

The glue that holds our work together

The role and nature of relationships in youth work

Professional identity is an ongoing topic of discussion in the youth work literature. This paper looks at one of the key elements of the definition of youth work: the relationships that youth workers establish with young people. It presents research findings which suggest that youth workers have multidimensional relationships with young people that have an educative component and therapeutic value. It is argued that these relationships are integral to the way in which youth workers work with young people, and that the significance of relationships to youth work should be documented in order to gain recognition and support from the field and from funding bodies.

by Helen Rodd
& Heather Stewart

New Zealand based youth worker Lloyd Martin has argued that it is the nature and place of relationships that distinguishes youth work from other disciplines. He states that although “there is no single skill associated with youth work ... It is the place of relationships that defines youth work” (2003, p.15).

Other professionals will normally form a client/professional relationship in order to deliver a service (counselling, education, or an outdoors experience). In contrast, a youth worker will see the relationship as a primary goal, and use the service they provide as a context within which that relationship can be developed ... The key difference is that counsellors or teachers will develop a relationship in order to help them do their job. For youth workers, the relationship is their job. (Martin 2003, p.116)

Accepting this definition of youth work, it could be argued that the relationships that youth workers offer young people are just as valuable as the practical outcomes that youth workers seek. That is, the relationship a youth worker establishes with a young person may be even more helpful than the traditional indicators of successful youth work, for example, linking young people into education pathways or securing accommodation. This paper presents research findings on youth workers’ views on the value and role of relationships that youth workers have with young people. It is beyond the scope of this paper to make comparisons with other components of the welfare sector:

this paper does not claim that youth workers hold any unique capacity to engage and support young people through the use of relationships. However, we believe as a youth sector we could gain from reflection on these ideas, and would like to see recognition of the core value of relationships to the practice of youth work.

Methodology

The research was conducted over a period of 18 months and included interviews with seven experienced youth workers in a range of youth services. Stratified purposive sampling (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005) led the researchers to select seven services from, first, the youth sector, and then, within the youth sector, to secure experienced youth workers from a range of youth work settings, including housing services, CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) agencies, drug and alcohol services, local government services and employment and education services. The researchers sought to interview experienced workers from a diverse range of services, because youth work is, as Sercombe describes, a “diverse and idiosyncratic” practice (Bessant, Sercombe & Watts 1998); it operates across a variety of fields in the community sector.

Having selected a range of agencies, managers were asked to approach their teams so that interested workers could self select. Interested workers then contacted us, and were presented with a short paper on some of the key literature in the field. This paper was distributed so that research participants could learn from relevant field research and from insights provided by other participants. They were also encouraged to talk to their team members about their experiences in relation to this topic, to generate some collective knowledge and thinking about the significance of the role of relationships to youth work. This approach allowed the researchers to correlate informed judgments on the subject from different perspectives, and to provide participants with educational material on diverse and related aspects of the topic.

The authors also presented preliminary findings at two major youth work conferences, and a paper was distributed seeking further

comments from interested youth workers. Comments were received from a further 12 youth and community sector workers across the youth sector, including Aboriginal community workers, health workers and generalist youth workers. This process sought to operate as a sort of modified open-version of the Delphi model, whereby “experts” (those youth workers participating in the conferences) were encouraged to comment / add to / critique the research undertaken up to that point in time. This allowed the research themes to be “checked” for validity or resonance (Wadsworth 1997, p.104). Comments that provided further insights were then added to the research data. Many workers commented that the research themes resonated with their experience. Findings from these workers, as well as the interviews, have been incorporated into this final paper.

Research findings and discussion

Good relationships with young people are central to effective youth work

Workers consistently identified the relationships they had with young people as having intrinsic value:

The relationship has some value, particularly with young people ... in terms of getting outcomes and behaviour change. Things are changing for young people, we might work with them for a few months, and they get on top of their substance use issues and then something completely different comes along ... the actual behavioural change is so transient and chaotic, so the relationship is like this constant thing, that they can come back to, that they might not necessarily have with any other adults around.

Youth workers believed that often it is the relationship that allows them to achieve their program goals, whether these are keeping a young person in school or identifying an education or training need or linking young people into appropriate support services. When asked, “Is the relationship you establish with young people important to your work?”, one youth worker answered, “I don’t think you can do your job without it”. Another said, “the most important thing that a youth worker can do is establish a positive relationship with the young

The most important thing that a youth worker can do is establish a positive relationship with the young person ... The relationship is the tool, it is my workplace, if I don’t have the relationship I can’t achieve much.

person ... The relationship is the tool, it is my workplace, if I don't have the relationship I can't achieve much".

It appears that establishing good rapport is not only useful, but often essential, and produces better results for the young people. "Young people who have developed rapport with their workers always demonstrate better progress, they do better in outcomes", commented a worker with unemployed young people. For her, the relationship youth workers establish is integral:

For youth workers to be able to do their job, the relationship is often seen as central, foundational and a prerequisite to making other things happen. It is the foundation to the achievement of other youth work goals.

Another worker supported this. Asked to rate the importance of relationships in her work with young people, she affirmed their value:

It is fundamental, the key, essential, you have to get that first, otherwise you won't get very far, you must get that engagement. The work does not really start until you get that into place, otherwise, you are asking too much. First three months, the funded period, that's where you are going to develop that, and work doesn't actually begin until you have that happening.

This worker explained that it was a privilege to get to work with young people. To try and expect them to open up to you, before you have established a relationship, was asking too much:

"You trust me, hand over your whole life, and we'll work on it." They may have told their story over and over again, had lots of workers, they're fatigued by that. Get to know each other, but of course while you are doing that, that's your assessment, working out exactly what is going on, what is going to be needed, and how we are going to do it.

Bruun and Hynan's paper on "guiding" young people with complex needs (2006) claims that there is "considerable evidence which suggests that the formation and maintenance of working relationships between practitioners and clients has therapeutic value" (p.20). These ideas were clearly supported in our research, where workers consistently identified the value

of relationships with young people for young people. The idea that relationships which therapists have with clients have a therapeutic component, regardless of the worker's skill, was first explored by Carl Rogers, who stressed that all that was required for success with counselling was that a worker held genuine regard for the client (1965). This idea echoes throughout our research where youth workers talked of the value that young people gained from the relationships that they established with workers, arguing that young people valued these relationships:

Young people often talk about their frustration around having someone to listen to them, or someone who cares about them enough to listen to them. These connections are valued by young people.

This again is the idea that the relationships that youth workers have with young people are important, and that youth workers were consciously choosing to work with young people in particular ways that allowed them to build a therapeutic component into their daily relationship work.

The value of relationships is also central to the research on resilience, which identifies protective factors and risk factors in the lives of young people, and asks what helps to increase the capacity of young people in risk situations to avoid developing antisocial behaviour. A key proponent in this field is Michael Resnick, whose research with Burt and Novick, cited in Martin (2003), found that the most important resiliency factor is "a young person's connectedness to others: in particular, connectedness with people who model and reinforce pro-social behaviour, and who go out of their way to communicate care and respect" (Burt, Resnick & Novick in Martin 2003, p.23).

Relationships in youth work have an educative component

One worker felt that the age of the young person was significant: the fact that they were young increased the need for the youth worker to develop and model good relationships:

I see it as an educative role, delivered in a very open way. Boundary setting is incidental, subtle, a relaxed method to the extent that

young people don't consciously know you are re-instilling these boundaries. At the same time you are establishing and imparting social norms that they may not be aware of.

That youth workers have a particular type of relationship with young people, which uses counselling skills, but is not "counselling", is worth commenting on briefly. In describing the kind of relationship that workers have with young people, interviewees often used the metaphor of workers travelling on a journey with the young person. This was contrasted with the conventional support relationship established in a formal counselling relationship. The difference between formal counselling and the use of counselling skills is explored by David Collander-Brown (2005), who points out that young people who seek counselling do so consciously, whereas a "young person talking with a youth worker who uses counselling skills may think of this as 'just having a chat' " (p.34).

Workers argued that young people were reluctant to engage in formal counselling sessions:

It is extraordinary how many young people say that they have negative experiences around counselling – it just comes up over and over again. We are always saying to young people, "these issues are really profound issues, they're deep issues, we need to get you into counselling, we're not counsellors. We need to get you counselling". And young people go, "no, what I want is you". They want that relationship.

That these relationships are "work" was clearly articulated by youth workers:

I also think that there is so much going on in the hanging out. Like I don't go and make friends here and hang out after work, because that is not relaxing. It's actually work. You're looking, you're fishing, for things that might come up in that hanging-out time, that are going to provide that moving through and reflecting and learning about their story. So it's a very active process.

The idea of establishing relationships to assist young people to develop and grow, and the idea that there is an educative component to relationships, both fit with the recognition that youth workers assist young people to develop

from child to adult, and that the relationship offers an educative component to young people:

It's not about me, it's totally about them: foundational relationship and foundational skills, educative, so they can go on and build other relationships with other people.

The idea of youth work playing a role in the informal education of young people resonates with British explorations of informal education and learning outlined by Batlseer (2008) in her examination of the role of informal learning in youth work:

What do youth and community workers do?
Listen and talk. Make relationships. Enable young people to come to voice (p.5).

Education in this sense is not the banking model of formal education as described by Freire (1972), but the process whereby learner (young person) and educator (youth worker) "engage in process of learning from the context of the everyday ... education as dialogue, as critical dialogue", which sees informal education as "conversation" (Batsleer 2008, p.7).

That this informal education occurs with young people is also significant. Developmental theorists have identified that young people begin to develop new relationships with others outside their nuclear family as part of normal adolescent development (Berk 2003). This idea is also explored by Lloyd Martin (2003), who points to the importance of adults other than parents in young people's development.

Workers' explorations of their relationships with young people suggest that they adapt their work with young people to take account of the fact that their clients are young. Youth workers work with relationships in particular ways, which help young people in key developmental and learning processes. Foundational skills are imparted through relationships that support young people in ways that Martin would call multidimensional (2003).

Multidimensional relationships broaden and develop across different social settings, going beyond the context of the service originally being delivered (Martin 2003, pp.119-22). Many young people often have relationships with a number of specialist workers. However, Martin argues that these

We are always saying to young people, 'These issues are really profound issues, they're deep issues, we need to get you into counselling, we're not counsellors' ... And young people go, 'no, what I want is you'. They want that relationship.

*With some boys,
even sitting at
McDonald's
is too
confrontational,
we just go
through the
drive-through,
and then we can
talk and eat and
drive.*

are often one dimensional, where connections are provided in limited “narrow, professionally proscribed roles” and only in the context of that service (p.118). In contrast, multidimensional relationships allow the development of a shared history between the worker and young person, and hence the development of trust over time.

Although some interventions may be short term, and practical, it was clearly expressed that the real value of most youth work came from the support provided, which was grounded in longer-term relationships. Also, many short-term practical supports (e.g. a tram fare, assistance with information on a program) were understood as introductory encounters, which, if positive, would lead to further contact. That is, the short-term interventions often became steps in a trust-building process, and workers were aware that these encounters frequently developed into relationships in which young people returned for more extensive longer-term support.

This practice provides opportunities for youth workers to implement what Martin calls an empowerment process, which he defines as the provision of opportunities to foster reciprocal helping, where the youth worker seeks to “move into the role of ‘learner’ and allow the other person to demonstrate their knowledge or skill” (Martin 2003, p.123). Throughout the interviews there was a strong rejection of the idea of youth worker as an “expert”. Youth workers talked about the need to establish genuine reciprocal learning relationships:

You need to be able to provide opportunities for the young person to be the one with the knowledge; this might be letting them teach you how to download some music, or about some game they know; the important thing is that you let them teach you.

THEY are the experts!

I share my experience, but I am not THE expert, in fact, they are teaching me.

Value of informal contact

Linked closely to the above finding there appears to be evidence that there is substantive value in informal contact, that is, contact

which is outside of the office environment, not tied to the specific service goals, and which is often unstructured and may include recreational activities. This could include incidental activities, such as the time a worker spends travelling with a client to get to appointments or other activities. Youth workers consistently identified that these opportunities to work with young people outside the formal working role are essential, and often allow young people to develop trust and to put issues on the table: “Driving is not incidental, the car is my office!” This worker said that in the car she can give young people her undivided attention without having to look at them, which is less intimidating than a formal counselling session.

A refugee support worker spoke of the value of informal contact with her young refugee clients, who often came to the service with no cultural understanding of the role of youth workers in communities:

I would take them on a picnic, or a day trip, and there were many conversations that raised many issues on the bus. I would listen, and let them know that I could help them with some of these issues. It was very informal, especially in the beginning, until the young people became aware of what a youth worker can do for them.

This view is supported in the statement of one youth worker in an educational setting, who was very clear that informal contact was critical to developing the rapport that made good youth work possible:

The informal stuff is as important as the formal stuff; it is the glue that holds our work together, the unstructured time, the coffee breaks, the sitting around the campfire.

He went on to talk about how important this work is, particularly with young men, who often struggle with formal counselling sessions. He spoke of the need to “do” something with young men, when you are trying to get them to talk about their problems:

It can work to “walk and talk” ... travelling parallel, stuff comes out ... with some boys, even sitting at McDonald's is too confrontational, we just go through the drive-through, and then we can talk and eat and drive.

These views seem to support Martin's (2003) claim that multidimensional relationships are the core business of youth work. Workers talked about the need to have contact with the young person outside their formal support role, and talked about the value of contact in informal settings, where the relationship could grow and trust could be developed.

Length of relationship

With the long-term contact, you can develop a relationship.

This comment echoes Martin's (2003) key idea of the need to establish and maintain these relationships over time. Time invested in relationship-building allows for the development of an informal education process, and for empowerment and transformation to occur. This has been supported by our research: youth workers believed that the length of time of the support relationship is very important. It was felt that young people benefit from having more time in support relationships with workers; this produces a better chance of positive long-term outcomes:

If we had more time we could achieve more goals.

It is important to give these young people the time; it is fundamental to my work. The outcome is important, but time allows the young person to gain the trust and confidence to reveal more ... you don't go straight to the core, but slowly peel back to discover each layer. It allows us to explore all the options and to achieve what is best for them.

It's also a matter of respect – young people should be allowed to set the pace.

Further, it is often only down the track that a worker can recognise the positive impact that they have had:

Young people appreciate that you have knowledge of them over time ... it's about connectedness and identity.

However, long-term support relationships were not always possible due to time restraints, often imposed on services by

funding bodies, which brings us to our fifth key finding.

Funding bodies don't value support relationships

When asked, "How does your funding agency rate the importance of relationships in your work with young people?", one worker answered:

... it doesn't rate, it really doesn't rate, we say to the department that relationships and periods of support need to be longer than 12 weeks. It is not heard; I approached them three times, and was told to go away ... They don't want to acknowledge this, as it was not their idea.

Despite youth workers identifying great value in developing supportive relationships, it appears that service funding sources have a limited capacity to recognise their value, and there is a tendency to seek and reward external manageable outcomes, often to the detriment of young people achieving other more necessary goals:

I have never heard our department mention the importance of "developing rapport" or "engaging well" or "building relationships", which is probably a good indication of how our program rates these outcomes. This is despite the fact that our program is specifically for young people who, it is recognised, have many issues and face many barriers. That "John is really opening up to me" doesn't really rate.

We have to keep the department happy by ticking the boxes, but what is really valuable are the lengthy discussions we have with the young people. However, due to time pressures, sometimes we have to say, "sorry, can you finish up and come back another time, as I have someone else waiting at the door"... Yet young people would be able to work through their issues a lot faster if we had time to help them.

Another worker's funding body held similar views:

... without the funding body we would not exist, so we have to be grateful ... but their

AUTHORS

Helen Rodd has worked across the youth, community and education sectors for over 20 years in diverse areas such as disability, housing and community development, with particular emphasis on working with migrant and refugee young people. In recent years Helen has worked in the higher education sector in both project work and as a lecturer in the field of youth work and community development. She currently manages the West Footscray Neighbourhood House, and is also involved in other community projects based in the inner west of Melbourne.

Heather Stewart has worked in the youth sector for over 20 years in a range of community and youth work teaching settings, and in research and policy positions. She has a particular interest in issues of how the youth sector works with diversity. She is currently coordinator of a team of multicultural youth workers at the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

philosophy is a bit bums on seats; they like to be able to measure our success. You can't really measure success except on an individual-by-individual basis. Success for one kid might be that they don't commit suicide, for another it might be getting into TAFE.

It appears that many youth work funding bodies do not recognise the support provided to young people through informal counselling as an outcome. However, as noted earlier, many young people who disclose personal issues to their youth workers never want to move on to a formal counsellor. In these instances, if support cannot be provided in the informal youth work role, the issues are simply not addressed. It appears that for some young people the only problem-solving they will access is that which is offered within a supportive, informal relationship, such as is provided by a youth worker.

Analysis and recommendations

These research findings clearly suggest that the relationships youth workers establish with young people play a very important role in their work, and that these relationships are often therapeutic in themselves, offering young people a safe environment to explore issues, learn new skills, and mature and develop. The authors recommend that the youth sector needs to be more explicit in articulating this and other important aspects of their work. These ideas are not fully recognised within the current policy environment, which has tended to value short-term measurable outcomes.

Better documentation could challenge the dominant contemporary discourse, which has led funding bodies to demand a limited range of measurable outcomes. More research on the value of relationships that youth workers establish with young people and of young

people's views on these relationships could assist us to gain recognition of the worth of professional youth work in the larger policy and funding context.

We believe that youth workers need support from the workplace that can mediate department guidelines and advocate for young people and the relationship-based style of work. We hope that this research plays a small part in helping the sector start this process and better understand and articulate this fundamental aspect of their work.

References

- Batsleer, J. 2008, *Informal learning in youth work*, Sage Publications, London.
- Berk, L.E. 2003, *Development through the lifespan*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.
- Bessant, J., Sercombe, H. & Watts, R. 1998, *Youth studies: An Australian perspective*, Addison Wesley Longman, South Melbourne.
- Bruun, A. & Hynan, C. 2006, 'Where to from here? Guiding for mental health for young people with complex needs', *Youth Studies Australia*, v.25, n.1, pp.19-26.
- Collander-Brown, D. 2005, 'Being with another as a professional practitioner: Uncovering the nature of working with individuals', *Youth & Policy*, n.86, winter, pp.33-47.
- Freire, P. 1972, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Sheed and Ward, London.
- Liamputtong, P. & Ezzy, D. 2005, *Qualitative research methods*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.
- Martin, L. 2003, *The invisible table*, Thomson Dunmore Press, South Melbourne.
- Rogers, C. 1965, *Client-centred therapy: Its current practice, implications and theory*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Wadsworth, Y. 1997, *Do it yourself social research*, 2nd edn, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards.