



Political Actions of Youth Workers

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Abstract

The ability to act politically is supposedly one of the core competencies of youth workers in Germany. Surprisingly, there is little knowledge about political activities of youth workers in Germany and elsewhere. In this article, I address this research gap by questioning how youth workers act politically. I present findings from the qualitative research project “civic education in youth work” and provide insights into the narrated practices of the interviewed youth workers in their contact with local politics and authorities. Based on a reconstructive interpretation using the documentary method (Bohnsack in *Documentary Method*. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The sage handbook of qualitative analysis* (pp. 217–233). Sage, 2014; Nohl in *Narrative interview and documentary interpretation*. In R. Bohnsack, N. Pfaff, & W. Weller (Eds.), *Qualitative Analysis and Documentary Method in International Education Research* (pp. 195–217). Barbara Budrich, 2010), I am able to identify three different types of political practices of youth workers and their underlying implicit orientations. There are youth workers who are reluctant to engage politically, who engage only in the face of an immediate threat, or who engage politically as part of their professional role as youth workers.

Keywords Political action · Youth work · Political social work · Qualitative research · Documentary method of interpretation · Germany

Introduction

The ability to act politically is supposedly one of the core competences of youth workers in Germany, along with other competences such as pedagogic skills in working with young people (Nick, 2021; Riechert et al., 2018). Youth workers “work directly with and for young people in non-formal educational settings and with a defined intention” (Schild et al., 2017, p.8). It is strictly separated from formal school education, further vocational training, and also educational work

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with and in families (Thimmel, 2017, p. 72). Youth work practice includes work in centers (youth centers) and engaging with young people in their environment (mobile youth work or youth street work). It is “based on voluntary participation and a strict focus on young people’s interests and needs” (ibid., p. 71). In contrast, youth social work provides targeted support to young people with fewer opportunities; activities are usually not voluntary but tied to sanctions (e.g., the cancellation of financial assistance) (ibid., p. 72).

In Germany, youth work and youth social work are legally framed by the Child and Youth Welfare Act (Social Welfare Act SGB VIII). “Child and youth welfare (...) are therefore a sub-category of the social sector and social work, with some overlap with the education sector” (ibid., p. 71). Accordingly, youth work and youth social work are primarily organized and funded by the municipal administration and additionally financed by federal state governments (ibid.). The conditions of youth (social) work practice “on the ground” are, consequently, shaped and influenced by different policies. In particular, funding at the municipal level is a result of political negotiation processes in the youth welfare committee. There, politicians and representatives of practice jointly decide on the focuses of youth work in the municipality and the corresponding budget allocation (which is then made by the youth welfare council) (Rohde, 2021). These decisions should be taken on the basis of the assessment of the local situation of children and youth. The legal mandate of youth workers “to contribute to positive living conditions for young people and their families and to create a youth- and family-friendly environment” (German Social Welfare Act SGB VIII §1, own translation) is often interpreted as a mandate to represent youth interests in youth welfare committees (Gerbing, 2013, p. 728). Hence, youth workers are often invited to inform the committee about the situation and needs of young people.

In summary: Youth workers have the opportunity to influence the negotiation processes in youth welfare committees, either by participating as a formal member with voting rights or by informing the committee about youth work and the situation of their target group on certain occasions. Since important decisions about their work are made in this committee, they should engage and try to take as much influence as possible. Of course, they can additionally use grassroots advocacy methods (e.g., campaigns, demonstrations etc.) to raise public awareness of their interests and those of young people in their municipality.

In order to have a significant voice in the decision-making process, they must have political competencies. According to Nick (2021, p. 148–149), the political abilities of a youth worker comprise (1) advocating for the interests and participation rights of young people, (2) enabling young people to participate in political decision-making processes, (3) creating and protecting spaces for young people, (4) representing youth work, and (5) lobbying for their own working conditions. Fundamentally, the first and vital skill of policy analysis and a specific understanding of policy work must be added to this list (Lindner, 2021, p. 916–920; Spence, 2008, p. 9). When youth workers act politically, they can influence how their field of work is perceived in politics and in society and thus how youth work is funded (AGOT, 2018, p. 7).

A look at the education of youth workers in Germany reveals a vague picture. Youth workers have diverse professional backgrounds; most are either trained as social workers (or have a similar pedagogical academic degree) or have completed a relevant upper secondary education course in pedagogy for early childhood (vocational school). Their education usually encompasses the study of laws relevant to their field, but not necessarily the politics of youth work and methods of policy work. Most of them probably learned about politics in secondary school. However, their acquired understanding of politics may not automatically apply to their practice and understanding of youth work.

As part of the research project “civic education in youth work” (German title: Politische Bildung in der Offenen Kinder- und Jugendarbeit), I interviewed youth workers in Thuringia/Eastern Germany and Lower Saxony/Western Germany about their general practices in working with young people and, in particular, about their practices of civic and citizenship education (Kessler, 2018a, b, 2021a, b). I included youth workers from these two federal states in the sample, because there is a different political culture at the municipal level in Eastern and Western Germany. In contrast to West Germany, we see a high rate of political disaffection among citizens in East Germany (Schulte-Cloos & Leininger, 2022; Weisskircher, 2020). People feel mistrust and alienation toward the political system, the established parties and the political elites, which have their origins in the experience of paternalism and powerlessness during the GDR and also in the years after the reunification. Accordingly, I suspected that there may be different attitudes towards politics and citizenship education among youth workers in these two federal states.

The aim of my research project was to reconstruct implicit orientations and understandings of politics and citizenship education that guide youth workers in their actions. Therefore, the project focused on the study of tacit knowledge, also understood as practice-based or process knowledge (Cheung, 2016; Polanyi, 1966). While the main objective of the project was to examine the ability of youth workers to enable young people to participate in politics, an important aspect of the interviews were the youth workers’ accounts of their contacts with local politics and authorities as part of their work. For this article, I took a closer look at these interview sequences and conducted a secondary analysis of the political actions of youth workers recounted in my interviews. Accordingly, in this article I explore the question of how youth workers act politically.

To begin, I will provide an overview of the literature on the subject. Subsequently, I will give an introduction to the research design and methodology of the project and continue with the presentation of results, namely the reconstructed implicit orientations illustrated by insights into the narrated political actions. Finally, I will summarize the presented results and discuss implications for youth work and research.

State of the Art: Research on the Political Actions of Youth Workers

Surprisingly, very little is known to date in the German-language literature about political actions and skills of youth workers, although this is a key competence for their work. Lindner calls this area “terra incognita” (Lindner, 2012, p. 243) and

indicates a desideratum. More recently, Lindner criticizes that youth workers rarely recognize policy work as part of their work and misjudge the importance of political engagement (Lindner, 2021, p. 912). He makes the personal experience that youth workers often recognize their misjudgment only when political decisions have negative effects on their practice and threaten the conditions of their pedagogical work with young people (*ibid.*). According to Lindner, one of the reasons is the lack of political qualification in the education of youth workers (*ibid.*), which can be confirmed for the studies of social work in Germany (Roth & Ragus, 2018, p. 378).

Looking at the literature in other countries, there have also been no studies conducted on policy practices of youth workers. However, we do know that youth work in several other European countries is legislatively embedded and framed by welfare and youth work policies (Williamson, 2017). Thus, we can find studies that examine how changes in welfare and youth work policy, especially reduced funding, affect youth work practice (e.g., Melaugh, 2015). In the light of these developments, not all youth workers are passive, as Melaugh notes, “youth work (...) is actively organising to promote and defend youth work” (*ibid.*, p. 115). We can therefore assume that policy practice, political actions, and advocacy work are part of youth workers’ practice in other European countries as well. Explicit reference to the need for political practice in youth work is made, for example, in British textbooks for the study of youth work (e.g., Batsleer & Davies, 2010), in publications for youth workers in Switzerland (e.g., Rieger, 2016; Vonmüllenen, 2016) and also in Ireland (Spence, 2008). They emphasize the importance and responsibility of youth workers to critically engage in politics and seek dialogue with relevant politicians, especially in their municipality (*ibid.*). “Without a direct debate with politicians, the work will be shaped according to a version of reality which does not take into consideration the views and perceptions of (...) young people” (*ibid.*, p. 16) and also those of youth workers about professional practice.

Overall, I conclude that policy practice is considered an essential part of youth work practice in literature, but there is some evidence that practitioners do not give it the same importance. In general, the discourse tends to be normative and lacks empirical analysis on policy practice of youth workers.

Compared to youth work research, the empirical analysis of policy practices in social work in Germany and also internationally is more advanced, albeit still explorative. While Weiss-Gal and Gal (2014) criticized the missing empirical basis in the discourse on the subject in 2014, several published studies can now be found (Weiss-Gal, 2017; see also Kindler, 2021). However, Weiss-Gal points out that very few studies focus on policy practice as part of professional job activities (excluding voluntary political engagement as citizens) (Weiss-Gal, 2017, p. 294–295; see for instance Aviv et al., 2021; Gilboa & Weiss-Gal, 2022, Lavee & Cohen, 2019; Tzadiki & Weiss-Gal, 2020). According to Weiss-Gal, these studies show that policy practice is generally limited; social workers tend to engage in more indirect and informal ways rather than choosing formal participation in legislative committees. Gal and Weiss-Gal identified three categories of factors that affect whether social workers engage in politics (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015). The first category, “opportunity,” refers to opportunities for participation as access to policymaking processes; the second category, “facilitation,” suggests that an organizational culture,

supportive of policy practice, induces more engagement; and the third category, “motivation,” comprises individual factors such as personal values, competencies, etc. In addition to these three categories, experiences of acute threats to their services and clients also lead to increased policy engagement (Gilboa & Weiss-Gal, 2022, p. 3). Factors that fit into these categories were confirmed in a qualitative study on policy practices by community social workers in Israel (*ibid.*).

Another case study of “frontline” social workers in Israel shows that they reflect their distinct knowledge of the lives of service recipients in their community and recognize their issues as wider social problems that need to be addressed through collective interventions at the policy level (Aviv et al., 2021, p. 464). Therefore, they recognize that they need to advocate for policy change (*ibid.*). Angstenberger came to the same conclusion in his qualitative analysis of policy practices of German social workers engaged in refugee and migrant work (Angstenberger, 2021, p. 189). Both studies show that social workers’ strategies are linked to their professional practices and are complemented by the adoption of “inside strategies linked to the established routines and arenas in the local authority” (Aviv et al., 2021, p. 465).

But not all social workers conclude to engage in politics; others may choose to “cope with these social injustices rather than contest them” (Schiettecat et al., 2017, p. 7).

Weiss-Gal’s and Gal’s findings from a quantitative survey of motivating and facilitating factors among Israeli social workers reveal that the “strongest predictors” for an engagement of social workers in policy practice “were managerial position, policy practice skills, political networks, and organizational support” (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2020, p. 228). However, there are also significant constraints to policy practice (e.g., their position as public servants, dominant focus on individuals) that limit the engagement of most social workers to raising public awareness for social problems, conveying their knowledge (Weiss-Gal et al., 2018), and also “silent acts of noncompliance (...) (micro politics of resistance)” (Schiettecat et al., 2017, p. 9). Their political activities can therefore be defined as indirect or informal.

In summary: Research on policy practices in social work can already provide more insight into the political engagement of social workers as an integrated part of their professional work. Accordingly, I will return to these findings in the discussion of the results of my study on the political actions of youth workers. Next, I will present the research design and methodology of my research.

Research Design and Methodology

The research project “civic education in youth work” (German title: Politische Bildung in der Offenen Kinder- und Jugendarbeit) started from the observation that not much is known about civic or citizenship education taking place outside of school, especially in youth work in youth centers and in street work aimed at young people. However, knowledge about these practices would be of great interest to educators in civic education, as youth work in these contexts is generally more successful in

working with marginalized youth than youth education services.¹ The research project had an explorative character. My intention was to gain insight and identify different practices of civic education in youth work and to reconstruct the underlying implicit orientations of youth workers.

Methodologically, the project is based on Polanyi's (1966) understanding of tacit knowledge or tacit knowing in practice. He assumes that practitioners "know more than [they] can tell" (Polanyi, 1966, p. 18). Their routine practice embodies tacit knowledge that structures and guides it. Although experienced professionals frequently draw upon tacit knowledge in their practice and routines, they are unaware of it. Nonetheless, they can communicate their practice-based knowledge while describing and recounting their routines. Synonymously, other researchers use the term implicit knowledge; and there are parallels to Bourdieu's understanding of habitus as incorporated knowledge (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 221).

In 2015, I conducted narrative interviews with nine youth workers (two from Lower Saxony, seven from Thuringia). The narrative interview method was developed by the German sociologist Schütze (1983; see also Hopf, 2004, p. 206). The decision to use the narrative interview was based on the idea that it "allow[s] respondents to speak off the cuff about a part of their everyday life" (Nohl, 2010, p. 196). It is an open interview form, mostly structured by the interview partners themselves, starting with a "narrative-generating question" (Hopf, 2004, p. 206). In this project context, I asked my interview partners to describe their practice with young people in youth work in general. I invited them to narrate and only asked questions when they stopped narrating. I then asked immanent questions to stimulate further narrations (for instance, to describe something in more detail), and only when they did not tell me about it themselves did I ask exmanent questions (for instance, about their civic education practices and contact with local politics) following the main narrative.

In theory, the experience of practices is particularly embedded "in narratives and descriptions" (Nohl, 2010, p. 206). Accordingly, the narrative interview provides access to the implicit knowledge that underlies the practices being narrated or described. To reconstruct this knowledge, I worked with the documentary method of interpretation, a text-based qualitative analysis developed by Bohnsack (2014) and based on Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. Mannheim distinguishes between explicit, communicative, and implicit, conjunctive knowledge. Following this distinction, the documentary method of interpretation is carried out in two steps: first, formulating interpretation and second, reflecting interpretation (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 225; Nohl, 2010, S. 203). Thus, the researcher first summarizes the main topics of the interview and then, in a second step, reflects how those topics are elaborated (and thereby reconstructs the orientation framework). As part of the reflective interpretation, the researcher conducts a comparative analysis, comparing sequences on the same topic from different interviews. This comparative analysis helps

¹ There are different youth work services in Germany: there is youth work taking place in youth centers and as street work addressing youth on a day-to-day basis in local communities; and there is a diverse working area of youth education that organizes, for instance, workshops, simulation games, and projects.

identify common patterns across interviews and supports a controlled intersubjective interpretation.

Usually, the researcher interprets the text with a research question in mind. The research question is therefore used as a heuristic for selecting particular interview sequences for the following interpretation or comparison, respectively. In preparation for this article, I selected interview sequences among all interviews in which youth workers describe practices of political actions. Of course, there are overlaps with sequences from civic education, as enabling young people to participate can also be defined as a form of political action (Nick, 2021). The interviewed youth workers themselves also frame civic education as political work. However, I attempted to narrow my focus to political action beyond civic education. I have therefore used a more rigorous understanding of political action to select sequences for interpretation. Political action can be defined as strategic practices that seek to influence social and political discourses and/or formal decision-making processes. They are “direct political interventions” (Rieger, 2014, p. 347, own translation). However, I have only included described practices that are framed as political action by the youth workers themselves.²

After this brief introduction to the research design and methodology of the project, I will describe practices of political actions and present the underlying implicit orientations.

Practices of Political Action

The interviewed youth workers mention different contacts with local politics and authorities as well as different political actions, ranging from protests when confronted with personnel cutback and potential closures of youth centers to mediation between youth interests and regulatory authorities and police, to ongoing practice in local youth policy committees.

Comparing the different interviews, I noticed three groups among youth workers in terms of their practices: (1) some youth workers are reluctant to engage in politics. They do not consider political actions as part of their own work and want to be neutral about politics, especially towards young people and the public. Political activities are seen negatively and without value for youth work. (2) A second group of youth workers only gets involved in politics if there is an immediate threat to their own work or if they are asked for support by young people. Consequently, their political action is selective. (3) Besides these two groups, there are youth workers that integrate political actions into their daily work. They are in contact with local politics and authorities and negotiate conflicts between them, and young people,

² Of course, youth workers describe sometimes activities which can be seen as political from my researchers' point of view. However, I excluded these recounts from my analysis as they are not perceived as political by the youth workers themselves. Unfortunately, they are not suitable to reconstruct their implicit understanding of politics and policy engagement as part of their youth work practice.

when necessary, are informed about local youth policy and politics and try to represent interests of their addressed youth.

In the following, I will describe these different practices, highlight contrasts, and reconstruct different modes of political action. I will draw on representative cases to illustrate my findings; therefore, I will not include references to all interviews.

A representative of the first group is the youth worker Mr. Weber,³ who works with young people in a youth center in a small town in Thuringia. During the interview, he mentions that his organization asked all youth workers to remain politically neutral. Mr. Weber interprets this instruction as a rule not to position himself politically in his work and to keep his distance to politicians. Therefore, he is not engaged in politics and is very reluctant if politicians or political parties approach him. Nevertheless, he organizes discussions with politicians as well as information events before elections, and he holds discussions about politics with young people visiting his youth center. Citizenship education is thus part of his work, although he himself keeps a distance to politics.

Mr. Bach, a youth worker of a youth center in another small town in Thuringia, also describes not being politically involved himself. He frames political actions as a responsibility of his organization; they need to engage and lobby in local affairs in order to keep the organization working. Therefore, he excludes political engagement in local affairs from his own work but nevertheless acknowledges the importance of it. In his description, there is a differentiation of organizational tasks that assigns specific responsibilities to different employees. His negative assessment is that a potential engagement of him would not change the financial situation of the youth center, demonstrating his own sense of powerlessness. Only when he and his youth center is specifically confronted with the threat of closing the facility, he acts politically. Therefore, Mr. Bach's practices go beyond Mr. Weber's actions.

Mr. Bach: (...) we had that in 2006 (...) then the center was closed. for some weeks because the staff position was officially canceled. in 2002 the youth center just opened. that means that was only after three and half years or almost four years. we put up really big banners and collected signatures. I believe we collected within two days over 1000 signatures and submitted those to the local committee of youth politics. they withdrew their decision then. although I don't think it was about the signatures. they couldn't close a center just after three or four years that got over a million of financial support (...).^{4 5}

³ All used names are not the real names of the youth workers. I used pseudonyms in order to protect their personal identity.

⁴ All quotes are translated from the original interview language German. I transcribed the spoken word. Therefore, it isn't grammatically correct. I am aware that the meaning might change with the translation. Nevertheless, I wanted to use quotes as an illustration for practices.

⁵ I used the following rule for transcribing the spoken words: (.) – break of one second or more, comma – short break, @ – laughing, underlined words – pronouncement, words in brackets (it's usually easy) – words are not spoken understandable, sentence point – intonation goes down, question mark – intonation goes up, [...] – omission of spoken parts.

In this quote, it becomes apparent that Mr. Bach and the community of the youth center raised public attention for the imminent closure by hanging banners and collecting signatures. Thus, they use forms of protest to engage the local community of the municipality. The large number of collected signatures, he points out, is indicative of the high level of public support. Nevertheless, Mr. Bach does not believe in the effectiveness of his own political actions. He assumes that the politicians decided regardless to his actions – even though he raised public awareness that they were accountable for their decision. In summary, although Mr. Bach is capable of political action, the experience of self-efficacy in this situation does not lead to continuous policy practice. Mr. Bach refrains from political engagement in his daily work and instead focuses on supporting young people.

Skepticism about politics is also evident in other interviews. Mr. Krüger, a youth worker who works in two youth centers, one in a large city in Thuringia, the other in a rural area, keeps his distance from politicians who, in his point of view, want to instrumentalize him for their own interests. Nevertheless, he is in regular contact with political representatives to mediate the interest of young people:

Mr. Krüger: about politics I try to draw a line to encapsulate myself because I don't want if there is something political with the district mayor and if he wants to execute something because he thinks now he can get more votes for the next election, ehmmm I try to vote like the young people. I am the megaphone for young people the intermediary. aaand ehm not somehow an instrument for some district mayor who thinks now he can do something to praise himself to get more voters of the community. no that it- then I try to encapsulate myself [...].

interviewer: yes@ you said before that you try to encapsulate yourself from politics and their attempt to instrumentalize you, from the district mayor there ehm and at the same time you try to represent youth. ehm how are you doing that?

Mr. Krüger: how I am doing that? I have eh eh (.) well I pick up the opinion the opinion of young people. eh yes and I try to reformulate that in professional language in understandable words@ and then I communicate that. I know how young people think and then I tell the district mayor no no no we cannot do it that way. you have to- there are also young people who also have rights. or for instance if there is a breach of the peace or something like it to say noo that were not the young people. they were not there. (it's usually easy) to blame young people. exactly.

Mr. Krüger emphasizes his role with the metaphor of the “megaphone for young people”; i.e., he does not act out of his own interest, but rather for young people. He speaks out for them loudly and understandably – because a megaphone also increases the volume and thus more people can hear the message. In Mr. Krüger's account, then, there is a disconnect between his personal feeling of keeping his distance from politics and his professional responsibility to represent young people and mediate between politics and young people. As described, he fulfills this role by translating youth opinions into a professional language that can be understood by politicians or by advocating the position of young people in conflict situations. His

political practice is based on communicating youth interests and opinions. Accordingly, he has a sense of the professional routines and language of local authorities; he knows that he must communicate his concerns or requests in a certain professional way in order to be taken seriously.

A youth street worker from Thuringia, Mr. Fischer, also sees his role in advocating interests of young people in public and local affairs. He has a quite similar practice, although there is less personal skepticism about politics and politicians. In the following quote, Mr. Fischer describes how he represents young people in a specific conflict situation:

Mr. Fischer: well that means for instance if there is stress in some town districts for instance at [a venue in the city center] I can tell again and again about the skaters. three years ago there was a big hassle. I forgot the name of the café that is next to the venue. they said about the skaters. that doesn't work they are too noisy when they jump. then it bangs. and then the tourists our customers are gone. the one who owns the ice cream parlor also said that to the local authority. and yes skating is not permitted at this [venue]. and then we try to take the side of young people if there emerges a working group for instance like last time in order to put an end to this problem and to create a space where everyone is somewhat satisfied. then we argue on the side of young people. of course we do that together with young people if they are also present. in this case two skaters were there who were elected by their youth group. who then got our support to participate at those negotiations for instance.

Mr. Fischer speaks about a conflict situation at a central venue of the town and describes the conflicting interests of the café owners and the skaters. They are presented as two different interest groups, with the café owners feeling their business threatened by the activities of the skaters. As described, the local authority is addressed by the café owners as skating is officially not allowed there. Thus, the skaters' interest collide with those of the café owners and an existing regulation that prohibits skating.

The youth workers support the interests of the skaters in the initiated working group to negotiate the different interests. Thus, Mr. Fischer engages in these official political structures and advocates the specific interests of the skaters. Advocacy work is understood here as arguing in support of young people and supporting the young people involved through one's own presence. Mr. Fischer does not mention his own personal interests even once; he only takes a professional role as an advocate.

In contrast to the others, Mr. Lange, a youth worker in a rural area in Lower Saxony, describes his regular participation in the local youth welfare committee. He sees this engagement in political structures as his responsibility as a youth worker, especially because young people themselves have no right to vote in this committee. In the following quote, Mr. Lange describes his activities in the committee, addressing the example of applying for a minibus to be used in youth work.:

Mr. Lange: [...] we had last week a committee meeting that addressed the acquisition of a minibus for the youth work because we want to support mobil-

ity. we have a really big area in our community and public transport is well you cannot go from A to B unless you go to school or back. then it works. yes and therefore we decided we would like to have a minibus for our youth work. Then we can transport young people if needed or we can go with a group to the neighboring community and visit their climbing wall. such things would be desirable and the committee just approved it.

interviewer: okay that means you can state your needs and then you get it approved?

Mr. Lange: yes but it was a long process. that started one and half years ago. we showed them an analysis that stated mobility is not as good as desired and lots of young people cannot come- well it started with less visitors in our youth centers. then they got keen to know why do youth centers get less visitors? and then we gave reasons the public transport. public transport is a popular topic. impossible the busses are not going. that can't be. and then you introduce different ideas. possibly several ones and name your personal favorite. then we proposed the acquisition of a minibus. and then we speak about funding options which you have to show in the next meeting. then you reach an agreement about the funding. and in the following meeting you present different proposals and then it gets approved.

Mr. Lange describes the decision-making process from addressing a problem and a possible solution to a final decision in the committee. He sees his own role in raising awareness of a problem that affects youth work and especially young people, providing an analysis and potential ideas, as well as specific information for the realization. Accordingly, as mentioned elsewhere, he sees politicians as disconnected to the interests and problems of young people. Consequently, he assumes that they cannot make good decisions that meet the interests of young people and/or youth work. That is why his political engagement is indispensable – at least as long young people cannot participate themselves. Interestingly, he does not express any anger about the long process but accepts it as the existing structure to negotiate different interests (like Mr. Fischer). His way of political action is quite rational and informed by political realities. In contrast to Mr. Krüger and Mr. Fischer, his political work is focused on representing the interests of youth work while keeping the interests of young people in mind. Youth work interests and young people's interests appear to be connected, as youth works acts on behalf of young people's interests.

Similar to Mr. Lange, Mr. Stein also regularly participates in the local committee of youth politics. He is a member of the youth welfare service in a major town in Thuringia, responsible for the coordination of local youth work. He also advocates strongly for youth work:

Mr. Stein: well physically I have contact with local politicians in the committees especially also in the sub-committee. where we present specific things specific strategies specific requests projects funding ideas. and of course we also have to justify or explain those. why we want to do specific things and why we don't want to do other ones. and we attempt to convince politicians that they say we vote for it when the decision is taken in the committee on youth politics. well my work field is more the sub-committee of youth work or

youth social work where things specific things are professionally prepared for the committee on youth politics which is more extensive (..)

Mr. Stein: [...] exactly and ehm yes I also see the political task of youth work to be an advocate for youth work and ideally in balance with needs or participative as far as possible. [...] exactly- possibly it's about the work to convince here in local politics (.) the requirement to convince others that youth work is necessary. that it prevents things before they go bad. this I see as a political social responsibility [...].

Mr. Stein describes his participation in the committee, which is about representing the interests of youth work, funding ideas, etc., quite similar to Mr. Lange. In addition to his regular involvement, he sees his main task as convincing politicians of the need for preventive youth work and not just acting as a firefighter when problems have already arisen. In doing so, he interprets his work in the committee as a possibility to convince politicians and change the focus of youth work policy.

Mr. Lange and Mr. Stein have in common that they have knowledge about structures and processes of local youth politics and youth work politics, especially of the respective committee. They implicitly know and follow the informal rules of the committee practice. Especially in Mr. Lange's description and to some extent in Mr. Stein's, references to the different phases of the policy cycle become apparent: raising awareness and formulating a problem, setting the problem on the political agenda to discuss it, formulating and negotiating possible decisions to solve the problem. They also have knowledge about interests and behaviors of politicians, which they use strategically to influence them and position their own requests. They are aware that political decision-making processes take time and require continuous presence and patience. Thus, they know how to "play the political game." Here, they can be seen to adopt the strategies and routines of the formal policymaking process.

Summary and Conclusion

This section summarizes the research and gives an overview of the different political practices of the youth workers (see Table 1). Finally, I will provide implications of the findings for future research and social work education and practice.

As can be seen from this table, there are three types of political engagement in youth work that are evident in my interviews: (1st type) reluctance towards political engagement; (2nd type) political engagement facing a threat; (3rd type) political engagement as part of the professional role as a youth worker. The third type can be divided in two sub-types: (3.a) youth workers who focus on advocating youth interests in local politics and (3.b) youth workers that strategically try to influence local politics in favor of youth work interests. These three types show a spectrum of political action ranging from reluctance to engage in formal policy practice to regular involvement in established political arenas of the local municipality. The youth worker of the first type in particular faces significant organizational constraints. His organization requires him, as a youth worker, to be politically neutral. As a result, there is no supportive organizational culture for formal policy practice,

Table 1 Tabular overview over the reconstructed types

Political engagement	Reluctance towards political engagement	Political engagement facing a threat	Political engagement as part of the professional role as a youth worker
Interviewed youth worker	Mr. Weber	Mr. Bach	Mr. Krüger Mr. Fischer Mr. Lange Mr. Stein
Described practice	Only civic education, no political engagement	Hanging banners and collecting signatures to raise awareness for the potential closure of the youth center	Advocating interests of young people; participating in media-tion processes on the side of involved young people
Implicit orientation	Following the organization's instruction to be politically neutral; interpretation as not to position himself politically in any way; providing information about politics and different political interests for young people	Following the organizational differentiation of responsibilities and thereby excluding political engagement from his work as a youth worker in a youth center; acting politically in the light of an immediate threat; sense of powerlessness and missing self-efficacy	Participating regularly in the local committee for youth politics representing youth work interests, convincing politicians Conceiving youth work as acting on behalf of young people's interests; strategically representing youth work interests in regularly working committees; following informal committee rules and correctly addressing politicians in order to take influence and pursue youth work interests

which Gal and Weiss-Gal (2015) argue is necessary to create the opportunity for policy engagement of frontline social workers. Nonetheless, this youth worker acts politically, although more quietly than others in the context of his work with young people, drawing on informal practices of citizenship education.

Especially the third type, but also to some extent the second type, show that youth work is not only an externally controlled profession that implements a legally mandated task. Youth workers are also political actors who influence politics and policy practices – especially in local matters (see also Schönig, 2014). The second type confirms the observation stated in literature that youth workers, as well as social workers in other fields, start to engage in politics when they are confronted with immediate threats to their work with clients caused by past policy decisions (see state of the art). Youth workers may thus become politicized by the negative effects of politics. However, youth workers may also choose not to engage in this (new) political awareness to focus their daily work on the support of young people (like seen in Schiettecat et al., 2017). In this particular case, the youth worker's decision might be mediated by the organizational differentiation of tasks in his organization, with political engagement excluded from the work of frontline youth workers and assigned to specific staff members. A result of this task differentiation, there is no supportive organizational culture for a policy practice of frontline youth workers on a regular basis.

Youth workers of the third type act – as presented here – within established political structures or informal working groups or alternatively use informal contacts to address politicians and authorities directly. In other words, they use the formal opportunities offered in local affairs to formally participate, following the implicit rules of established policymaking practices to strategically influence politicians and the decision-making process. Looking at the supporting factors for policy practice in social work (see state of the art), youth workers of this third type not only have the personal motivation to engage in politics, but also have a supportive organization and established formal and informal political networks. Type 3.b youth workers, in particular, are in managerial positions that predispose them more to policy engagement, according to social work research. All youth workers of the third type show skills in policy practice. Generally, their activities can be understood as political advocacy work or lobbying, but not as policy advice, as all interviewed youth workers who are politically engaged pursue a specific interest. In contrast, practices of policy advice would imply that information is provided in an objective manner (see Rieger, 2014).

Furthermore, the interviews suggest several reasons for political aversions: In addition to a rejecting organizational culture, these include a personal sense of powerlessness and lack of self-efficacy or the fear of being appropriated by politicians. Contrary to my assumption, I could not identify specific differences between youth workers in Thuringia/Eastern Germany and Lower Saxony/Western Germany. Youth workers generally seem to be aware of the political context of their work, although not all of them engage actively in policy practice.

The findings presented provide insights into various political actions of youth workers and their underlying implicit orientations. Thereby, this research helps to understand policy practices in frontline youth work. From here, research needs to

analyze youth work policy practices more comprehensively. There is a need for further research on individual practices as well as organizational practices, as my results indicate that youth work organizations also position themselves towards politics and have their own organizational aims and strategies to engage politically. Nonetheless the findings of this study have important implications for social work education and youth work practice. Although in theory, the ability to act politically should be one of the core competences of youth workers in Germany; only those youth workers who perceive political action as part of their work possess competences in acting politically. In order to create an understanding of political action as part of the profession, especially youth workers in training need to be taught about influences of local politics on youth work practice on the one hand. And on the other hand, they need to be trained in strategies of policy practice for developing competencies and realizing their potential impact. Unfortunately, German universities rarely offer courses which focus on policymaking strategies as part of academic social work programs (Burzlaff, 2021). Accordingly, there is a need to adapt existing programs and concepts from other countries (for instance, Street et al., 2022; Weiss-Gal & Savaya, 2012).

The findings here indicate that organizations are mediating the political engagement of frontline youth workers in practice. Even though we still need to examine the reasons why frontline youth workers are instructed by their organizations to remain politically neutral and to not engage in politics, we have to question if this organizational practice does not actually hamper an understanding of political action as part of the profession and lower its potential power to create political change in communities. Therefore, we need to foster awareness for the consequences of this practice on the community level in order to change to a different perspective within organizations.

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