

Professional Youth Work – The Whole ‘Kit Bag’.



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Youth Work - A Distinct Professional Discipline

Youth work is a distinct professional discipline that has clear parameters to its practice base. These parameters form the reference points for each professional youth worker. These parameters are now enshrined in the Victorian Youth Sector Code of Ethical Practice, (Corney & Hoiles YACVIC, 2007). Barwick (2006) states that “a Code of Ethical Practice is a document developed by the profession for the profession to assist and guide in the development and implementation of ethical and safe practice for both clients and workers” .

The parameters for Youth Work are also underpinned by an understanding of the social, political and economic context, in which young people live and operate. All of the above, a set of ethics, values, practice reference points, principles, knowledge, skills, are what should be contained in the ‘kit bag’ of each professional youth worker made available to them through training and professional mentoring. The kit bag of professional youth work can only be advocated for, developed and passed on through the strong collective voice of a professional association.

Youth Work is an Educational Practice

Woods, (2011), in his book on Youth Work discusses how youth workers are primarily educators who engage with young people in diverse settings, using different methods and activities to stimulate informal education and learning. They build and sustain open and trusting relationships in order to create conditions for learning with an aim, wherever possible, young people will choose to engage in the learning relationship. Informal and Non-formal education is distinguished from other types of educational practice by its values and methods. It is primarily concerned with young people’s personal and social development. Youth workers *purposefully intervene* in young people’s lives, creating opportunities, activities and conversations that aim to enable young people to think, feel and act differently towards their social world

Devlin and Gunning, (2009), undertook a research project in Ireland to define the benefits of youth work. As their starting point they decided to use the definition of youth work that was enshrined in legislation in the 2001 Irish Youth Work Act. According to the Act youth work is a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social

development of young persons through their voluntary participation. The Act also identifies youth work as complimentary to their formal, academic and vocational education and training. The research itself reported its findings from focus groups with youth workers who universally agreed in one key component of youth work. That is that the key purpose of youth work is primarily educational and developmental.

The diagram below from the European Youthpass resources describes the outcomes of the learning that young people experience through engaging with Youth Workers.

Learning in the field of youth



(Bergstein, Rita, 2012)

The Commonwealth Education Ministers would agree

At the 20th Meeting of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Nadi, Fiji in 2018 the final communique of outcomes stated the

Ministers noted with deep concern that youth in many Commonwealth Member States are vulnerable to drugs, gang violence and street crime and in certain societies extremism. Concerted efforts are required to impart global citizenship by inculcating universal and humanistic values through peace education, creating better understanding of social rights and responsibilities, and respecting cultural and religious diversity through formal and informal education and training.

Ministers acknowledged the contribution of non-formal and informal learning in building the resilience of young people and the role of youth and community workers in delivering non-formal and informal education.

A Professional Association is about Good Practice.

Good youth work practice can make systemic and long-term differences to young people's lives. It can also ensure that some of the most disadvantaged groups in the community have advocates that understand the relationship between policy and practice. Good youth work can also ensure that young people and the community

develop the range of skills necessary to work for change both in the lives of individual young people and in the landscapes of their community and social context. A professional association enshrines such practice principles by encouraging the profession to credential and to continue to update skills and knowledge. A professional association also plays a distinct role in engaging youth workers in an industry wide discussion about quality and the benchmarks of good practice.

The South African Child and Youth Care Workers have worked with their members, community and Government to have the profession recognised. In an article by Gharabagi (2018) he outlines that child and youth care is a practice based on specific competencies and given that it adds value it is necessary to protect this profession from those who practice without having demonstrated the necessary competencies. Once regulated and legislated child and youth care practitioners need to be valued through better compensation and better gate keeping of who is considered to be part of the profession.

The African Youth Charter (2006) compels Governments to provide resources to professionalise Youth Work. It also outlines the aim of developing Youth Work training in Higher Education. There is wide acknowledgement of the work there needs to be a stronger political commitment to building a professional workforce.

High Standards

Our expectations of youth work practice should be high. As a community we should expect the passage of young people to be made smoother by the youth work professional as they take on the large responsibility of delivering to young people what we as a community have not been able to deliver. Although, we should not be unreasonable and expect workers with young people to do the impossible, "put humpty back together again". When the damage to a young person has been great, such a role requires a very full 'kit bag' and may be more than we can ask. However a professional association should advocate and be an active partner in making the 'kit bag' as full as possible. This should happen by engaging in training, skill development, appropriate industrial awards and career paths. Thus ensuring that young people are the recipients of the highest possible standard of professional youth work practice.

Youth Work and Distinct Vocational Training

In order to work optimally with young people, the intensive, complex and demanding nature of youth work requires workers to possess and demonstrate a high level of knowledge, skill and self-development (Chandu, 2003).

To progress the distinct vocational role of the professional youth worker, as opposed to those that work with young people, then we must ensure that the education and training of youth workers is of a high standard. We must also ensure that it is accountable and that the outcomes of such training meet some agreed criteria. Any such criteria should be assessed, not just by academics, but by youth work peers, young people and the wider community.

Distinct Practice -Defining a Youth Work Industry.

Professional Youth Work, as a particular vocational practice, is similar but not the same as the work undertaken by other professionals and groups who work with young people. These may be, teachers, therapists, counsellors, mentors, recreation specialists, arts workers, social workers, welfare workers, religious practitioners or just well meaning volunteers, to name a few. These groups of people, in many cases, have their own professional body or industry organisation. We believe that Youth Workers are those

that are specifically trained professionals that have a defined knowledge base and set of practice tools that can be articulated and delivered within the context of work with young people.

The traditional 'practice tools' of youth work; such as, recreation, outdoor adventure activities and the arts have recently found ways to legitimate their roles as standalone theoretical practice frameworks that pose as 'the' solution to the complex issues that young people currently face. Historically however, good youth work practice would suggest that activities such as, sporting and recreational pursuits, outdoor and extreme adventure programs, the theatrical, musical and fine arts as well as graffiti and street arts are all used as informal learning 'activities'. These 'activities operate as 'practice tools' to assist in providing young people with the skills needed to traverse adolescence, build relationships, improve personal development and encourage a level of self-reflection, resilience and self-esteem for young people and their communities.

As such, 'tools' or 'skill sets' such as 'recreation or adventure therapy' cannot work in isolation from a holistic youth work approach that considers the theory, practice and underpinning values of concepts such as empowerment, participation and community development, with the issues of education, employment, housing and family stability as keys to strengths based, solution focussed work with young people.

Conclusion

Youth work defines itself as working towards both systemic and individual change with young people in a wide range of settings. Youth workers are clear about their professional boundaries and place young people at the centre of their work. Youth workers have a broad understanding of the context of their work as well as specific practice skills. Youth Work has a defined body of knowledge and a documented history. The kit bag of professional youth work can only be advocated for, developed and passed on through the strong collective voice of a professional association.

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