

Chapter 14

Conclusions and Recommendations – Way Forward for Professional Youth Work

The research strongly indicates that youth work in the Commonwealth is a diverse and multifaceted practice. While it has commonalities in terms of delivery and intent, it does not conform to any one set of techniques or approaches. This is probably reflective of the character of this ‘family of nations’, its cultural and historical diversity, as well as the differences in economic and social background. With this in mind, it would seem to be unnecessary to insist on uniformity for its own sake and wise to be ready to promote mutual learning from the richness of response.

However, this poses issues in arriving at some form of unanimity in terms of professionalism. Wants, needs and requirements differ from context to context, even within relatively small nations and geographical areas.

The Commonwealth has, over the years, sourced and expended a comparatively large amount of energy, intellectual labour, time and finance into developing paths to facilitate professional responses. This has led, directly and indirectly, to probably tens of thousands of people taking up training and education at almost every level between basic introductions to practice to postgraduate qualification. The benefits to young people have almost certainly been considerable; it is likely that millions of Commonwealth citizens have grown up in the embrace of youth work; the concern and effort of what Nelson Mandela saw, with reference to the Commonwealth, as an organisation that ‘makes the world safe for diversity’ has also contributed to this.

Youth work’s claims of working with young people in order that they ‘fulfil their potential’ can sound pretty trite when one asks how one might know when someone has reached that point (or half-reached it). But in defence of those youth workers, why would anyone want a child not to make the best of their potential?

Given the size of the Commonwealth youth population, youth work is likely to have a growing presence, certainly in the light of racial, political, social and economic tensions and divisions, that are replicated in different contexts across the Commonwealth. Youth workers prospectively need to be more than programme providers, being ready to take on aspects of roles such as counsellor, mediator, advocate, activist and educator. As the practice develops, appending new roles and expectations, society and young people will look to youth workers for a range of responses.

In today’s context, professionalism for youth workers in the Commonwealth is no longer a luxury or strategy for enhancing the profile or status of the field. Professional expertise is a necessity as practitioners increasingly assume responsibility for the positive development of a massive section of the total population.

In any society and maybe across societies, it would be helpful to have some agreement about the actual and comparative value of youth work. This perhaps might help with regard to establishing what might be the appropriate level of remuneration for youth workers in any given context.

The Commonwealth has found that youth work is fundamental to national development, and may be considered as pressing as other needs, considering issues of social cohesion, economic and social inequalities, etc., for which youth work will have a response related to the delivery of basic health/education services and care. Therefore, the Commonwealth and member states have made efforts to advance youth work as a practice that is professional.

There can be little doubt that the presence and skills of youth workers work as a fillip to any society in terms of the stability and social health of communities. The Commonwealth believes and has shown that it is in the interests of governments to invest in youth work because of its direct and indirect contributions to positive human development and social productivity, to establishing democratic cultures, to social cohesion and a sense of direction for the future of communities, regions, nations and the world. Commonwealth leaders have consistently agreed with this perspective and have unfailingly backed youth work initiatives.

For all this, a significant section of the population of the nations focused on would probably correctly assume that youth work is largely a part-time and/or voluntary activity. The contribution of volunteers in faith-based and uniformed provision across regions dwarfs the full-time workforce. Many of these volunteers have comparatively modest training and support, while an appreciable number do not access any form of training. As such, it is likely that the professional status of youth work may be something of an enigma for most people across the Commonwealth, as it might be for many youth workers who are not in a position (partly because of the lack of training) to understand the complexities associated with the explicit assertion of professional status. The mere claim to professional status, or a level of regard an occupation might command in terms of professionalism, does not mean that the occupation has professional status in any legislative and so indisputable legal sense.

Such considerations need to be thought about with regard to the professionalisation of youth work. Yes, we would logically want youth workers to act professionally; to have the requisite skills, ethical awareness and so on, but to have this must youth work be corralled within a profession? If it is, what happens to the massive majority of youth workers who practise part-time and who are volunteers? If they are not provided with the means to act professionally, having professional awareness and knowhow, how we will be able to claim that youth work is founded on professional values, principles and conduct?

As highlighted above, the Commonwealth has achieved much in the advancement of youth work, but it is clear perhaps that a few fundamental questions might need to be asked or re-asked; 'What must youth work in the Commonwealth be?'

What then, are the 'Musts' and 'Shoulds' for member states aspiring to provide professional, visionary youth work services for young people?

14.1 The 'Musts'

1. Build a collaborative vision for youth work

Build a national vision for professional youth work based on the foundations of a strong, competent cadre of youth workers with attitudes, knowledge and capabilities of professional judgement. Build this in collaboration with all youth work practitioners, those teaching youth work, with youth stakeholders, and especially with young people.

This would be seen as a vision of an occupation concerned with the rights and wellbeing of young people, that involves practitioner empathy, but unlike certain incarnations of social work or teaching, that which avoids assumptions of deficit – the person in front of me is not necessarily relatively ignorant (generally uneducated) or helpless (broadly in need of help). Youth work is not centrally concerned with 'at-risk' groups but developmental processes aimed at the generic youth population.

The welfare focus of youth work, its orientation of care for, and concern about, young people – what amounts to the values of the practice – is often forgotten in discussions about professionalism and youth work, and the research related to this is scant (Beker and Maier, 2001). However, this element of professionalism in youth work practitioners risks missing what is perhaps the most intricate aspect of the role; it is related to feelings about and orientations toward social justice and equity, and as such, has a political underpinning. Arguably, this is the foundation for everything youth workers do and determines how they apply their knowledge and skills. This end goal should not be lost in building this vision.

2. Formalise youth work education and training in qualifications frameworks

Ensure that youth work training and qualifications are registered onto the National Qualifications Authority Framework or by a relevant recognised qualifications authority to formalise education and training for youth work.

3. Obtain professional recognition for the youth work profession

Ensure that Public Service Commissions recognise youth work as a profession in the public sector. While many countries have assigned youth service officers/ youth co-ordinators in public sector youth structures, and many countries include functions related to youth work in the role and responsibilities of youth service officers, the formal recognition of the profession would obtain value and recognition for the profession, regularise competitive pay scales and, by extension, strengthen youth worker retention and systematic delivery of asset-based youth work for young people. An evidence-based policy paper that sets out the rationale and approach for the recognition of the youth work profession is usually a good start.

4. **Develop a framework for professionalism considering the eight criteria of the baseline and other relevant national/regional priorities, and implement the framework**

Assess your country's/region's status in terms of the eight criteria for professional youth work that defines the baseline (The existence of: a collectively formulated and owned definition of youth work as a profession, policy and legislative commitments, professional organisation as youth workers' associations, code of ethics, competency standards and other regulatory frameworks, qualification pathways, professional validation, professional supervision, and investment.)

Develop a widely consulted framework that brings on board the expertise and interests of all stakeholders highlighted in **recommendation 1**. Where a professional association exists, ensure their participation and leadership in the process as the core organisation of practitioners. In terms of government-led frameworks for professionalism, Malta and Malaysia provide an established and emerging professionalising process, respectively.

An implementation plan, and monitoring and evaluation of the plan, needs to be built into the process.

The rest of the recommendations below help articulate directions for recommendation 4.

5. **Set up structures and processes for youth work**

The ultimate test of the ability to impact young people's lives through youth work practice will depend on how trained and competent youth workers are facilitated with the resources of sustained and effective youth work delivery structures. Many youth club processes and learning processes developed in the youth work sphere would be helpful in planning for and investing in youth work delivery structures and processes. An example is the Commonwealth-Pravah-NYKS pilot *Co-Creating Youth Spaces: A Practice-Based Guide for Youth Facilitators* (Commonwealth Secretariat et al., 2014).

6. **Make youth work delivery accessible and safe**

This suggests the necessity to have **proficient, trusted practitioners, who are ready and able to engage with young people and foster positive life outcomes** (Astroth et al., 2004). Ensure safety and vetting mechanisms for professionals working with young people so that young people will not be put at risk by allowing significant access to them by those who, both unintentionally and otherwise, might do harm to them.

Again, conventional filters and checks will not be adequate for such a massive safeguarding challenge. While much might be achievable via the co-operation between police and youth work providers, on the scale we are looking at pan-Commonwealth, innovative forms of vigilance and vetting are needed at a community level.

7. **Ensure continuing education and competency-based programmes to raise practitioner abilities and status**

Continuous professional development supports the retention of youth workers and enhances their capacity to respond appropriately to young people (Walker, 2003).

While there is support for professionalising youth work by way of university-level education, others have it that experience-based training and preparation is the best way forward. Regardless of this lack of consensus about the means of professional development, it has been argued that youth work seems to be heading towards more formal professionalism.

To use an example outside of the Commonwealth (for the sake of comparison), in the USA, there has been a consistent demand for more concentrated and formal training arrangements for youth workers, and a foundational definition of youth development work. Borden and Perkins (2006, p. 101) have it that 'given the complexity of the needs of today's young people, it is both timely and prudent to increase the type, quality, and quantity of educational experiences available to community youth development professionals.'

The Commonwealth Youth Council has also asked for greater attention to be paid to the practice of peer youth work, where young people themselves attain professional status in order to engage other young people. In a context where research has highlighted the benefits of young professional peers engaging with others of their age group, this is indeed a further area of inquiry and strengthening through adequate education and training.

8. **Establish rights-based ethical standards**

Develop and ensure the implementation and monitoring of ethical standards for youth work practice in a participatory manner involving practitioners and young people. Ensure the participation of youth service beneficiaries in the monitoring and evaluation of services.

For youth workers to be professional, these ethical guidelines and professional direction is critical, and is similar to ethics that govern social workers, teachers and other like professionals who are involved with young people.

For Sercombe (2010), ethics in youth work arises out of the unique character of the relationship between the youth workers and young person that is central to its practice. It is not like the association between a pupil and teacher, or a social worker and a client, although it can involve elements of the same, and of other roles (counsellor, advice worker and so on). Youth workers, while perhaps acting in a friendly manner, are not friends, neither are they or can they be (if they are to remain professional) surrogate parents, or older siblings. Corney (2014), while offering a helpful critique of Sercombe, also provides a unique rights-based framework that provides further guidelines, principles and responsibilities of practice. The Commonwealth Secretariat's Draft Code of Ethical Practice for Youth Workers also highlights a similar rights-based framework. It is this generic

but also delineated youth work role that requires unique knowledge and skills; the association needs to motivate trust, but maintain appropriate boundaries.

9. Develop an evidence-base for youth work

Evidence is what tells us what works, and what does not. Demonstration of the impact of youth work on young people's lives and on peace and prosperity of countries generally, also promotes trust in the profession, and encourages investment. Evidence also helps youth workers hone their craft.

There have been recommendations by, among others, Azimi (2005) to address the lack of evidence-based tools for to assess youth work and its impact on young people. However, youth work practice remains hard to assess due to the lack of localised, context-relevant models and measures of youth work effectiveness. Without this, it is difficult to see how professional development can be said to be happening. Moreover, in the current context of financial cuts to youth work, there is an urgent need to invest in research that demonstrates a link between professionally trained youth workers and positive youth outcomes (Beker, 2001; Eisikovitz & Beker, 2001). This calls for the development of tools and methods to evaluate youth work.

The upcoming *Transformative Youth Work International Conference: Developing and Communicating Impact*, 4-6 September 2018¹ explores evidence of the impact of youth work in selected European countries. This would possibly lead the way for similar impact assessments in the Commonwealth. While the impact of youth work on youth development, and equality for youth, is not always easy to measure, quantitative and qualitative modes of measuring achievement need to be explored and adapted.

10. Develop a knowledge base for youth work

Knowledge creation in the youth work profession was not specifically addressed in this study. There is a significant corpus of intellectual work, both academic, and more practice-oriented, in the Commonwealth that needs to be collated, and shared. Examples of the more practice-oriented work include 'Ocean in a Drop: Inside Youth Leadership', an examination of youth-led youth work and other youth initiatives in the context of India. Additionally, numerous youth work journals, including the *Commonwealth Journal of Youth Development Work*, periodically published jointly with the University of South Africa (UNISA), and the *Journal of Youth Work Ethics* published by Ara Taiohi in New Zealand add to the corpus of knowledge and deliberation around youth work. Such initiatives need to be improved and expanded.

11. Discuss and formulate competency frameworks for youth work as relevant to your context (Huebner et al., 2003; Quinn, 2004)

With the professionalisation of youth work comes the need for standards to measuring professionalism. As indicated above, youth work lacks baseline tools for measuring professionalism, comparable to those found (for example) in professions like pharmacy (see Chisholm et al., 2006) or medicine (American

Board of Internal Medicine Committees on Evaluation of Clinical Competence and Clinical Competence and Communication Programmes, 2001 – see <http://www.tau.ac.il/medicine/cme/pituach/030210/1.pdf>).

Even though a formalised model of professional youth work has not been developed, Davies, Harte and others have suggested some elements of what can be taken as ‘quality’ youth work. These include:

- Competency: specific/unique knowledge and skills;
- Integrity: ethics;
- Care/concern: values

Youth work competences are the ‘knowledge, skills, and personal attributes workers need to create and support positive youth development settings’ (Astroth et al., 2004, p. 27).

As youth work is fundamentally and essentially developmental, to be competent, it would be key for a professional practitioner to be able to show one has the knowledge and skill to work with young people as this is central to the ‘quality practice’ (Evans, 2008; Sockett, 1996).

The Caribbean Commonwealth competency standards and the UK’s occupational standards may be guides to forms of assessing professionalism. At a more granular level of assessing direct youth engagement competencies, ComMutiny – Youth Collective’s Challenger Deep assessment tool would also be a helpful guide.

Once again, competency standards need to be developed in collaboration with youth workers’ associations, universities, young people and other youth sector stakeholders. This creates a means to evaluate and/or measure professionalism.

12. Monitor and evaluate youth work

Ensure mechanisms that enable youth workers and managers to monitor and evaluate the processes and results of youth work. This evidence helps convince planners and investors of the worth of youth work.

13. Invest in youth work and develop budget lines specific to expenditure relevant to professionalising youth work

Youth work needs investment. Public spending considerations for youth work are vital and the evidenced erosion of public investment in youth work needs to be curbed. At the same time, well-executed plans for funding strategies ranging from equitable and rights-based public-private partnerships, entrepreneurial innovation, bilateral and multilateral partnerships, crowd funding and so on, need to be encouraged.

In the public sector, clear budget lines need to be set up in ministries and departments for youth work-related expenditure including budget allocated for the education and training of youth workers, for investment in youth work programmes and processes, for the establishment of youth-work delivering youth clubs, and so on.

While adequate funding is crucial for implementing youth work, the quality of the individuals involved in planning, operating and monitoring practice is also key. 'As public investments in youth development programmes continue, the preparation and ongoing development of adults who work with young people in programmes has increased in importance' (Borden & Perkins, 2006).

14. Focus on quality recruitment

Invest in, and liaise with professional associations of youth workers in ensuring the recruitment of suitable youth work professionals whose qualifications, but above all, youth engagement competencies, are adequately assessed. Davies (1988 as cited in Harte, 2000) argued that youth workers, to be professional, need a blend of exclusive skills and knowledge. They therefore also need to be judiciously selected.

15. Establish and implement supervision frameworks

Explore collaborations with professional associations and universities with advanced frameworks and implementation mechanisms as elaborated in the baseline, for setting up supervision standards so that youth workers might preserve and deepen their trained skill.

A great and lively network across our planet is there for the making, and supervision can be the cementing agent holding this together; a massive, dialogical nexus of development, exploration, examination, betterment and learning – a humming, buzzing human dialectic and the collective voice of the young.

14.2 The 'Shoulds'

Having taken just a cursory look at the 'musts' of the kind of youth work we might want, how about the 'shoulds'? At best, what do we want youth work to do?

1. Make youth work fun

Young people might look to youth work to be 'fun' and that would seem reasonable to most people; youth *should* be a time for having fun; fun involves play and we know that play is edifying in itself.

2. Make youth work a learning experience

As much as youth work is made to be fun, parents and governments may also believe it should offer opportunities for young people to learn. **If learning is to be fun it is going to be related to things one wants to learn.** But does this bring us back to the problem of training? Is it not the case that adults need a good deal of education to be able to work with young people to facilitate their learning? The project of **ComMutiny – the Youth Collective** in India has shown that young people can develop their own learning environments simply with the encouragement (or lack of discouragement) of allied adults. Sugata Mitra's 'Hole in the Wall Project'² has confirmed this worldwide. Perhaps his 'granny cloud' could be an inspiration?³

This notion does not make professionally qualified youth workers redundant. In fact, it can create a whole new role in youth work in centralised hubs, perhaps sponsored by a range of finance from State grants to crowdfunding and entrepreneurial innovation. The knowledge of graduates can be disseminated effectively from every corner of the globe, but also such work can offer completely novel research possibilities to build on and extend practice.

That these processes are underway in many Commonwealth member states is a positive sign.

As a result of the commitments of the Commonwealth's Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE), there have been ongoing calls for the generation of a youth work code of ethics, enhanced practice standards, and the collectivisation and professional organisation of youth work professionals. This was a logical and clear advance toward raising the quality of youth work. Such initiatives have received extensive support, and the Commonwealth commissioned relevant resources such as the draft Code of Ethical Practice, guidance on youth work, as well as guidance on establishing professional associations (Commonwealth Secretariat 2012a, 2012b and 2014). While national-level movement along these lines have begun to be energised, these is yet more to be achieved, and sustained.

Young people are the greatest resource that youth work has (indeed without them there would be no youth work) and it is their collaboration that is the means to make youth work accessible, safe, fun and a means to promote and stimulate learning, and in turn cohesive, prosperous, societies.

Youth work is a growth profession, in a growth sector.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.marjon.ac.uk/courses/our-faculties/faculty-of-education--social-sciences/departments-of-social-sciences/transformative-youth-work-2018--developing-and-communicating-impact/>
- 2 see https://www.ted.com/talks/sugata_mitra_shows_how_kids_teach_themselves?language=en
- 3 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-17114718>