

Chapter 4

Paradigms of Practice

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is an overview of youth work practice in the very diverse contexts of the Commonwealth. It examines different manifestations of youth work as well as the ideologies and intent that result in different forms of practice, and different outcomes for youth. It also examines synergies between State and non-State youth work – a synergy that the Commonwealth has constantly been concerned with.

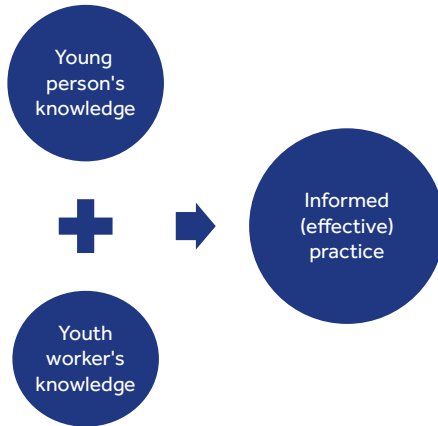
4.2 An overview of paradigms of practice

Almost all countries, sometimes even regions, have evolved, refined, adapted and changed received notions of what youth work is, should, or might, be. Often, different forms of youth work take place under the same labels, such as different interpretations of the ‘psycho-social’ discussed in relation to Canada and the work of the Indian organisation Pravah below.

Other responses are taken to be ‘developmental’, seeing **particular age groups as relatively ‘underdeveloped’**. What appears to be an anthropological slant on occasion comes close to depicting young people as almost a separate species with distinctive (rather than, say, evolving) behaviour patterns and psychological propensities. One fairly prevalent set of techniques and approaches, informal education has fostered a whole body of literature that seems to incline practitioners to act covertly (informally) without the full awareness of those targeted for this ‘education’,¹ as demonstrated through some of the examples below.

How can this covert education be education? Isn’t it indoctrination or propaganda? Such ambitions fly in the face of the ethos and practice of the ‘rights of the child’. That aside, this view of youth work assumes the presence of **ignorance on one side (the child/young person) and enlightenment on the other (the adult practitioner)**. It is not too hard to discern that such activity appears to be premised on assumptions uncomfortably close to ideas and suppositions that informed colonialism.

Youth work does aspire to promote learning, **but the role of the young person is crucial in this process**; it is they who might teach practitioners about their situation, environment, their wants, needs, issues, problems, hopes and ambitions. Without this knowledge and understanding, the youth worker is ignorant of the position of the young people they are working alongside, with and for. This learning process is based on, and grows out of, conversation (dialogue) between the practitioner and the young person; it is a purposeful, dynamic and open interaction. Figure 4.1 illustrates this.

Figure 4.1 'The dialectic of youth work'

The following examples from across the Commonwealth attempt to look at explicit and implicit paradigms of youth work as articulated through State/national youth work practice.

4.3 A mixed heritage

Youth work, as the practice we might recognise today, has been strengthened by State legislation and action or duties given to local authorities both in the global south and north (most widely during the postcolonial period). At the same time, youth work has been and continues to be used by faith-based organisations and other interests, although not as an end in itself, but as a means to other ends.

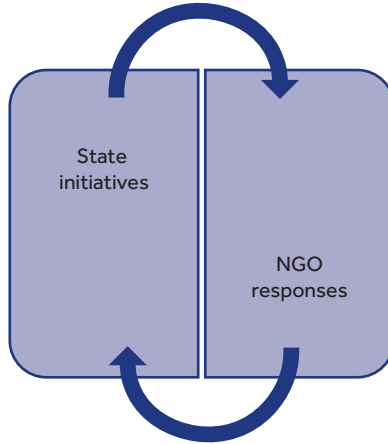
State initiatives have blended with the work and the aims of NGOs, while social and community work responses have, more or less, merged with and generated ways of addressing what is usually seen as 'youth problems' and/or the transitional challenges that are perceived to be inherent in people at a stage between childhood and adulthood. Figure 4.2 illustrates these dynamics.

For all this, the social and legal boundaries between childhood and adulthood differ from context to context, in terms of individual perceptions, and sometimes from person to person.

4.4 Uganda: bottom-up initiatives for the recognition of youth work?

As in **Cyprus** and **Canada**, in **Uganda** there is no State recognition of youth work. However, there are possibilities of identifying youth work approaches in existing practice which can be used as a basis for advocating for the importance of recognising youth work as a profession. The structures for youth service delivery in Uganda, as in many other member states, indirectly acknowledge the importance of building youth work competencies in order to maximise the impact of existing youth empowerment structures. This is explored below:

Figure 4.2 State–NGO interactions in youth work



Uganda’s National Youth Policy (NYP) (Uganda, Republic of, 2001) defines youth as ‘all young persons; female and male aged 12 to 30 years’. It states that ‘this is a period of great emotional, physical and psychological changes that require societal support for a safe passage from adolescent to full adulthood’.

The definition does not look at youth as a homogeneous group with clear-cut age brackets but rather as a process of change or a period of time when an individual’s potential, vigour, adventurism, experimentation with increased risks and vulnerabilities show themselves in a socially meaningful pattern.

The definition considers the labels ‘youth’ and ‘child’ to be mutually inclusive at some stage of young people’s lives. It reinforces the definition of a child and seeks to nurture, protect, and ensure their welfare. It seeks to prepare and empower young people to be able to take on socio-cultural, economic, civic, political and adult roles and autonomy. **It also reflects the reality on the ground that the family and extended kinship ties loosen due to different factors, and that many young people have assumed adult responsibilities by the age of 12.** It simply provides a basis for the development and preparation of young people for adult responsibility in the given context.

Finally, this definition of youth takes into account programmatic issues and is in harmony with a number of operational and strategic definitions of major youth programmes in the country, including factoring in different definitions of youth, including age definitions as they apply to international bodies such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth.

The policy goes on to state:

The Policy seeks to promote youth participation in democratic processes as well as in community and civic affairs and ensuring that youth programmes are youth-centred. (Uganda, Republic of, 2001, para 5.5)

and

The Policy advocates for creation of a supportive socio-cultural, economic and political environment that will empower the youth to be partners in development (Ibid., para 5.6)

Here, it can be seen that while Uganda does not have any State recognition of youth work as a profession, **there is State recognition of many of the values and principles the Commonwealth includes in its definition of youth work.** Uganda, as in many other countries in the Commonwealth, does not overtly seek to address the above via State-recognised professional youth work but via ‘youth Involvement, participation and leadership’ (Ibid., para 8.3) as follows:

- Advocate for increased effective youth representation and participation in key positions of decision-making, leadership and management at all levels of Government and in the civil society,
- Advocate for review of and harmonisation of National Youth Council statute 1993, the Local Government Act 1997 and the Decentralisation Policy to support the Youth Council structures and other Youth Programmes,
- Strengthen and promote Youth Networks at all levels and ensure their integration with Internal Networks,
- Promote and support youth institutions for peace and conflict resolution,
- Advocate for the realisation of the rights of youth with disabilities and ensure their participation in all youth programmes.

Arguably this approach, *as it might theoretically be better implemented by professional youth workers, implicates a youth work/youth participation approach by way of existing or reformed structures and processes.*

The National Youth Council, as is the case in many other member states (**Annexure 4**), is a representative body of local youth councils. The National Youth Council Act states that:

- A village youth council shall consist of every person who has attained the age of eighteen years but is below the age of thirty years and is a resident of the village,
- A parish or ward youth council shall consist of all the members of the village youth committees in the parish or ward,
- A sub-county, division or town youth council shall consist of all the members of the parish youth committees in the sub-county, division or town,
- A county youth council shall consist of all the members of the sub-county, division or town youth committees in the county,
- A district youth council shall consist of the chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, publicity secretary and finance secretary of each county youth committee in the district; and one male representative and one female representative of each sub-county youth council in the district elected by the sub-county youth council. (Ibid., para 10.4)

The National youth delegates' conference is held once a year and is the main policy-making body of the council. The national youth delegates' conference is made up of:

- the chairperson of every county youth council;
- the chairperson of every district youth council;
- the secretary for women youth at the district level; and
- eighteen students elected by the Uganda National Students Association.

This model of youth participation and action, reflected in several youth council structures throughout the Commonwealth (Annexure 4), **might be understood as far more inclusionary and collaborative than many situations where youth work is recognised in the absence of commitments to such structures.** In principle, it is doing what much youth work sets out to do: empower young people and involve them in decision-making about their own and a wider agenda.

According to how well the Ugandan approach to youth empowerment/participation works (which is similar to other approaches Commonwealth-wide) **a case would need to be made for why and how the development of policies and strategies for professionalising youth work build in existing good practice such as this, and, additionally, learnings that emerge from these experiences, for meaningful, bottom-up policy and legislation.**

4.5 Country X: youth empowerment and party political goals

Policy aims for youth in Country X (a non-Commonwealth member state) are not dissimilar to those of Uganda and others, placing empowerment, participation and the benefit of young people to the fore. However, the youth service in this country might be understood to be more controlled, restrictive and manipulative of youth than in more democratic contexts.

The National Youth Service here was ostensibly established for the transformation and empowerment of youth to support national development. The service claimed to provide young people of the country with a sense of national identity and patriotism. While it aimed to unite people above party lines, it also promoted wariness of foreign influence and intervention in national politics.

An opposing view of this service claims that it **indoctrinates its members towards loyalty to the ruling regime** and even trains them for military operations to enforce its dominance. The government of Country X also had plans to make the programme mandatory for all youths.

According to some reports, members of the youth service are taught exclusively from party political campaign material and speeches.

While the programme collapsed some time back, the government re-established it more recently, claiming it had been re-branded to focus on the development of skills as a way of economically empowering youth. However, conditions in the service training facilities are reported to include poor construction, frequent hunger and

sexual abuse of girls and women. It is to be noted though that Country X also has other youth organisations that legitimately empower youth.

So, the aims of services that might at first reading look very much like youth work can have a range of purposes and impacts in practice quite contradictory to how the Commonwealth (for instance) might understand youth work.

4.6 Canada's work with youth: is it youth work?

Some writers have taken the Canadian Child and Youth Care model as being, for all intents and purposes, youth work. However, the scope of practice from the Council of Canadian Child and Youth Care Associations (n.d.) provides a helpful definition of the field:

Child and youth care practitioners work with children, youth and families with **complex needs**. [they] specialize in the development and implementation of therapeutic programmes and planned environments and the utilization of daily life events to facilitate change. At the core of all effective child and youth care practice is a focus on the therapeutic relationship; the application of theory and research about human growth and development to promote the optimal physical, psycho-social, spiritual, cognitive, and emotional development of young people towards a healthy and productive adulthood; and a focus on strengths and assets rather than pathology.

As can be seen, the focus of this work is young people with 'complex needs' rather than the generic response that is fundamental to youth work practice. In 2012 the Office of the Children's Advocate Alberta explained:

The most common assumption about 'complex needs' is that the term refers to a population of young people experiencing a multitude of issues that cross multiple service sectors (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). A helpful definition that captures this perspective is provided by the CanChild Centre for Childhood Disability Research in Ontario (2004, p.5):

Children with complex needs [are] defined as children with multiple health/developmental needs that require multiple services from multiple sectors, in multiple locations.

This definition acknowledges that needs may arise from a number of conditions that affect children's health or development, and asserts that there is value in utilising a 'non-categorical' definition that does not assign responsibility to any single discipline or service sector.

While it is true that some people qualified in child and youth care gain employment in 'youth work-like' posts, perhaps with NGOs or local authorities (as do qualified teachers and social workers) it is evident that this response is **essentially/significantly therapeutic in character and not in the main the generic, empowering approach that is central to youth work**, and specifically the Commonwealth definition of youth work. The latter is underpinned by the contention that youth work is for all young

people, focusing on a rights-based approach. Indeed, as in other parts of the world, initiatives in schools and other formal establishment exhibit explicit youth-work like approaches, but they are sketchy and are not named as such.

4.7 Psycho-social 'models': Canadian child and youth care work and Pravah (India)

What is interpreted as psycho-social models of youth work here are discussed through two examples from **Canada** and **India**. The Canadian child and youth care model described above emphasises psycho-social work with young people within youth-in-context strengths/ assets/ resilience models, yet is focused on youth-at-risk rather than all young people. Meanwhile, in other contexts, as in the context of Pravah, an Indian youth work organisation, youth work is seen also as a psycho-social response, but understanding this as a means to recognise that young people exist in a psycho-social context and that the development of the human being **requires a clear understanding of the self in relation to the social** (and vice versa; 'from me to we and from we to me'). In short, this model works to connect the psychological and the social. This, in turn, is placed within a context of a critique of youth-for-development approaches that overlook psycho-social/wellbeing aspects that youth work addresses.

4.8 Youth work in youth development – New Zealand and Zambia

'Youth development' strategies and practice appear to be so close to youth work that they can be understood to be much the same in terms of practice ethos and direction. For example, the Ministry of Youth Development in New Zealand states that 'Youth development means growing and developing the skills and connections young people need to take part in society and reach their potential.' This is elaborated thus:

Youth development is about young people gaining a:

- Sense of contributing something of value to society
- Feeling of connectedness to others and to society
- Belief that they have choices about their future
- Feeling of being positive and comfortable with their own identity.

It's about building strong connections and active involvement in all areas of life including (New Zealand Ministry of Youth Development):

- Family and whanau (extended family)
- Schools, training institutions and workplaces
- Communities (sports, church, cultural groups)
- Peer groups.

This approach is also about young people being involved and having a say in decisions that affect them, their family, their community and their country and putting into

practice and reviewing those decisions, which broadly equates to the definition provided by the Ministry of Youth and Sport in Zambia:

A process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent (Republic of Zambia, Ministry of Youth and Sport, 2015, p. 8)

4.9 Economics driving instrumentalist youth work: Bangladesh

Context (economic, social, cultural etc.) tends to drive what youth development/ youth work might be. For instance, in Bangladesh, the Department of Youth Development (DYD) aims to facilitate skills development training, employment and self-employment, and to involve youth in national development. The DYD implements youth policy, sitting within the 'guardianship' of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The DYD works to encourage self-development and employment, promote involvement in community and national development activities, support youth organisations, involve youth in socio-economic activities and empower youth to become self-employed through micro-credit schemes.

As such, it is evident that while youth development in Bangladesh carries elements of what might be understood to be youth work principles, the emphasis is on economic exigencies via employment.

4.10 Critique of instrumentalist youth work: India

In the global South there is a critique of some youth-for-development models that predominantly respond to young people as instruments to implement wider national development programmes, sometimes at the expense of young people's social, political and ethical development as autonomous beings.

There is a South Asian critique relating to the way orthodox systems can appropriate youth work for their own ends, thus undermining the potential value and importance of youth work that supports young people's broader social, political and economic self-empowerment. Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), a youth work organisation from India, has exemplified this critique of instrumentalism in putting forward its own alternative, transformative definition. YUVA states that the organisation's youth work is:

framed within a radical theory of impacting larger societal change. It is focused on enabling young people to develop critical thinking and question social and political structures. **YUVA believes youth work is a political act and frames all their work in the rights and social justice frameworks.** (YUVA Youth for Voluntary Action, n.d.)

The organisation The Concerned for Working Children in India, whose core work is in empowering children who work for a living, also takes on a similar position

on youth engagement (The Concerned for Working Children, n.d.). These critiques often take youth work more in the direction of reflective thinking/social action that is yet another manifestation of youth work practice.

Similarly, Pravah, a youth work training organisation based in Delhi, and discussed above in relation to their psycho-social model, critiques instrumentalist youth work that perceives young people as instruments in realising national development with little focus on the self-empowerment of young people themselves.

4.11 Diverse contexts, diverse needs

There are consistencies and divergences in the practice of youth work between and across contexts. These multifaceted responses to young people are founded on the solid underpinning of society's care and concern for its young people, their growth and security.

While the above discussions have demonstrated how rich and sensitively-receptive approaches have been developed in youth work, it means that the understanding of, and the perceived need for, professionalisation varies.

The effort to provide cross-national and international views of practice has been tried more than once (certainly in the European context).² However even as researchers, theorists, academics, civil servants, voluntary agencies and so on toil at the task of framing a global view of practice, **the ever-shifting realm adapts and responds to social and financial demands, practical limitations, political ambitions and the conscience of the collective.** Much of this movement is unpredictable. At the same time, there are existing traditions to be accommodated that are often struggling, sometimes resisting, to integrate new approaches and reforms in practice. It is then perhaps not surprising that different definitions of youth work, often cumbersome and uncomfortable ones such as 'social pedagogy', are easily misunderstood and quickly become outdated.

Even attempts to obtain a national picture of youth work practice is frequently thwarted by the huge diversity of the practice *within* countries. The following is a perspective from a long-time member of a programme evaluation firm and a professional practitioner:

Variations in programming and differences in structure are pervasive in all sorts of youth-related programming. Some things fall under Federal responsibility, some come under State or local-level oversight, and some are programmatic (and usually tailored to a specific local population). There are huge cultural differences to account for (regional differences; urban/rural; racial/religious), as well as wildly different access to resources and legislative support.

As someone who works in programme evaluation, I can say from personal experience that assessing youth services in resource-poor, mostly rural areas, wherein racial bias can be built into the system, with a lack of legislative support and faith-influenced culture, is very different from assessing them in a another resource-poor rural area, lacking basic infrastructure, where mobile phones and internet aren't always possible, but which has a concentration of services in isolated

urban centers, sky-high opiate use rates and pockets of very high unemployment. These areas differ from districts with more ethnically diverse populations that also suffer from extreme geographic isolation, but with relatively well-funded behavioral health care. All of the latter contrast with very urban, more diverse populations, with access to services but a high crime rate, etc.

We run into trouble attempting to carry out Federal regulations or determining ‘best practice’ guidelines that can be reasonably applied to everyone. In a national context that encompasses Arctic to sup-tropical geographic circumstances, hundreds of languages and cultures, regional political divisions, which render resources unpredictable, sheer distance and infrastructure challenges, there are no easy answers.’

This context is perhaps evident within most regions of the Commonwealth but it might resonate more from a pan-Commonwealth perspective. Even within particular countries (for instance, India) this kind of diversity is part of the national profile.

With this in mind, this document has been built, as far as is possible, on pragmatic and concrete perspectives to ascertain the development of professionalisation of practice throughout the Commonwealth and, to some degree, also reflecting contexts within contexts.

The ethos of youth work practice may well take on different persona and be clothed to suit the environment it occupies, but that is how it sustains and advances; how it becomes more than what it has been. The culture of youth work will bend and shape to wider cultural influences; if it failed to do this, one might justifiably worry about its efficacy.

Youth work might perhaps be more of a state of mind and so a set of responses more than any particular set of rules and regulations, standards or guidelines. As a commissioner of mental health services noted:

Based on my background in youth work, I devised an early intervention model that moved away from the medical model and the constant inappropriate referrals from professionals. Yes, there is a need for some young people to be seen by a qualified therapist and many might need more of a youth work approach (**more people less pills**). Talking to youth workers around the benefits of, say, outdoor activities, could technically be called adventure therapy. Someone to walk alongside them to help deal with life’s problems and support young people in developing the skills to manage what life throws at them (at all of us).

I also worked with one provider to create therapeutic communities around a cluster of schools so the school staff including teachers, learning mentors etc., were not only skilled up but could call upon a qualified therapist to get advice and so on, and only refer to specialists if necessary. It’s a model that works well, but needs to be expanded on by colleagues buying into it, albeit slowly. This is where I see youth work being so valuable – I feel a bit like a missionary. I have left youth work but youth work has never left me and I can see where it fits across a whole spectrum of work – it could literally take over the world!³

4.12 Youth work needs to be inclusive, but is not everything

The above discussions demonstrated the varied forms of work with young people that are defined as ‘youth work’ across the Commonwealth. That said, youth work can’t be everything, because then it would be ‘no one thing’ (nothing). This presents the complex challenge of the pages that follow. Youth work often seems to be like light: you can see it, you can make it, but you can’t bottle it. However, that does not stop us understanding light and its properties.

Notes

- 1 The literature on IE (informal education) consistently encourages this – it tends to task practitioners to work out how to covertly educate young people. So for instance we set up a table tennis club; we only advertise it as such, but the workers are using this to educate young people in any number of vague ways (for their ‘betterment’ or ‘self-confidence’). There is hardly ever a learning needs assessment for such ‘education’; the need is just assumed (deficit model) – this sort of thing is present in most of the literature, but has its root in Jeffs and Smith (2010).
- 2 See ‘Working with young people: The value of youth work in the European Union http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf and ‘Mapping Global Youth Work’ <http://think-global.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/dea/documents/Global%20Youth%20Work%20mapping%20FINAL%20report%20July%202010.pdf>.
- 3 This demonstrates how youth work skills can complement non-youth work environments and aims.