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PROFESSIONAL YOUTH WORK IN VICTORIA: The whole 'kit bag'

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ABSTRACT

Youth work is a distinct professional discipline that has clear parameters to its practice base. These parameters form the reference points for professional youth workers and are enshrined in the Victorian Youth Sector Code of Ethical Practice (Corney and Hoiles 2007). The parameters for youth work are underpinned by an understanding of the social, political and economic context in which young people live and operate (Maunder and Broadbent 1995). This article discusses a youth-work practice framework, using the analogy of a 'kitbag' that defines us as professionals and, more importantly, the distinct set of skills and knowledge that is called 'youth work'.

Youth work has built up professional resources, including codes of ethical practices and a research body of knowledge, and has become a defined industry, with education and training and labour-market definitions. All of these, as well as a set of ethics, values, practice reference points, principles, knowledge and skills, should be contained in the kitbag of each professional youth worker and provided through training and mentoring. The analogy of a kitbag seems appropriate when referring to all of the tools that a professional may need. Interestingly, industry representatives used the term 'toolbox' in the past, based on similar connections to the need for tools in order to be successful in any profession. The establishment of what is included in the professional kitbag of youth work requires the sort of advocacy that is found in the strong collective voice of a professional association. Victoria has a history of attempts to establish a professional association to be that advocate. In recent times there has been yet another call to align the code of ethical practice with a professional association. With an increasing number of other professions scrambling over the youth worker's terrain, there seems to be a looming imperative for youth work to professionalise or perish.

The history of Victorian youth-workers associations

A number of short-lived attempts have been made to create and sustain a professional association for youth workers in Victoria, Australia, of which the latest is the endeavour by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) to develop a code of practice that will lead to the creation of a professional association (Corney and Hoiles 2007).

The first attempt was the Victorian Association of Youth Leaders (VAYL), established by its parent body (which still exists) as the training and development arm of the Victorian

Association of Youth Clubs in 1945 (Goodwin 1991). VAYL disbanded in the early 1950s. The second attempt, the Institute of Professional Youth Leadership (IPYL), was inaugurated in 1957. The IPYL was somewhat more sophisticated than its predecessor, and included the dual aims of developing professional standards and industrial conditions. However, it too faded away in the 1960s, to be replaced by the Youth Workers Association (YWA).

The YWA was established in April 1968. Although it disbanded in 1982, its achievements were long lasting, particularly in the development of formal university-level training and industrial conditions. The 1980s saw the emergence of the Victorian Workers with Youth, the short-lived Youth Development Workers, and a national body, the Nationwide Workers with Youth Forum. But by the end of the 1980s all had run their course. Nearly two decades passed without a professional association in Victoria (Irving, Maunders and Sherington 1995).

Despite this, the industry has not been idle; it has grown in its understanding of good practice, engaged in training, and in many ways established a professional framework, in spite of the absence of an organised collective voice. There have been opportunities for the sector to operate collaboratively and collectively, and these have assisted in establishing a profession with a strong culture of professional practice.

Establishing the parameters of youth-work practice

The youth-work sector had previous opportunities to make explicit the parameters of practice. The 1997 National Youth Work Consultation raised certain key points. Participants at meetings in every state and territory in Australia responded to the statement: 'Please identify critical and discrete areas of training that workers with young people require to work effectively within a changing social, economic and policy environment.'

These aspects were acknowledged as critical to good youth-work practice (Broadbent 1997):

- ◆ Understanding the social, economic, and political context that young people live in is necessary in ensuring quality service outcomes to young people.
- ◆ Professionalism, values, ethics and codes of conduct are fundamental to good practice in the youth-work sector.
- ◆ Adapting work practices in changing policy environments is significant in youth work. The skills required for working in a competitive and privatised public sector were stressed.
- ◆ Workers raised the importance of skills of measuring, evaluating and reporting on the outcomes of their work.
- ◆ The emergence of the current industrial landscape has highlighted the need for training in areas concerned with workplace management. The impact of privatisation and competition requires workers to deal with the application of new



employment relations legislation, including contract and short-term tenured staff, and managing change.

- ◆ The political environment presents new challenges for the community development aspect of youth work, which underpins all aspects of service delivery for young people. In the current policy environment, managing the dichotomy of working in collaboration and in competition with other agencies was raised by workers as a significant issue for skill development (Broadbent 1997).

The Broadbent summary, though now a decade old, still holds currency because it focuses on key debates such as the privatisation of the community sector and the 'galloping managerialism' that has been embraced by government and employers. More importantly, it was another defining point in the establishment of a youth-work sector with a set of professional values and tools.

The youth-work kitbag

Professional youth work, as a vocational practice, is similar to the work undertaken by other professionals and groups who work with young people, for example teachers, therapists and counsellors. These groups mostly have their own professional bodies or industry organisations. Youth workers are also 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 been legitimated as stand-alone theoretical practice frameworks that pose as *the* solution to the complex issues that young people face. For example, the National Review of Youth Work Training suggests 'new' qualifications, from Certificate 1 to Advanced Diploma in Adventure Based Youth Work and Recreation and a new graduate qualification in Adventure Therapy for Young People (2007, 34–35).

Historically, however, good youth-work practice suggests that sporting and recreational pursuits, outdoor and extreme adventure programmes, and the theatrical, musical and fine arts, as well as graffiti and street arts, are all used as non-formal 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. Traditionally youth work has not seen these tools as frameworks for practice (Maunder 1990; Irving, Maunder and Sherington 1995).

For example, Hulett (1997) describes a range of 'youth arts activities', asserting they are powerful crime prevention tools that offer safe and constructive environments for young people. Similarly, Broadbent (2000), in a study of seven western region local government

authorities, concludes that youth service activity programmes act as primary tools for engaging young people. This engagement can be through diverse activities, such as music and the arts, which can be used within outreach programmes, or as links with local schools. Furthermore, youth workers that were interviewed articulated the way in which they would use their practice tools and activities to engage young people in services relevant to their immediate needs, suggesting that many young people engage in services for recreation and social opportunities before issues are identified. Importantly, the rapport that is built with those tools enables workers to identify broader issues and needs (Broadbent 2000).

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-focused work with young people. As Maunders (1990) pointed out – and was confirmed by Corney's (2003) study of youth-work training – professional youth work is not prefaced on activity-based programmes, but is primarily a value-driven practice.

These skills, values and knowledge, as conceptualized by the youth-work sector, form the basis of a professional youth-work kitbag. If fully recognised as the industry professional standard, this kitbag would inform practice decisions, and programme and policy development in the youth sector. Most importantly, the kitbag would define the benchmarks for youth workers and the wider sector. It would contain the elements of good practice, particularly the role of empowering young people, enabling them and ensuring that they have the opportunities to make informed choices and have equal and equitable access to community resources. Similarly, Mokwena (2006) refers to a toolkit that focuses on youth engagement within organisations by involving young people in operational and governance issues. Significantly, he moulds good practice on the key component of empowerment within the wider context of where young people are positioned in society.

The youth worker's kitbag is not received in one lump, but is carefully built over time by undertaking good pre-service and in-service training, establishing and embedding a youth-work code of ethical practice, professional development, workplace learning, and professional supervision and mentoring, and is enhanced by good government policy. Youth-work practice is as good as its pre-service and in-service training.

Youth work and vocational training

To work optimally with young people, the intensive, complex and demanding nature of youth work requires practitioners to demonstrate high levels of knowledge, skill and self-development (Chandu 2003).



To progress the vocational role of professional youth workers, their education and training must be of a high standard and accountable, and the outcomes must meet agreed criteria. These criteria should be assessed, not merely by academics, but by youth-work peers, young people and the wider community.

The growth of youth-work training was assisted in 1995 when the Ministerial Review of Youth Worker Training (1995a) identified the need for increased training opportunities. The committee stated that the industry should 'aim for a much higher proportion of paid staff with either a diploma or degree in a youth-work specific qualification than at present'. This committee, appointed by the Victorian State Government, stated:

We strongly believe that matters concerned with young people's development are sufficiently important and particular in nature as to warrant specific training courses in youth work in its own right (Ministerial Review of Youth Worker Training 1995b).

This led to the development of the articulated degree at Victoria University (VU), the degree programme at the Australian Catholic University and technical and further education (TAFE) diploma courses in line with the national training framework. These complemented the long-standing degree course at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT).

Youth-work training: an inclusive, empowerment model

Youth-work training in Victoria is an inclusive, empowerment paradigm that engages the industry in the training with a view to modelling practice with young people. In the major courses at RMIT and VU, the combination of competency-based modules, recognition of prior learning, flexible delivery and formal credit transfer has provided high numbers of mature-age workers with formal acknowledgment of what they have achieved through their work. A permutation of some or all of these aspects has provided entry points along the diploma/degree course continuum.

The time needed to complete these diploma and degree programmes is directly related to prior formal and industry-based experience. A vocational course must maintain its connection with industry and be inclusive and empowering in its model of training. Any course that is to win industry confidence and facilitate the growth of skills and knowledge must respect and mirror the expertise that has been acquired through informal learning pathways. That experiential knowledge must be formalised in the education setting.

The concept of diploma to degree pathways reflects the need for trained workers at foundation level, and for support for an emerging career structure. It targets what is currently accepted as the type of career structure that many youth workers will follow, that is, working face to face with young people, then moving into coordination,

programme and policy development, and, for some, into a broader management and/or executive role. Industry-driven training that reflects industry values makes a professional association an imperative if this collective work is to be sustained.

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 ensure that some of the most disadvantaged groups in the community have advocates that understand the relationship between policy and practice, and that young people and the community develop the range of skills necessary to work for change in the lives of individual young people and in their community and social context. A professional association enshrines such practice principles by encouraging the profession to credential and update skills and knowledge. A professional association plays a distinct role in engaging youth workers in an industry-wide discussion about quality and the benchmarks of good practice.

Conclusion

The expectations of youth-work practice should be high. The passage of young people should be made smoother by youth-work professionals as they take on the responsibility of delivering to young people what the community has not been able to provide, although we should not be unreasonable and expect workers with young people to 'put Humpty Dumpty together again'. When the damage to a young person has been great, such a role requires a very full kitbag and may be more than one can ask. However, a professional association should advocate and be an active partner in making the kitbag as full as possible by engaging in training, skills 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 defines itself as working towards 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. They 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. It has a long history of formal training and worker associations in Australia and internationally (Irving, Maunder and Sherington 1995). However, in Victoria the profession currently has no member-based organisation to safeguard standards of training and practice and no designated organisation that will develop and review the kitbag that holds the components of good practice together. The kitbag of professional youth work can only be advocated for, developed and passed on through the strong collective voice of a professional association.



Notes

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