that clarity of work objectives, something particularly challenging in youth work as staff often wear many hats, was influential in increasing job success (Davidson et al., 2011). Researchers have also looked at the differences between novice and expert youth workers, finding that those with additional years of experience were able to come up with youth-centered approaches and consider a wider variety of perspectives when addressing common program problems (Walker & Larson, 2012). Similarly, research examining the role of youth workers in partnership with schools found that skilled youth workers sought to support student voices and challenge traditional pedagogical approaches, even in the context of traditional classrooms (Epstein, 2013). In our study, we sought to build upon this research on the skills of youth workers, to both elevate their unique perspectives, and advance future research on youth work.

Moving from personal knowledge to critical bifocality

The liminality of spaces that youth workers occupy and navigate has been documented previously. Specifically, we build on Ross (2013) work on “personal knowledge” in which she highlighted the multiple ways of seeing amongst youth workers. For example, she describes how youth workers code switch “between the culture of the street and the culture of youth organizations” (p. 284). This technique illustrates the dexterity that is often required of youth workers who function as cultural brokers between homes, schools, and community-based organizations. Moreover, Ross (2013) highlights how youth workers’ expertise is intimately constructed through their membership within communities of practice, which affords them an intimate relationship to both institutional and localized knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Ross’s (2013) contribution to youth work literature is significant for taking on youth worker expertise and their dilemma stories on their own terms as a distinctive educational praxis.

We expand upon Ross (2013) personal knowledge framework to include additional political and conceptual considerations. We worry that concepts such as code switching and rules of the street are too closely entangled within a tradition of social science research that has relied upon and reproduced “culture of poverty” tropes where culture is reduced to behaviors associated with pathology and deviance (Carter, 2005; Kelley, 1997). Within this conceptual zone, the historical, legal, social, political, and economic determinants of inequality can be separated from culture; what has followed are individualized and vulgar cultural explanations of relative deprivation

(Kim, 1999; Maxwell, 1988; Small et al., 2010). This “personal knowledge” framework is useful for understanding one dimension of youth work praxis, but can be expanded to account for the interface and interplay between individual youth workers and the structures that shape their professional practice. As such, we pivot to a more robust interpretive lens for understanding the interconnections between youth workers and the constraints generated through political economy, public policy, and other socio-historical forces.

Integrating critical bifocality with noticing and youth work

We draw upon Weiss and Fine’s (2012) *critical bifocality* framework to understand how youth workers—as educators—are positioned to observe and operate within the connective tissues that conjoin broad social structures to the particularities of local phenomena. According to Weiss and Fine (2012), *critical bifocality* aims to:

[M]ake visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals (p. 174).

As a framework, critical bifocality represents an empirical commitment to attend to the continuities between the structurally determined maldistribution of material and symbolic resources and their localized manifestations within structurally vulnerable communities. In other words, it is an explicit effort to understand how broad policies inhabit the same realm as local practices and operate to both enable or disable inequality, (in)justice, and tangible social change. As an interpretive framework *critical bifocality* eschews the “political and empirical splitting of structures from problems or marginalized lives [...]” (Weiss & Fine, 2012, p. 176). This analytical technique is part of a long tradition led by radical scholars of color who have critiqued and refused the tendency of social science research to pathologize poor and racially marginalized communities throughout the history of the United States (Cox, 2015; Du Bois, 1899/1995; Hartman, 2019; Simpson, 2007; Tuck, 2009). A precursor to critical bifocality can be found in the work of Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000) who articulated the concept matrix of domination to describe the overall social organization of intersecting oppressions that Black women have experienced in the United States. By situating Black women’s experiences in relation to the social institutions that regulate their marginalization, Collins’ theoretical intervention demonstrates the inseparability of structure from individualized experiences of oppression.

The implications of *critical bifocality* compel us to fully interrogate how even localized phenomena are entangled within larger political, economic, and social projects and processes. Stories that focus only on one or the other present an incomplete picture to the academic audience, but more importantly produce an incomplete portrait of inequality, marginalization, and oppression. *Critical bifocality* is a useful framework for naming and understanding the forces that animate educational problems. By attending to the intersections of racism, sexism, and other political-economic structures, researchers can augment learning frameworks—communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), professional vision (Goodwin, 1994), organizational systems and routines (Engeström, 2015)—to more robustly account for the increasingly complexifying dynamics of our conjuncture.

This study emerges from a larger project focused on teacher noticing frameworks, and is animated by the limitations of such frameworks when applied to the educational praxis of youth workers. *Critical bifocality* offers a starting point to begin to conceptualize better fitting frameworks to understand the specific praxis of youth work. For example, a noticing framework that attends to *critical bifocality* moves away from the hermetically sealed and insular images of classrooms by foregrounding the linkages between local interactions and societal structures and processes. Weiss and Fine (2012) remind us that “... structures produce lives at the same time as lives across the social class spectrum produce, reproduce, and at times, contest these same social/economic structures—has somehow gotten lost” (p. 175). Too often, conventional educational researchers offer facile concern for structural formations (e.g. evoking Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological framework), while doing little to conceptualize the interconnections and interactions between structures and learning environments. Moreover, society and structures are too often conceptualized as nothing more than ethereal, empty signifiers that play no significant role within many analyses.

We highlight *critical bifocality* within this article to showcase how youth workers and community based educators root their understanding of pedagogy and educational problems through the interaction between structural formations and local contexts. In contrast to neoliberal, individualistic ways of understanding social problems and social change, youth workers in this essay foreground systemic roots of social problems as well as collective visions of social change where organizing and activism are imbricated within pedagogical philosophies and practices. As such, we explore how educators who are embedded and active members within the fabric of their respective communities attend to the linkages of the local and the structural.

Research method

Participants

This study took place in the context of CoATTEND, a National Science Foundation funded research project, which is based at two universities: one in Colorado and one in Southern California. This project focuses exclusively on the Southern California site, and all youth workers in this study work in Southern California. The goal of the CoATTEND project is to advance theory on teacher noticing (van Es, 2011) by bringing secondary mathematics teachers into conversation with community youth workers to advance noticing practices for equity in mathematics classrooms. The study is informed by participatory action research and community-engaged research methodologies that recognize the need for educators and educational organizations to authentically engage with local communities to learn about the lived experiences of youth in their local contexts in order to develop more inclusive, responsive learning environments (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Zeichner, 2010).

Three youth workers (who were assigned pseudonyms for this piece by the research team) were all employed at local community-based organizations and invited to join the study to offer different perspectives on equity. Based upon what they observed in out-of-school spaces and their participation in classroom-focused video clubs, the CoATTEND project relied upon youth workers to offer alternative viewpoints (in relation to classroom teachers) on working with youth. Three youth workers, two middle and two secondary mathematics teachers, and a team of university researchers made up what came to be known as a *noticing team*. Two of the authors of this study are former youth workers ourselves, which advanced our ability to build relationships and trust with the youth worker participants, as well as inform our understanding and eventual analysis of their work. However, it was crucial to not deny the power differential that existed between us and these participants, given that we were no longer youth workers and were now acting as researchers.

This study employed a criterion sampling strategy, where participants met predetermined criteria. Prior to selecting youth workers for participation in CoATTEND, four steps were taken. First, a team member conducted research on equity-focused youth development programs in the local area to create a short list of possible organizations. Second, we called each organization to determine who at the organization worked directly with youth facilitating programming. Third, we had initial phone calls with these individuals to determine fit and interest. Lastly, the team had an in person meeting with the potential participant to gain better insight into whether or not they, upon early conversation, view youth through an

equity lens. It was important to employ this criteria to ensure that participating youth workers did work directly with youth, they worked for an initiative focused on equity, and at least sought to align themselves with the equity goals of their organization. Through this criterion, a sample of three youth workers was selected to join CoATTEND, who then in turn participated in this study as well. The three selected youth workers, Pedro, Alejandro, and Manuel, ranged in age from being just a couple years out of college to having spent decades out of college.

Data collection

Data was collected for this qualitative study over the course of 19 months, from November 2017 to August 2019. Three methods of data collection were employed: document review, observations, and interviews. Each of the three selected youth workers work for an organization focused on equity, with one actually working on two initiatives, and for each initiative, there are written documents that explain their programming, either online or via printed materials. Such documents include program brochures, annual reports, press releases, curriculum descriptions, funder newsletters, and staff manuals. A review of these documents and analyzing for themes provided insight into the goals, procedures, and outcomes associated with each equity initiative, and the work the participant engaged in on a daily basis.

The next method utilized was site observations, which occurred in the spring of 2018. Each youth worker participant was observed one time for a period of one to two hours in their programming, during a time in which they were facilitating programming with youth. The observer acted as a moderate participant observer, taking field notes and engaging in some contact with participants. At these observations, the youth workers introduced the researcher to the students to help build initial rapport as an outsider. The observation protocol was then to take both descriptive and reflective notes on the ways in which the youth worker interacted with the youth in the programming being observed. The team focused on observing various aspects of these interactions including how often the youth worker interacts with students, do they interact with all students, how do their interactions change with different students, what is their body language like with youth, what is their vocal tone like with youth, what is the kind of feedback they give to youth, based on how they speak and physically interact with youth, how do they position themselves relative to youth, and how do youth seem to react to them.

In addition to these in person observations, a review of video observations was also completed. The three youth workers all participated in certain days of the CoATTEND summer institute in 2018, where they worked

alongside participating teachers to discuss issues of educational equity. This summer institute was filmed, leading to video observations being created of each day. The research team reviewed and transcribed targeted vignettes from this summer institute that featured the youth workers talking about their perspectives on equity or working in the community.

Each youth worker also completed one semi-structured interview in the spring of 2018. These interviews were held either at their organizational offices, or a site at which they worked (e.g. a high school where they worked with students). These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a member of the research team. A full interview protocol can be found in the Appendix. These interviews were the main focus of analysis for this paper, while the observational data and document review provided additional insight and triangulation.

Data analysis

We utilized a grounded analytical approach by following a theoretical sampling process associated with grounded theory. Within a grounded analytical approach, data analysis and data collection are intertwined and synergistic processes that inform one another throughout the entirety of the research project (Charmaz, 2006). A theoretical sampling framework attempts to maximize the opportunities to uncover variation within the data, as well as gradually refine emergent categories. The whole process was segmented into a three-stage process. During the first stage, we utilized line-by-line, in vivo coding of interview transcripts, youth worker field notes, and summer institute video footage (Saldaña, 2015). During the second stage, we utilized a constant comparative method by comparing new data, codes, and categories with those constructed during prior stages as well as the created codes between the authors. Through this technique, we continuously refined codes, generated memos, refined categories, as well as shifted the stage of our observational focus. We conducted a second round of coding (focused and axial), developed advanced memos, and further refined the tentative categories. The third phase began with advanced category generation. During this phase, we collectively organized codes into broader categories such as “horizontal relationships,” “structural vision,” “collective solutions” and “community organizing”. Next, we created advanced memos, which allowed us to generate this paper’s main thematic concepts (Miles et al., 2014). Once the themes were drafted, the first two authors conducted a member check with two of the three study participants to share preliminary themes and gather feedback, as well as ask any clarifying questions that arose in our memoing.

Findings

We set out to center the perspectives and experiences of the youth workers specifically in the context of the CoATTEND collaborative research project. Our analysis revealed three mechanisms through which the participants enacted *critical bifocality* in their practice with youth: the use of lived experience and the shared migratory histories within the community, the structural connections of localized problems, and structural responsiveness—apprehending the synthesis of structural and local phenomena.

Lived experiences and common migration histories

In our conversations with these three men, lived experiences and geographic histories were frequently discussed, notably memories of migration and ties to the region where they now worked. The communities these three worked with were predominantly immigrants, and the migrant experience was something these three knew intimately from their own families. Moreover, their shared histories of migration underline how social, political, and economic forces have set the stage for the forms of community knowledge found in the spaces where they work. These migration stories are situated in the context of global, political, and economic forces that have compelled the migration of Central and South American populations north into the United States (Castles, 2003). It was this personal knowledge of the migrant experience that informed how they approached their current role as a youth worker, each citing their own childhood as influencing their work.

Pedro described the experience growing up with immigrant parents who did not know much about the American education system, saying, “When I was growing up, I felt that my parents didn’t know a lot because they immigrated here. So the only thing that my mom knew was go to school, go to school, go to school, but she didn’t know how to help me with my schoolwork.” While Pedro’s mom greatly valued education and had high educational hopes for him, something Yosso (2006) coined *aspirational capital*, his mother lacked experience with the United States education system, meaning Pedro had to learn on his own, often making mistakes. He further explained, “I had to learn the hard way, and so what I’m trying to do is try to teach people not to learn the hard way.” Pedro uses his own lived experience of trying to manage his education without family guidance to inform how he understands the challenges faced by young people, which he feels is valuable, saying “I saw that as a struggle for my family and having to be that bridge for my brothers, for my siblings and all that. So I just saw that as an opportunity where I can help my community because I know that I had that struggle.” Elaborating on this idea further, he

explained, “I can be that bridge between parents and the school, that would give them a little bit of extra boost.”

This example illustrates how these youth workers drew upon their lived experience both as motivation for their work with youth, but also as a window for understanding the realities of the communities with which they worked. Similarly, these lived experiences were understood in the context of *critical bifocality*, as they were informed by broader societal structures. Pedro understood his own experience of being a bridge for his siblings to help them access education as not one that was unique to his own family, but rather a systemic barrier within immigrant communities that can impede access to education.

Alejandro told a similar story, growing up as an immigrant and without parents who could guide his educational process. He described this saying, “I was very inexperienced. English was my second language and there was a lot of things that I was never really exposed to outside of my community.” However, unlike Pedro, Alejandro found support from influential teachers who he cited as making a difference in his life and education—one who helped him enter a poetry contest, one who gave him a leadership role of helping other students in Algebra, and one who taught him Business in high school. He described their importance by reflecting, “Teachers were a really big part of my life. They were the ones that kind of made me realize what my potential was.” These three individuals inform how he views his role in relation to young people today, noting, “Having had those formative experiences early on really changed my life and that’s what I’m hoping that I’m able to do now by creating these spaces.” Like Pedro, Alejandro used his similar life experience to the youth with whom he now worked as a blueprint by which to design his current role as a youth worker.

The third youth worker, Manuel, expressed a similar sentiment. While he spoke less about his personal life than Alejandro or Pedro, he did mention an alike experience when asked about his path to his current role, talking about coming to the United States in his childhood. He elaborated saying, “I think also my own journey ... growing up, a migrant, just taught me how needed intervention programs are and creating space and opportunities for people are.” This could also be seen in his facilitation of a youth poetry workshop, where he would weave in his own life experiences when discussing the poems, which often led to participants sharing their own, similar, personal experiences. These lived experiences, in particular of migration, were salient for all three youth workers in informing how they approached their current role and afforded them a unique understanding into the lives of the youth with whom they worked.

However, this lived experience of migration was not the only unique insight the three youth workers possessed into the community wherein they were placed. All three worked in the same county where they grew up, some even in the same city, and graduated from the same public schools now attended by the youth with whom they worked. This lived experience within and historical awareness of a specific geographic region afforded them a special trust from those with whom they worked. Pedro explained:

My tie ins with specific communities are tied with deep roots, and I think that helps me in the work with cities, just because we have a lot of deep roots there, and just have a really good understanding about the community and the different needs... So not just that I'm a part of the organization, they know that I'm a part of the community as well. So, I think they like to be able to see that it's not just the best interests of the organization, but also the best interests of the families and the communities.

These youth workers understood that their geographic history was meaningful for those with whom they worked and was not something other professionals working with youth could necessarily offer. The geographic placement alongside those with whom they worked also allowed for everyday interactions outside of institutions like schools or nonprofits that facilitated a different view by community members of these youth workers, specifically as someone who was a part of the community, rather than an outsider. Pedro observed the impact his presence in certain local spaces had on the youth with whom he worked, saying “because I live in the same city, the kids got to see me at the same grocery store ... and they'd be like, oh, I saw [Pedro] and he was at our grocery store. He has to go grocery shopping too! ... so then they knew that I was like a real person...” In reflecting on his role, Pedro noted that these kinds of interactions in the community were special to students and helped break down barriers to connect with them.

Their consistent presence in these communities not only facilitated trust that allowed different kinds of relationships with youth in the community, it also gave them unique insight into the lives of the youth with whom they worked. *Critical bifocality* necessitates interrogating localized issues within broader societal contexts and the three participating youth workers engaged in this duality, utilizing their local knowledge of the communities within which they worked. Ultimately, it was these lived experiences of migration and growing up in the same geographic region that offered these three youth workers invaluable insight and trust to structure their work.

Structural understanding of local problems

The three youth workers further enacted *critical bifocality* by marrying their local knowledge with a deep understanding of broader societal systems.

Participants' views of social problems were informed by their own lived experiences, which they then used as a basis for a critical understanding of systemic issues. However, there was variation in how the three youth workers discussed this phenomenon. Manuel was quite explicit about reconciling the two. In his interview, he talked about "a responsibility to know that we have inherited a very hurt world," situating his current work in the context of history. He further expanded on this when discussing his passion for indigenous sovereignty and decolonization, stating, "Yes. I want young people to get paid and I want schools to be not horrible, but I also just don't want the U.S. [United States] to exist anymore."

Further, Manuel, in summer professional development meetings alongside teachers—the opening vignette—helped clarify the connection he saw between local challenges and the prison industrial complex, speaking about his work with young men in county juvenile halls and the over presence of young men of color in such institutions. It was this uncommon insight that highlighted what was unique about Manuel's understanding of social problems. In spaces with other educators trying to improve educational equity, he could look at localized problems within a classroom as a part of a much more complex system, allowing for a vision of transformative change, beyond neoliberal norms.

While less explicit, a similar connection was made by Alejandro. In his own conceptualizations of equity, Alejandro spoke too about a transformative vision, specifically imagining a new world, saying he thought about "reinventing or rethinking the whole system ... re-envisioning everything from scratch because to me that's what equity means ... means that whatever's previously held things up, it's just getting rid of those things and reinventing something new." This desire for a new world meant pushing back on certain popular narratives that may not be in the best interests of students, particularly the drive for all students to go to college. In his interview, he shared:

I feel like the students are pressured into just the four year, like hustle, you know, rat race if you go and the student debt and just all of that when there's such a disconnect with what the world really needs, you know, it needs more people to do trade skills. It needs more people to do, like, peace building in our communities. It does. It's not just about like what's going to pay the most and that's really what's been pushed a lot in our schools.

Despite working within schools as part of a community-based organization, Alejandro was critical of the ways in which education broadly, not just in local schools, may be misleading students and what the systematic reasons for that might be. This reflection provides an example of critical bifocality in action. While others may end their analysis at a localized level, drawing on what they observed in their own workplace, Alejandro

continued his examination, looking at the root causes of these problems plaguing the current educational system. In his everyday interactions, Alejandro was navigating a layered system and attending to its complexities, leading to a more nuanced perspective.

In his work with youth, Alejandro also led discussions about these structural barriers and injustices. He brought these issues up in conversation when working with students, during one observation discussing a very public incident of racial bias at Starbucks. He identified these kinds of conversations as important aspects of his work with young people:

Creating spaces for students to be able to connect not just with me or with their teachers, but with each other. A lot of times the topics that we talk about (gender identity, social class, experiences growing up)... not everyone has the same background, so giving them the opportunity to get to know each other on that personal level is probably the best part of my job.

He explained the purpose of this further stating, “I think the biggest thing that I hope to expose them to is that there’s bigger causes, bigger issues than what they see in their everyday life, in their communities and in their schools and that it’s all connected.” He spoke about how this not only helped the young people, but could lead to broader political change: “Starting with their own personal experience and having them make their own connections with larger society... and realizing we’re all in the same boat. We don’t have to be isolated even though that’s what society wants us to feel a lot of the time. It keeps us controlled.” This observation provided further insight into his dynamic approach to working with youth. He was not just concerned with promoting positive change for the individuals participating in his programming, but also for the world at large, in a way that attended to structural barriers of modern society. In this way, Alejandro’s critical bifocality compelled him to support the youth with whom he worked to develop critical consciousness, a process in which marginalized individuals learn to analyze their social situation and act to change it, to help support liberation (Watts et al., 2011).

Pedro’s discussion of the broader societal problems that informed his work was more limited in scope, but still present. Twice in his interview when talking about the social problems he works to address, specifically homelessness, poverty, and educational inequity, he mentioned how they were a part of nationwide issues:

Seeing the kids that were getting left behind or the parents didn’t know how to better serve their kids because of language, socioeconomics, or just all the million reasons why kids are struggling in the United States right now. I just want to make sure that there was extra supports for these families, for these kids so that they have equity as the same as anybody else across the whole United States.

This consideration of systemic issues was also dynamic and changing in response to current events, particularly the election of Donald Trump. Pedro spoke about how he had to consider the political climate when planning events for families to attend, noting that the fear of negative repercussions due to immigration status impacted attendance. “There’s a fear of people coming out to an event and then getting trapped somehow, so we put a lot of thought into those events that we have now, so that people feel comfortable attending them.” Because Pedro was conscious of the dynamic nature of the structural barriers community members in the area where he worked were facing, he could adjust his programming accordingly, to better meet their needs.

Alejandro echoed similar concerns in how the changing political climate impacted the youth at the schools with which he worked:

Working in these schools, you see these things. And you see it now on the news with all these students, whether it’s a joke or not, doing Nazi salutes and all these other things. That’s the current climate at schools and it’s not getting better, unfortunately, because of the larger national political climate. But it’s still something that you keep in the back of your mind and try to address because I was working with students and they’d say, ‘Yeah we have neo-Nazis on our campus’, ‘We have students that openly say anti-Semitic jokes’, you know ... It’s just something that the students unfortunately have to deal with ... Those things have always been there and now they’re magnified because of what’s going on nationally.

Like Pedro, Alejandro was conscious of how the broader political climate was impacting his community setting and he factored this knowledge into how he worked with youth, in particular the way that Trump’s actions and speech were increasing fear and trauma amongst students and their families, as has been affirmed by research with similar populations in other states (e.g. Rodriguez & Gonzalez-Ybarra, 2020). This was further complicated because, the county in which this study was located has a documented history of white supremacist violence via the Ku Klux Klan, likely heightening anxieties related to Trump. This history was something Alejandro attended to in his activist work outside of his job—advancing calls to rename a local school that was named after a Ku Klux Klan member. Overall, it was this positioning of their local understanding as a part of a larger context that created the unique, critical lens from which these three individuals worked and the responsive actions they took.

Structural responsiveness

These demonstrations of *critical bifocality*, as our interlocutors informed us, were fundamental to shaping the direction of their grassroots educational efforts in the community. Moreover, they demonstrate *structural responsiveness*, in which their work as educators and youth workers were

fundamentally guided by their understanding of the myriad of social, political, and economic barriers that were affecting their communities. More so, *structural responsiveness* speaks to how our interlocutors work was animated by a synthesized understanding of structural forces as concomitant to the localized phenomena in the community. For example, Manuel presents his work as an educator in youth organizing as a reaction to district policies that were having negative material consequences for the young people with whom he collaborated:

We've had forums and actions collectively here or a we've hosted candidates forums, or we've gone to city council to discuss around de-escalating issues in the city of [name redacted]. We've talked with stakeholders at the high school district to talk about zero tolerance policies in the schools or policies around that are affecting migrant students and English learners students, etc.

Manuel's understanding of *critical bifocality* makes possible an analysis that locates racial disparities in school discipline as a structural problem that requires young people and educators to organize and address the source of racial inequities by confronting the state and its school discipline policies. He further elaborated on these projects, describing the youth commission that emerged as a result of the organizing efforts of his youth collaborators. Here, we see an articulation of the concrete linkages that connect the abstract levels of social structure to the lived realities at the local level. Through youth organizing, Manuel and the youth for which he worked articulate *structural responsiveness* through their recognition of the issues at hand, and by locating the solution through structural reform, offering a potential guide as to how school-based educators could do the same.

During the course of the CoATTEND project, the Trump administration announced its intention to make drastic changes to immigration law through the public charge rule. These proposed changes would have made it much more difficult for poor migrants attempting to immigrate into the United States. Pedro, whose work was heavily focused on providing educational resources for families in the community, reflected on how federal decisions reverberated throughout the lives of the families he regularly served:

I think that with so much fear being put into families because of what's being said by the current political agenda and the media, and social media, on families being separated — I think families are dealing with a ton of fear right now. What they can do or what they shouldn't do to keep their family safe and keep their family together and continue their American dream without it being smacked by this political agenda of 'We're gonna send ICE all over the place.' And families just thinking, forget it. Why even send our kids to school? We don't want them to be separated. We're not sure if we should even go to work [...] The fear that's being instilled in the families and the lack of resources that their families are willing to get because they're starting to feel that they won't be able to become a US citizen if they're trying to get resources [...] Families not getting resources. Keeping their kids home.

Not going to work. Creating this bigger issue of more people that are gonna be living on the street. Yeah, if they're getting services like food stamps or other resources. They're saying "Why are we gonna let you be a resident if you're not being able to take care of yourself?" But anyone who comes as an immigrant has had to have some sort of help to build up their families until they grow up into self-sustaining families.

Weeks before this interview, the Trump administration announced its intention to implement a public charge rule for all green card applicants. Under this rule, immigration officials would be tasked with weighing applicants' economic self-sufficiency by factoring in receipt of public assistance. The implication of such a rule, of course, is that migrants from Central and South America are a "drain" on the welfare state. As a liaison between schools and families, Pedro illustrates how he constantly shifts through his bifocals by being responsive to the political and social determinants of the lives of young people and families in this immigrant community. For Pedro—whose work is specifically focused on engaging families and parents—this excerpt demonstrates the interconnections between federal immigration policies and the material and psychological well being of families in the community. More importantly, he underlines how these policy decisions have a direct influence on his own work with families in the community. Said differently, Pedro's analysis lays bare how structural forces become metabolized through families and individuals, which he must account for within his daily praxis as an educator.

As Pedro explains, this decision made 3000 miles away in Washington D.C. has viscerally trickled down to the families he serves on a daily basis. While fears about ICE have been at the forefront of people in this community, this recent development illustrated the weaponization of capitalist ideology, which Pedro notes is dissuading working class immigrant families in the community from seeking out vital basic services. This leaves vulnerable populations in absurd circumstances where they are compelled to make a "choice" between accessing public services and their hopes and aspirations of attaining permanent residency. Pedro's analysis demonstrates how he as an educator must constantly navigate his bifocals in order to comprehend the multi-dimensional complexities of state sanctioned violence and its manifestations on the ground.

Discussion

Our analysis underlines how *critical bifocality* might be useful in understanding how youth workers in a variety of settings perform particular kinds of "noticing". We observed how youth workers' pedagogical practices have been intimately informed and shaped by their readings and

understandings of interconnectedness of structural forces—social, political, economic—and the material conditions and realities of the young people they regularly serve. As such, *critical bifocality* can help researchers continue to develop a framework for noticing that is responsive and relevant for the educational praxis of youth workers.

Noticing practices are fundamentally animated by the political-economic contexts and the educational settings in which educators move, think, engage and operate (Erickson, 2011). Learning sciences scholars (Hand, 2012), have pointed out how noticing is always engaged within broader cultural politics and ideological struggles where teachers, especially in mathematics classrooms, construct, reify, contest and refuse racialized (and gendered) notions of smartness and proficiency. Moreover, others have highlighted the importance of understanding how race can shape the types of noticing a teacher is able to employ (Louie, 2018). While we tend to agree with this assessment, the empirical findings in this article demonstrate how youth workers in this study primarily attended to the local and national material forces that were affecting the lives of youth and families. In turn, these forces reverberated directly to each of their respective educational praxis. The types of problems and issues these youth workers engaged with required that they simultaneously attend to specific policies that had wide ranging consequences for youth and adults all over their local communities. In other words, our interlocutors demonstrated how *critical bifocality* was embedded in their noticing and pedagogical practices. We see *critical bifocality* as another layer of this noticing puzzle, one that engages individuals in a dual way of seeing youth—wherein both the community context and the broader world are considered. This framing was present in the three youth workers in our study—who each were wrestling with social issues that were structural in nature, but local in effect.

The *critical bifocality* employed by the three youth workers in this study had practical implications on how they approached their role, particularly in regard to their relationality with the youth with whom they worked. They came to this work with a lived experience both of the community itself and of the struggles faced by those within it. This intimate knowledge created initial trust with those with whom they worked and their continuous presence in the community led to them being viewed favorably by other residents. In our participants' approach to their work, they challenged traditional norms of how to engage with youth and families, by both including structural responsiveness in their programs, but also by building relationships focused on answerability (Patel, 2016).

In *Decolonizing Educational Research*, Patel (2016) outlines the role of answerability in research, stating it as a responsibility we have as researchers. She outlines our responsibility as educational researchers to learning, to knowledge, and to context. With each domain we must be answerable to, there is a set of responsibilities that this answerability entails, which often is a shift from traditional views of research. Similarly, these youth workers positioned themselves as answerable to youth and communities, which too meant they each occupied a unique set of responsibilities that was a shift from traditional views of engaging with young people. Manuel stated, he worked “for young people,” rather than with them, suggesting a responsibility to their needs, interests, and desires. Alejandro and Pedro echoed similar sentiments, as a clear priority in their role was making the work they engaged in appealing to young people and meeting their needs.

This answerability to young people’s needs also requires a different view of young people, one that can be seen as an outcome of a lens of *critical bifocality*. Each youth worker had articulated both an ability to relate to the students they worked with as a result of growing up in the same community and an understanding of the broader systemic issues faced by the youth with which they worked. It was this critical framing that led to them having a different view of young people and their needs that went beyond just framing, and influenced their practice, leading to the focus on answerability to the youth with which they worked.

Conclusion

This article is limited in that it should not be taken up to generalize the experiences of youth workers across communities and contexts. At the same time, our interlocutors lift up the phenomenological dimensions of engaging in youth work outside of a classroom space. We believe that researchers interested in youth development work would do well to pursue the construction of noticing frameworks that are responsive to the contexts and noticing practices of youth workers (Fusco, 2011). In this paper, we offer the lens that overlays *critical bifocality* onto noticing as one way to hold both the individual and structural contexts. More broadly, it underscores the location of youth workers within the political economy of the American educational system, where the field has been defined by low wages, high turnover, minimal job security, and other signifiers of precarious labor. This contrast is especially visible when compared to youth work professions within countries with much stronger social welfare states such as the United Kingdom. As such, the dearth of attention and understanding within education in relation to the noticing and pedagogical practices of

community-based educators and youth workers follows a similar pattern (Baldridge, 2019).

One of the limitations of youth work as a practice is the lack of educational and training opportunities, which may lead to a wide and unpredictable variance of baseline skill sets among practitioners in out-of-school settings. Moreover, youth work as a profession continues to be an economically precarious occupation even compared to the compromised status of classroom teaching. In the spirit of critical bifocality, we see this as directly connected to the lack of institutional recognition and support within schools, colleges and departments of education. The realms of classroom teaching and youth work are complementary, yet are also distinct ways of being educators. Despite the fact that youth workers comprise a significant portion of educators in the United States, the field continues to be relatively ignored and positioned as marginal by educational researchers (Baldridge, 2020), while very few higher education institutions offer educational pathways aimed at youth work. As such, there is a need for researchers to develop frameworks that are specific to the work of educators who work in non-schooling settings. As Dylan Rodriguez has noted, the existence of the “nonprofit industrial complex” introduces deep ideological contradictions for social justice oriented nonprofit professionals.

Future research might further explore how these contradictions shape, inform and limit youth workers’ noticing practices, instruction and pedagogical praxis as educators. Here, critical bifocality might serve as a starting point for future efforts by education and youth studies researchers for generating youth worker relevant noticing frameworks. Such a framework could allow us to better understand the qualitatively distinct processes and particularities that animate youth workers’ engagements with young people within a diversity of learning and care settings. Additionally, future research could expand this framework of critical bifocality to classroom settings, examining the ways in which teachers attending to both individual issues and the structural forces behind them could improve schooling, especially for marginalized students. Ultimately, critical bifocality offers a promising direction for advancing educational equity, and the ways in which youth workers embody this concept can serve as a foundation for utilizing this perspective when working with young people.

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Appendix

Interview protocol

Background questions

- What is your current role at your organization and what does it entail?
 - What are some of the projects you are working on?
- What experiences, either personal or professional, led you to this role?

Equity orientation:

I'd also like to hear your thoughts about issues of equity and justice. To give you an opportunity to spend a little time thinking about this, I have an activity that we would like you to do. The activity involves describing your ideas about equity through words and/or drawings. For example, you could make a concept map. To make a concept map, write equity in the center of a blank sheet of paper, and draw lines to other ideas, thoughts or emotions that you feel connect to it. You are also welcome to do something more freeform, and just draw out your ideas on paper. Whatever works!

- Can you describe the drawing you made to me?
 - How do you think about these ideas in relation to your role with youth?
 - Do you have any stories about your experiences, or your students, that relate to your drawing?

Philosophical approaches:

- Why did you decide to work with youth?
- How do you approach working with youth?

Praxis:

- What do you hope is happening for youth in this space?
 - What experience do you hope young people have when they participate in your programming?
- How do you create the space with that in mind?
 - What kinds of practices, programs, or norms do you adopt?