

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF YOUTH WORK



As a result of Australia's colonial legacy, Youth Work in Australia has historically been heavily influenced by its expression in the UK. Youth work emerged in the UK around the middle of the 19th century with early involvement in the Church and recreation. Up until the 1970's youth work in Australia was still largely being done by volunteers with Christian affiliations. In its early stages youth work was focussed around civil society groups who sought to support young people to become healthy active citizens. This included organisations like the Scouts, Guides and Brigades.

In Nordic countries the "Youth Club", an informal drop-in style space for young people outside of school hours, continues to be the dominant form of youth work (Forkby & Kiiilakoski, 2014). Whilst in the UK the decline of the youth club in the 1980's saw the rise of "detached" youth work in which youth workers would engage young people in an outreach capacity in their community on the streets (Beck & Purcell, 2010). The other major influence on the development of youth work in Australia is the advent of child welfare and protection. This "child saving" was designed to protect young people from all manner of abuses (Bessant, 2011). This paternalistic component of welfare policy continues to influence the identity of youth work today, however this is often critiqued within a professional context through appropriate supervision.

In the mid 1980s youth work began to appear in Universities. This opened new possibilities for greater critique of theory and practice. This tertiary level curriculum, and associated research, sits alongside other quality training in the VET sector providing a continuum of professional development to meet the diverse needs in the service sector. Across the general sector there is shared agreement for the need for a strong identity built on robust education and training.

Youth work is a diverse profession which has a wide range of practice spheres and frameworks which have evolved historically. This is one of the central challenges for modern youth work. Youth workers today work in schools, churches, prisons, local councils, charities, "for profit" as well as "not for profit" community services, advocacy and political movements. They employ knowledge and skills from psychology, sociology, criminology, teaching, counselling, social work, as well as a range of practical life skills. Youth work is a contested space with conflicting priorities and pressures. These pressures include the continual search for funding, ideological aspirations, changes of government, global unrest and many more, all of which are held in balance with the expressed needs of young people themselves.

In South Australia the peak body for youth affairs ("Youth Affairs Council of South Australia,") was incorporated in 1982. However, unlike other states of Australia, South Australia has had no widely adopted code of professional ethics for youth workers. As such youth workers have not had a central body to advocate for and educate around the distinct identity of their profession. An identify distinct from other similar professions: social work, psychology, teaching etc.

Youth work continues to be a is a contested profession which is highly influenced by personal ethics, politics and culture. As such, in the words of Professor Judith Bessant (youth work trainer and academic):

“A key test in determining the quality of youth work education is whether it equips student to make good judgments in different situations about where they face tensions or contradictions.”(Bessant, 2011, p. 64)

Despite the diversity of youth work expression there develops at least one central tenant that underpins what it is to be a youth worker in contrast to other professions. Lloyd Martin (New Zealand youth worker and author) describes this principle in the following way:

“Other professionals will build a relationship in order to effectively deliver a service. A youth worker will offer a service in order to build a relationship” (Martin, 2002, p. 15).

Youth work at its core is professional relationship with young people. The relationship is the basis for the young people having the capacity, and safety, to enact change in their lives. The youth worker fosters a professional relationship with a young person for the purpose of supporting them to establish and maintain their own healthy, functioning relationships with other people, their culture and society at large. In doing so the young person is understood to be a full citizen with the associated rights and responsibilities.

References

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