

Chapter 2

Introduction to Youth Work

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses youth work in greater detail and examines the implications of delivering for young people within a rights-based framework. While serving all young people within a framework that sees them as assets, youth work also has a critical place in addressing the needs and rights of young people in difficult circumstances, in preventing extremist thought and action, in creating peaceful societies, and also responding to specific social needs of young people in contact with the law, or engaged in substance abuse.

2.2 The nature of youth work

The Commonwealth's definition of youth work introduced in Chapter 1 indicates the holistic approach of youth work in ensuring young people's development as individuals, as collectives, and as contributors to community, national and global development. This also refers to youth work's unique role in youth engagement, and the facilitation of experiential learning/education and social empowerment.

This is a rights/asset-based approach that avoids perceiving young people as being essentially in deficit. That is, rather than responding to young people as lacking capacity, this approach emphasises, celebrates and looks to maximise and build on the talents and potential of young people. This means that youth workers regard young people as a social asset and resource whose potential can only be fully realised when they are recognised as young citizens with rights and, as such, personal integrity. This also means that young people need to be perceived and engaged as those ready to participate and contribute to making and developing their societies.

Youth workers are situated in the governmental, non-governmental, private and voluntary sectors and work with young people in a range of situations including centre-based contexts (youth clubs, schools, hubs and associations) and in detached settings (sometimes understood as 'outreach', or 'street work') that can take place where young people freely congregate (street corners, parks, bus shelters and so on) of their own volition. Youth work can also take place in hospitals, prisons and other institutions with which young people have contact. Some might argue that many or even all of these constitute 'types' of youth work.

In addition, the international and national NGO sector deploys a workforce variously tasked to meet the needs and nurture the development of young people. These personnel are not always youth workers. However, broadly speaking, many undertake youth-work like roles, including working for the empowerment of young people and promoting their participation in communities and society.

Figure 2.1 Youth work as a global phenomenon

Youth work is premised on the **willing participation** of young people. While this can be contested from a number of standpoints, this is what sets youth workers apart from teachers, justice and prison workers and others who work with young people in contexts where young people are **obliged** to attend agencies, institutions or centres.¹

In this study, references to youth work constitute the specific practice of engaging with young people through the fostering of empowering and enabling processes. This is reliant on young people's freedom from constraint in making decisions about their attendance, engagement and personal learning, wellbeing and development. This means they are less directed and more encouraged to find their own directions; instructions are displaced by questions while discussion of what is possible takes up the space that can potentially be dominated by attempts to impose didactic forms/systems of education.

As exemplified in Figure 2.1, youth work's purposes are advanced by **engaging with young people, and focusing on their empowerment as part of enabling processes, within welcoming, tolerant and caring local, national and global environments in which the freedom of expression is maximised.**

The following key tenets of youth work are based on the Commonwealth's *Professional Youth Work: A Concept and Strategies* that sets out the ethos of youth work the Commonwealth advances and supports.

The concept note elaborates these as follows²:

- a. **Professional care:** The delivery of youth work services in environments providing professional, detached care for young people. This is based on an associative, rather than personal, relationship with young people. Youth workers work **with** young people in order that they might **represent themselves better**.
- b. **Building personal awareness and expectation:** Building young people's personal awareness of their strengths and helping them deal with personal challenges, while building their expectation of themselves. This requires that youth workers

Figure 2.2 Key tenets of youth work



are able to support young people to detect interest in/care about their wellbeing and that they might develop the motivation to have expectations of themselves.

- c. **Social and political education:** Developing intellectual, personal and ethical means to interact, think critically, and develop in a social context. This can also be extended to mean the development of a collective consciousness among young people in order that they contribute to their advancement and the advancement of their communities, nations and the world. This requires both youth work practitioners, and young people they work with, to develop the ability to take and manage responsibility, as well as deal with the consequences of action.
- d. **Making professional judgement:** The youth worker needs to be able to make sound, evidence-based and non-partial judgements based on practice experience around each and every context of their interaction with young people.
- e. **A rights-based approach:** Human rights principles and the Commonwealth Charter frame all aspects of youth work advanced by the Commonwealth, including seeing young people as agents in determining the best youth work initiatives for them and foregrounding young people’s rights at all times.
- f. **Youth participation:** Ensuring that youth work promotes young people’s agency and they are enabled to participate in every aspect of decisions around youth work provision, and monitoring and evaluation of youth work outcomes.

However, to simply corral almost any extra-curricular response or practice that encompasses elements of non-formal practice into youth work would overlook the foundation of the nature of professional practice. A solicitor is not a barrister,

Figure 2.3 The place of youth work in difficult/extreme contexts



although the former can perform some functions and aspects of the latter's profession, and both share appreciably similar ethical boundaries. Ophthalmologists differ from optometrists and opticians in their levels of training and in what they can diagnose and treat, but they are all interested in eyes. **Because I do a bit of what you do, does not make me you.**

2.3 Youth work for all, especially the marginalised

Youth work, while it serves all young people in the rights-based perception that all youth are real and potential assets,³ also has its particular functions as a crucial empowering process in difficult or extreme contexts, such as in:

Youth work taps into something that was evident in traditional societies; the benefits of sociality and association which is the seedbed of basic political consciousness; it informs recuperation (the re-capture of something lost) and recreation (and opportunity to re-create or re-establish the self); youth workers build environments that can facilitate personal and social development, learning, healing and respite.

In the postcolonial Commonwealth, different interpretations and adaptations of youth work have appeared in different contexts and countries. Culture, economics, religion and politics fashioned and transformed provision. Social work was more

Figure 2.4 Social development, learning, healing and respite



influential in some places than others, while churches, NGOs' and State ambitions for nation-building altered and sometimes necessarily overrode the more broadminded aspects of what might be described as the 'spirit of youth work'.

Notes

- 1 Qualified youth workers are employed in schools, prisons, hospitals, residential centres and other non-voluntary, statutory circumstances. However, for the most part, the parameters of the roles they assume in these situations are founded on the dominant institutional, organisational or professional frameworks (correction, formal educational functions or social work aims and duties for instance). These practitioners bring youth work skills to largely non-youth work situations in which such approaches might help achieve practical, legal and ethical aims and obligations. Because there are examples of youth workers being employed in non-youth work institutions and agencies does not mean these institutions and agencies are made youth work institutions or agencies, with predominantly youth work related outcomes.
Youth work may also be understood more as a *fait accompli* than a choice to voluntarily participate in situations where no other provision exists; young people use clubs and agencies for the want of any other facility. However, by and large, globally, youth work tradition and theory is underwritten by the recognition of the voluntary participation of young people. To start looking at youth work without this grounding, to claim that practice might encompass a range of adult/youth interaction that is based on obligatory participation, would mean also bringing other defining factors, such as the essential informality of practice, led by and for young people for their personal and collective empowerment, into question. To claim that youth work in young offenders' centres (for instance) might be essentially youth led, for their personal empowerment, is to totally misunderstand the nature of correction and punishment by way of incarceration.
- 2 These key tenets reflect, and elaborate/ expand on the key criteria for professional youth work set out in the Commonwealth document *Professional Youth Work: A Concept and Strategies*.
- 3 See for example the work of organisations such as Concerned for Working Children which addresses survival issues through empowerment – <http://www.concernedforworkingchildren.org/about/>