

Empowering Marginalized Youth

An interview with Bianca Baldrige

As a professor of education, Bianca Baldrige highlights the importance of extracurricular programs for young people, and the lack of social recognition enjoyed by community-based educators.

Bianca Baldrige is an associate professor of education with expertise in community-based education and critical youth work practice at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Baldrige's research explores the sociopolitical context of community-based youth work and critically examines the confluence of race, class, and gender and their impact on educational reforms that shape community-based spaces engaging Black and Latinx youth in the U.S. In addition, she explores the organizational and pedagogical practices employed by youth workers amid educational reforms and restructuring.

Baldrige's book, *Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work* (Stanford University Press), examines how racialized market-based reforms undermine Black community-based organizations' efforts to support comprehensive youth development opportunities. Her book received the 2019 American Educational Studies Association Critic's Choice Book Award. With the support of the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship program, Baldrige studied how racial discourse shapes community-based spaces that engage Black youth in predominantly white cities that espouse a liberal and progressive ethos. Her current research examines 1) broader issues of equity facing the out-of-school time sector nationally, 2) the precarity of youth work profession and 3) how Black

community-based youth organizations respond to city change and displacement fueled by gentrification, educational restructuring, and displacement.

Baldrige's research appears in the *American Educational Research Journal*, *Review of Research in Education*, *Teachers College Record*, *Educational Researcher*, and *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*. In addition, her experiences as a community-based youth worker in domestic and international contexts, continue to inform her research in profound ways. As a former youth worker for over 20 years, Baldrige has worked with several OST networks, non-profit organizations and facilitates communities of practice with youth workers across the country to sustain justice-oriented and humanizing youth work practices.

Books&Ideas: Central to your work is the notion of “community-based” educational spaces, formal and informal, and how they can address the difficulties of black and ethnically minoritized youth in the United States. French scholars and the general public are not always familiar with this level of intervention, which are generally run by the central state in France, and associated with social work. Can you explain the specifics of these programs and their effects on minoritized youth, on schooling performance, as well as on social capital and identity?

Bianca Baldrige: Community-based educational spaces are part of a larger field of community-based youth work or afterschool programs. Basically, it's trying to ensure that young people are getting the personal, educational and social support they need outside of school hours.

I believe that all young people should have the opportunity to nurture their talents, that they should all be able to discover, and play, and learn and figure out who they are. And I think it's really important for us to understand that schools can be, and in fact have been hostile spaces, particularly for black youth, and more broadly, for young people who are marginalized by race, gender, class, sexuality. Which is why I study black education.

The framing of community based educational spaces, as though, it's always depicted as black youth needing these kinds of programs, because something is inherently wrong with them. I reject that idea. I reject that premise. The reality is that society has been hostile: we live in a racist society, and schools have been spaces of suffering and violence for young people. Think about the overrepresentation of black youth for disciplinary action, or being tracked into lower level classes instead of higher

level classes like AP or Advanced Placement courses. Then, also you just have sort of the ritual sometimes humiliation in schools for black young people. I often see community based educational spaces as a site of refuge from those spaces of hostility.

I always advocate for, spaces that are not like school, and in fact, a lot of the literature in community based educational spaces talk about how young people prefer to be in their youth program after school than they do in school. And that has a lot to do with sort of what I call a youth development sensibility. When you're in schools, it's very clear who the authority is, right? Teachers have the authority, they have the power, and it's highly hierarchical, in a way that, schools do, it's also very punitive: you get in trouble. There may not be a first a second chance or a third chance to correct a mistake. So, it has been written and I've written about this a lot, that community based educational spaces can offer not just second chances, but third chances and sometimes fourth chances.

Books&Ideas: I was struck and absolutely amazed by your sociology of the effects of neoliberal policies on the organization of these community-based programs, and how they heighten the risk of considering youth as mere objects to be improved upon for the purpose of meeting national economic goals. From the French perspective, these analyses, based on a system far more marketized than ours, are extremely stimulating. How are neoliberal policies framing black youth and their needs beyond budget cuts of afterschool programs?

Bianca Baldrige: Neoliberal policies in the US, connected to education has really been about the idea that society functions better according to principles of the market. Along with that, you have interest around competition or individualism, meaning that, every individual in society has the right to a prosperous life or right to sort of participate in the market. But the reality is that structural inequalities exist and that individualism is not possible for everyone. There are a number of education scholars and sociologists who have done a tremendous job of documenting what happens in schools, what happens to teachers as a result of neoliberal policies.

Everything from teaching to testing to measuring success or achievement solely by standardized test scores or grades conveys this idea of quantity over quality. Even education as a whole, the school system, is often treated as a business enterprise, and not for the public good. For example, in some public schools, principals are labeled as CEOs.

What I've learned is that the same desire to, categorize achievement as these measurable things also happens in the afterschool space. Community based organizations may do academic support, academic development, but they also do leadership development or identity development or political education. But what I found is that funders, who are a necessary piece of the puzzle, might want to see success by the increase of test scores. And what I've learned is that organizations have been trying to, sort of shift their mission or their values to align with funders whose perspectives on success is aligned with those academic, sort of more measurable, outcomes.

Another way that I see it, really, shifting the landscape is what I've called the corporatization of afterschool. Again, where schools are now looking like businesses and enterprises and less like schools, afterschool programs are starting to feel more like school, where the pressure to, serve more students, is now a measure of success. The other example that I can share is also related to the framing, of black youth, in particular in community-based organizations. The common framing of black youth in afterschool programs is that, again, they need these programs because something is inherently wrong with them. And if you think about what's happened in popular media or even films or television, you see things like, well: "those kids are at risk" or "they're broken" or and "they're in need of saving". "They need to be fixed", "they come from a broken home." All these kinds of things that are coded racially, as well as class, about who these programs are for. Again, those kinds of framing say nothing about structural inequality, doesn't say anything about, systemic racism or white supremacy or capitalism or anything like that specifically focuses on the individual child, or their family or some sort of cultural attribute. And for me, that is directly connected to, sort of what I've called racialized neoliberalism. Where if there is failure or "underachievement", then individuals are blamed. Young people are blamed. Parents are blamed. Their communities are blamed, and not the fact that school in the US was not designed for black children. That's a tension that I've been working through in my career.

Neoliberalism sort of shapes philanthropy and how people are able to understand what they need to give in their role, the role of philanthropy in perpetuating structural inequality. We need to push back against that, and to try to protect black youth from this very toxic framing of them lacking something, or them being deficient, and needing to be fixed. This is something in my scholarship that I've written a lot about: the deficit is not inherently in young people at all, no matter the

young people, but especially not in black youth. The deficits are in systems and structures that were never designed to support and protect black youth.

Books&Ideas: You also stress the fact that community-based programs can also become a place of resistance against the effects of neoliberal policies on education. Can you develop this? Do you think community-based workers and educators can have a greater autonomy towards national policies than other professionals, such as teachers?

Bianca Baldrige: Youth work professionals are sometimes called community-based educators, sometimes coaches or mentors, they have many different names. I use the term youth-worker or youth-work professional because I believe it's legible; not only in the US, but also in the UK. and what's important to understand about youth workers as a group of education professionals or care professionals, is that the same way that the community based educational landscape is vast, youth workers come into the profession from all different kinds of angles.

For example, you mentioned, social work, in France being a way that youth-workers sort of come into this profession. In the US, there are many youth-workers who also come to community-based education through social work, also through community psychology programs, or as volunteers in high school and college that they just happen to stumble upon. You have youth-workers who have high school diplomas, you have youth-workers who have college degrees and sometimes advanced degrees. You have youth-workers whose organization might require licensing for them to even engage with young people. And they are sort of tracking their hours around, and making sure that they are adhering to the standards of their organization.

And then again, you have youth-workers who have never had formal training on how to engage with young people. So just as the field itself, is situated in a lot of different sectors, youth-workers, the staff members in these organizations also vary. Consequently, their level of autonomy really depends on the kinds of organizations that they're working in.

My current book project focuses on black youth workers, in the U.S. My research team and I have interviewed close to 100 people, throughout the U.S. And so these are youth workers who are staff members who are part time and full time

working directly with young people, building curriculum, designing programs, community based leaders who are running organizations or coordinating a specific program, and organizations, as well as scholars, people who have been studying youth-work for decades, as well as policy influencers, people who are connected to state and local government who are working within afterschool networks and bridging relationships between school districts and community-based education, as well as things like city parks and recreation services and cities.

All those people have been a part of this book project. Their experiences vary. Some of them might be highly paid, have manageable hours, are fulfilled and have opportunities for growth in their positions, meaning that they can, aspire to leadership positions. Maybe they are engaging with young people as a part time staff member. Maybe they're full time, but then maybe they start directing a program, or maybe they start, getting into more, levels of leadership in the organization. And then there are also youth-workers who are struggling with housing insecurity, or struggling with food insecurity or who are doing "patchwork": they are working at one organization for a few hours and then they're working at another one, etc. They might be working from anywhere from 2 to 3 different organizations to try to make ends meet. It's also a profession where some workers don't have adequate health care or benefits. For youth-workers coming into the profession, from college with college debt, being able to pay off that college debt is close to impossible.

And part of that struggle there, is related to the fact that a lot of youth organizations are in the nonprofit sector. They are nonprofit organizations. And for those who study nonprofit organizations (like in education, health care) workers are often suffering, and struggling and working really long hours for very little pay. They're essential to how we live our lives. They're essential to how we function in society, but yet we don't do a good job of taking care of them. And I specifically have argued that in nonprofit professions related to care and education, there's this sense of pressure by appealing the nobility of what is considered to be helping professions. There's this sense of: "Oh, this is good work, this is noble work. So of course you're going to do it, we don't have to pay you because you should care about doing this right. It feels good." Well, yes, it feels good and rewarding to engage with young people and witness their growth and their development. It's wonderful. Yet people deserve to be paid. People deserve a living wage. People do deserve housing, and being able to care for themselves and their families.

Books&Ideas: Several of your articles focus on self-proclaimed liberal environments, such as Boston, and how they can frame the effects of community-based programs toward black youth. Can you explain the specifics of these liberal or perceived progressive contexts on youth-workers, and how they consider the difficulties they target?

Bianca Baldridge: Cities that proclaim to be progressive or liberal tend to have this ethos of caring for everyone in the community, everyone in the city, or connected to and interested in issues of social justice. One of my research studies was in a self-proclaimed progressive liberal city, that was majority white. A report came out about racial disparities in that city where black youth, and black community members were really at the lower tier of every indicator of social and economic and educational success. 74% of black children live below the poverty line. black children had more interactions with the police, were less likely to graduate.

There are all these statistics about, the racial disparities. And what was interesting, when this report came out, is that a lot of the white residents, and self-proclaimed sort of progressive, liberal, residents who were on the side of social justice were really shocked, whereas black residents in the community, they were very much like: "Well, we've been telling you for years, for decades, that inequality exists and that these disparities exist, especially within our schools". There was this sense of: "Oh, it couldn't be us, because this city is consistently voted as one of the best places to raise a family, to be a kid." Yet it's the worst place to be black. And so how does that exist in this place that is supposed to be, committed to social justice? and what I learned in talking to community based educators, youth workers in their city, is that some of those issues related to that surprise or that shock among white residents was also located in their organizations, particularly those that were led by really well-meaning, white progressive, liberal, leaders of organizations with predominantly Black and Latinx/e staff members where youth workers directly engaged with young people.

What I learned and what I've been hearing from many of these youth-workers, black youth-workers in particular, is that there is a ceiling to their leadership, where they were not being promoted to positions of power. Those very progressive, very well-meaning leaders of organizations agree that more organizations in this city should be run by members of the community that are they're serving, but again, wouldn't make a path forward, for many of those youth-workers to assume leadership roles.

I also saw what I call exploitation, where there are a number of black youth workers who may not have an advanced degree or even a college degree, but have spent decades working with young people, to the point that organizations that receive lots of funding, that are sort of the prized possession of the city, will solicit the support of youth-workers for their knowledge, for their expertise, and for their connection to community, their ability to know and understand the community, but won't pay them for their time or won't hire them, even though they get calls almost every other day about how to work with young people. I see that as exploitation. They see that as exploitation. And there is also just a general, sort of restriction to be able to work with young people in the way they deem fit, if leaders in the organization, again, who profess to be liberal and progressive are uncomfortable.

For example, many organizations are committed to engaging young people of color in conversations about race, conversations about identity. In fact, one of my most favorite jobs as a youth-work professional was engaging with 9th graders and 10th graders and social identity development, right where we would talk about gender identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, nationality, and the ways that all those things intersected and how they felt about themselves, how they felt about their families, how they show up in the world. All of that was really essential, those conversations about identity, but also about the world. So during the time of my studies, Mike Brown was murdered. Trayvon Martin was murdered. George Floyd was murdered. Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and I can go on and on. and in fact, in this community that I mentioned, a young man, recently graduated from high school was also killed by the police.

These things were happening in the community, and young people needed a place to talk about these things and to process not only what they're experiencing in their schools, but what's happening with their friends, what's happening in the city, but also what's happening nationwide. And so, many of the youth workers, that I've interviewed have described the ways that those kinds of conversations can get shut down in organizations that, again, claim to be progressive but get uncomfortable with the race conversation, or get uncomfortable talking about the ways that white supremacy might show up in their organizations, in their schools and in the work dynamics in the organization.

And so that's very frustrating for a lot of youth workers. What I found is that this is very common across the US, where a lot of youth workers feel, like they're tokens, right? But there's no decision-making power.

When we think about, historic black organizations like the Black Panther Party or, SNCC [Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee], black churches, civil rights demonstrations, etc., there was a duty to prepare young people for the way the world is, what they would be facing when they go to school, particularly integrated schools. There was a duty of helping them to deconstruct how the world works, how institutions work, how institutions might see them. And so that's always been a part of the legacy of black education, in school as well as out of school. I see sociopolitical development as a part of a legacy, a very long legacy of preparing black youth for the world as it is. Black youth workers also see themselves as part of that tradition, and in my current book, my plan is to situate black youth workers alongside black freedom fighters and educators and leaders who created independent black institutions, who saw it as their duty to not only allow black youth to learn, but also to be politically aware, socially aware and with a very strong sense of community, and pride for their communities.

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