If you can name it you can claim it: redefining youth work

Tracie Trimmer-Platman
University of East London

Abstract

Despite years of experience and development, youth work in the UK remains a profession that is misunderstood, under-appreciated and lacks recognition. There has always been uncertainty around the professional definition or articulation of the role of a youth worker. Not only is there a societal lack of understanding about the role but there is also an intrinsic lack of ability to explain the role by those actually undertaking it. Often when social landscapes shift, so too do our attitudes and values, suggesting that perhaps we must acknowledge that the role of the youth worker might also change. Questions need to be asked as to whether Youth and Community Work can make effective enough shifts to survive or whether rebranding and repackaging is required.

Keywords: Youth Work; Young People; Youth and Community Work.

In 2012, Cooper (2012: 32) advised that youth work will only receive support from government and local authorities if 'policy makers can see a positive connection between Youth and Community and their policy agenda' and 'if commentators and the public can understand and value what Youth Workers do, and if Youth Workers have the tools to be able to refine and reinvent their own practice to retain core values in ways that are relevant to changing social circumstances'.

Despite the Joint Negotiating Committee bringing about the professionalisation of Youth and Community Work in 1961 as a result of the Albemarle Report by setting a ten-year plan for the development of services in England, youth and community work only became a graduate profession in 2011.

Concerns about youth work were aired by New Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in the form of *Transforming youth work* (TYW) (Department for Education and Employment 2002) and *Youth matters* (YM) (Department for Education and Employment 2005). Neither report was able to find standard practice within the service, but they highlighted the variety in the nature and quality of youth work being undertaken across the country. The Government at the time was unable to 'substantiate Youth Workers' claims about the excellent work they did with young people' (Moustakim 2012: 3). In addition, the reports found that there was a disconnect between policy-makers and youth workers' definitions of good-quality work. Robertson, S. (2005).

Both TYW and YM documented the fact that youth workers placed greater emphasis on the processes involved in youth work delivery rather than the outcomes of the intervention, and there is a recognised notion that youth workers find it difficult to articulate what they do, thus prompting a lack of appreciation of their work from communities and other professionals. Despite years of being undervalued, undermined and stripped of resources, the Youth Service in the UK is based on a robust set of principles. Youth work is relational, meaning that young people engage with it as a result of a voluntary commitment to the relationship. Over time, meaningful working relationships are developed based on mutual trust and respect. The youth worker aims to encourage the young person to make both personal and positional shifts in their attitudes and behaviour and to develop a values system. There is a lack of respect for the profession (Smith 2010: 123) which leads the way to cuts in services, budgets and opportunity. Youth workers in most local authorities are expected to work to one-to-one caseloads with those young people identified as most at risk or most in need.

The dedicated network formed in 2009 to protect and advocate for youth and community work, In Defence of Youth Work (www.indefenceofyouthwork.com), suggests by its very title that there is an issue. Youth work is in danger of losing its fight for existence and

credibility, but this has been the case, as far as I can see, for the past 30 years. In 2011 key youth work charities in the UK made the case for youth work before a Parliamentary Committee, which according to some was an 'impoverished effort' (Jeffs 2011: 1). This resulted in a lack of influence over the progressive decline of services for young people across the country. Youth work was perceived as being in an 'unstable and dysfunctional condition' (Jeffs 2011: 2). At the same time an online consultation, Positive for Youth Policy (PYP) (Department for Education and Employment 2011), aimed at creating a common narrative for youth work practitioners, commissioners and participants. PYP was an attempt to bring together policy-makers and local communities to create a better understanding of the role of the youth worker and to implement a common language for youth work.

Unfortunately all these efforts to influence a universal understanding have suffered from what Davies (2013) refers to as the 'phenomenology of disagreement'. This can be interpreted as the unique and frustrating concept that youth and community work practitioners are rarely able to agree on definitions or job roles. However, among practitioners there is a deep belief in – and advocacy for – the work, and numerous testimonies exist (McKee et al. 2010) from young people and youth workers who have experienced positive change as a result of professional intervention.

There are a series of key elements that individually could be problematic in the definition and development of youth work, but, when collectively linked, weaken it even more. Many over the years have claimed that youth work is designed to promote personal and social learning in individuals and how the subsequent learning and development can be determined. Smith (1988: 114) says youth work has a history of being anti-theory and anti-intellectual, with a focus on action or process. Seal & Frost (2014: 7) assert that youth workers are only likely to be good at what they do if they can achieve an academic qualification, and advocate for all youth workers to do a degree.

However, when attempts are made to describe informal education, it is often claimed that it is easier to describe what it is not. Mahoney (2001: 17) says:

> *'as informal educators, we can often be seen doing something similar when we define our work: we choose the pieces that we think are important to our work, then chip away the others which for us are not so important. This creates difficulties when trying to define our work to others, because*

> *what is important for one worker may not be for another.'*
> Seal & Frost (2014) tell us that youth and community work reflects a sense of unease, of not fitting in, and Smith (1988: 15) describes the culture as being one of natural emphasis on the charismatic. Tyler, Hoggarth and Merton (2009: 225) offers the notion of multiple roles that youth workers tend to take on, including 'friend, teacher, counsellor, coach, and mentor'. He also says that the most effective youth workers adopt and adapt roles according to the demands and needs of the young people and the requirements of the moment. Indeed all these are worthy considerations, yet they signify a lack of cohesion and agreement among key thinkers.

In 2007 the first Minister for Youth announced that the youth service was 'the patchiest most unsatisfactory of all the services I've come across. I've never met such down-at-heart, "can't do" representatives as I've met in youth services throughout Britain' (cited in Henman 2007: 7) In a sense this could also describe young people whom youth workers encounter who are undervalued, underestimated and lack focus – perhaps a consequence of there being no universal definition of or focus on the development and wellbeing of the young person.

Why can't we name it?

It seems possible that the way to resolve the mystery of youth work is to consider a universal definition for it; easily articulated and understood – rather like that of the solicitor, plumber or doctor. However, rarely do youth and community work professionals attempt to provide a definition for the role, and when they do it is rambling and over-complex. The lack of consistency around the role and remit of the youth worker inevitably encourages a somewhat confused and/or incomplete 'go-to' definition to share with others. As a result, there is inevitable ambiguity around youth and community work which would suggest that an important way to strengthen and harmonise the work would be to establish an accessible definition for it.

Nichols (2012: 11), for example, explains that youth workers 'educate and support young people and amplify their voice. It is a combination of these three intended impacts that makes their work unique'. He goes on to say, 'the three threads cannot be unwoven; if they are, it is not youth work'. Meanwhile, according to the National Assembly of Wales (2001: 44), 'youth services work with young people in many different ways to promote lifelong learning, employability, citizenship

and healthy lifestyles. They engage with young people as individuals with the object of building their capacity to make choices and pursue constructive paths. A key principle is that young people choose to participate and are able to do so in ways which build on their interests'.

A rather colourful definition comes when equating youth work with great jazz (Batsleer & Davies 2010: 6) which is 'well prepared and highly disciplined, yet improvised'. However, perhaps this is based more on one's appreciation of jazz rather than an understanding of what youth work is.

On the other hand, some say that 'youth workers provide information and other support to effect changes in attitudes and practice within young people, services, communities and society as a whole in order to enable young people to have a say in the issues that affect them'. It can be argued that youth workers in addition 'support young people to become responsible adults' (Sapin 2013: 11). One pertinent way of describing what youth work is about is suggested by Batsleer & Davies (2010: 1) who say that it is a way of working with young people 'that has been thought up and practised by human beings – in all their diversity'. Putting this into context, they explain that because of this diversity of interpretation it cannot mean the same thing to everyone and defining youth work has always been the subject of 'fierce debate'.

Professionals (Batsleer & Davies 2010) also attempt to conceptualise the origins of youth work, which originated as 'youth leadership' and has always responded to changes in the economic and social environment, particularly in relation to funding priorities and social curriculum development. This is one of the fundamental issues with definition – if your stance or focus is ever-evolving, surely the way in which you are defined also changes. For example, if your job role changes from being an administrator to a personal assistant, there is a different sense of the work even if it does not change significantly in practice. The result, over time, has meant that there is a difference in terminology and emphasis around the core values of youth work. Core values are likely to vary from one provider to another yet be essentially similar. This leads to a 'distinctive way of approaching and responding to young people' (Batsleer & Davies 2010). In essence this, in search of a definition, only seeks to define a chaotic and confusing approach with little definition.

There is, however, one common element that runs through all the definitions thus far (Richardson & Wolfe 2001: 17; Robertson 2005: 78; Sapin 2009: 65; Wood & Hine 2009: 9; Batsleer & Davies 2010: 1; Bradford 2012: 23; Seal & Frost 2014: 25) and, although not included in their definitions, highlights the fact that youth work is based largely on a voluntary relationship which young people opt into and do so purely if they want to and for no other reason. There are comparatively few youth work provisions that are compulsory in the UK, and even those rely enormously on the youth worker's ability to form positive relationships with young people based on mutual trust and respect.

How to claim it

Much of youth and community work discourse evolves from how we prove that what we do has value and how this might be measured. Field (Youth and Policy: 103) talks about youth work as being 'lifelong learning' and Department of Education Northern Ireland (2003) describe this as being a 'commitment to preparing young people for participation by testing values and beliefs and in the promotion of acceptance and understanding of others'. Field (Youth and Policy: 103) explains that youth work is often based on 'soft' outcomes such as whether a young person has developed friendships with others, whether they have attended the same workshops and perhaps whether they have engaged in discussion with adults in the agency, outcomes that are difficult to measure.

There have been many attempts to develop a practical and applicable model for youth work. For example, Smith(1988: 63) made the distinction between what he called 'professionalised Youth Work' and 'movement based Youth Work', the difference being that the latter involves uniformed, social and leisure participation and the former is based in politicising practices which respond to local or national policy agendas such as the Every Child Matters Department for Education and Employment (2006) policies set up by the Labour Government.

There will be some focus on whether the way in which youth and community work delivery is perceived has any impact on the relationship between a general understanding of the work and its benefits to young people and generic credibility. According to the Review group on the Youth Service in England (1982: 224), 'young people find with the right sort of youth worker that their lives and attitudes are treated with respect.' This raises the question, what are other adults doing to treat young people respectfully? A youth worker is someone who is a 'guide, philosopher and friend', according to some academics (Young 1999). This description undermines the professional ethos, since friendship is not a job role, nor should it

be assumed to be. Certainly, one of the key strands to any professional training delivered to youth and community workers is precisely that we are not friends with young people, we do not love them and our relationships are boundaried – this should be clear and underpin practice. Perhaps in the same way that teachers might be described as educators, a youth worker could be described as a 'facilitator' or as one who 'empowers'.

Rebranding youth work – how to claim it

Some practitioners might argue that giving youth work a new image and brand would not be the answer but would merely paper over the cracks. However, it seems appropriate to give it a go. After all, young people are unlikely to have an issue with this: they are forever rebranding themselves, from Teddy Boys and Rockers to Punks and Goths to Hoodies and Grungers, Hipsters and Rappers – we come to expect it of them.

We are told that in creating brands, very often the 'product' needs to be differentiated, unusual and unique. Although it could be argued that youth in itself is about unique cultures, the brand culture that is seemingly so entrenched in the music, fashion and lifestyles of today's youth may in itself be seen as a cultural brand. Most successful brands have a clear and simple idea that sets them apart. Take low-cost airlines for example: for all the jokes and sketches we endure about them, you know for sure that you can get somewhere relatively quickly, reasonably cheaply and no frills attached. We are told though, by branding experts (Olins 2003: 176), that what is really key to a good brand is a focus on coherence, consistency and powerful emotion and or attitude – making something which people recognise and understand. Olins (2003: 184) also advises that in launching or rebranding there needs to be clarity about the product quality. The message from branding gurus is that rebranding is necessary when the existing brand perception, message and image is outdated and no longer aligns with business strategies, goals and priorities (Cheinman 2012: 47).

Advertising agencies encourage us to believe that rebranding is a process and not a project – it is in fact a 'fundamental cultural shift' (Cheinman 2012: 47). It could be seen to be the tool with which new positioning and platforms meet desired objectives. It could be the way in which youth work reconnects with its audience and inspires action.

In order for youth work to shake off its outdated image we must celebrate what we offer – we know that good youth work works and we know how to deliver it. Just as The Spastics Society became Scope, the National Association for Mental Health became Mind and Old Age Pensioners became Senior Citizens, youth work could rebrand itself. This means being brave, bold and possibly radical. Perhaps youth work could simplify its remit, remodel delivery and dive into the modern world with pride and purpose, all underpinned by a recognisable, understandable and actionable brand image or product.

Rebranding will not be about losing anything, except an image that no longer serves us well. Instead it will help us to lose those things that drag us down and keep us from being recognised in the way that we rightly deserve.

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Contact: t.trimmer-platman@uel.ac.uk