

Youth Work: Global Differences

Jennifer Brooker

FICE Australia

RMIT University

Abstract:

Youth work is conducted throughout the world, in one of three major frameworks: a therapeutic model in North America, community development in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand and a social pedagogy in Europe. Despite these differences youth work remains the same – we work with and for young people in the hope of making their lives better.

In theory youth workers should be able to travel the world to work and yet a ‘global passport’ for workers is non-existent. Many professions work and travel with little, if any, need to further qualify. For youth workers this is currently not the case and many find themselves at the bottom of the salary pile despite having suitable qualifications in their home country.

My research identifies the global differences between certification and accreditation requirements. This workshop will look at transferring these into the creation of a global passport for youth workers and what that would look like is an important discussion to have.

1. Youth Workers Are...

The answer to what a youth worker is and does might appear to be obvious. But it is not. It’s disciplinary and practice boundaries are far from clear which in turn has implications for the education and training of those working in the youth sector. A cursory review of the professional and research literature fails to provide a clear answer as to what youth workers actually do (Davies 2005, Smith 1988, Wisman 2011). Some writers advocate for integrating young people into their community (Martin 2002); for others it is about providing informal education (Banks 1999). Vaughn Bowie (2005), former lecturer in youth work at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) before the cessation of its youth work training program, described youth work and its dilemmas as having “...a major role in working with young people in their personal and vocational and life development ... (and youth work) tends to have a reputation for working more with at risk kids...but that’s not the whole picture” (Bowie 2005:).

The diverse and disparate nature of youth work today is now complicated by the perennial ethical issues of confidentiality and balancing the autonomy and control of young people with the needs and requirements of government funders, boards and other accountable agencies. Youth workers require a sound knowledge and understanding of both practical and administrative skills to successfully address the multitude of scenarios they face daily. Current courses offered in Australia tend to favour training youth workers in either competent skills, academic capabilities or differing mixes of both (Belton 2009, Emslie 2009, Gabb & Glaisher 2006, Sercombe 2007).

This lack of clarity is increased by the fact that much of the recent literature in youth studies, together with the content of funding applications, represents young people from a deficit perspective, high at-risk and requiring urgent and immediate help to normalise their wayward behaviour to eventually become effective citizens (Belton 2009, Clark 2007, Ord 2012). This clearly does not apply to the majority of young people who all have their assets and aspirations (Cahill & Ewen 1987). A quick inspection of the daily papers highlights ‘youth’ providing staple copy for the media generally with reports on how youth problems such as binge drinking, poor self-image, drugs, bullying and violence impact negatively on the lives of young people and the broader community (Barham 2006, Belton 2009).

2. Defining ‘Youth’

The confusion is further complicated by the fact that there is no global consistency as to what ‘youth’ is. Around the world the age range spans across a moving scale of 0 – 34 years of age. In the state of Victoria, Australia, *Positive Pathways*, the Victorian government youth policy introduced in 2010, increased the age range for young people from 12 – 25 years to 10 – 25 years of age. Nationally the federal government works with the 12 – 25 age range. Finland’s youth become adults at 29 and in Canada youth workers care for children and young people aged between 4 – 18 years, though even the federal Canadian government is not clear and defines youth anywhere between 15-30 years of age depending on the department and organisation involved (United Way n.d.).

In England it is argued that the age range of youth programs has been dramatically reduced due to the shift in funding to a more targeted approach. The traditional drop-in centre, advocated for in the Albemarle Report (1960), was designed for those aged 14-20 years, yet commentators, such as Ord (2012), note that those as young as eight could participate. Today this has been replaced with today’s focused and specialised programs for at-risk 13-19 year olds who need ‘specialist intervention (which) will help them regain self-esteem and put them on the ‘straight and narrow’ (Ord 2012).

Nor are government youth work departments positioned administratively in similar ways. In Australia, federal youth policy is managed by the Department of Education, Employment and Work Relations (DEEWR) whereas the Department of Human Services (DHS) is responsible for young people in Victoria which houses the Office for Youth as well as protective child services. In New Zealand, youth are located within the Ministry of Youth Development while the United States does not have a federal youth portfolio. Much of the work there, upon first glance, appears to be conducted through faith-based organisations, similar to the work done in Britain during the 1800s (Mauders 1984).

The current push towards devolution has meant that each of the four nations has been charged by the UK government with the responsibility of delivering their own education and youth policies. Hence, and not surprisingly, this has resulted in somewhat different administrative responses as each has allocated this responsibility to different government department. In England this job was transferred on 3 July 2013, to the Cabinet Office from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), where it has been administered for over a hundred years. In Scotland the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning has been charged with this task by the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly has given the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills the responsibility, while in Northern Ireland the Department of Education is responsible for the success of its youth.

3. The Changing Youth Work Scene

The occupational horizons for the scope of youth work education have been substantially narrowed over the past 30 years with the removal of recreation from the offerings to match the funding focus of at-risk youth. This is reflected in the courses delivered in Australia today which have little if any sport, craft or hobby activities included in the curriculum. Victoria University in Melbourne’s western suburbs would be an exception as in 2012 it addressed the issue with the delivery of a new dual award, the Bachelor of Youth Work/Bachelor of Sport and Recreational Management.

The removal of practical subjects such as group work, an important element in all courses up until the 1980s when Australian universities gained control of the youth work curriculum and replaced it

with a stronger emphasis on the sociological and psychological aspects of youth work, is being repeated. The 2013 Training Package, after a six months national consultation process with the youth sector, has identified that *Planning and Conducting Group Activities* is an important competency youth workers require today if they are to successfully work with young people, and has been added as one of the 14 core units in the latest version of the Certificate IV in Youth Work. Overseas these subjects were retained and integrated into other subjects due to their perceived importance in working with young people

Administration and management skills, which were integral units when training began in the 1940s until the 1980s, have not yet returned to any pre-service youth work training in any consistent way in the courses that make up this study. The Diploma of Youth Work in Australia leans this way in its emphasis of delivery. The focus of pre-service training in 2013 still tends to be either completely theoretical with some practical elements or competency based learning.