

# YOUTH WORK

## PREPARATION FOR PRACTICE

JASON WOOD, SUE WESTWOOD AND GILL THOMPSON

# Youth Work

Professional practice is at the heart of youth work training, but integrating the theory learned in class with the reality of placements can sometimes require extra support. This comprehensive textbook is designed to help students working with young people become competent and ethical practitioners, able to reflect on their learning and interventions in young people's lives.

Divided into three parts, this core text:

- provides an understanding of and commitment to the *principles* of youth work;
- explores how *contexts* shape youth work;
- demonstrates the core *practice* skills that are required to make a meaningful impact on the lives of young people.

Engaging and practice-driven, this is an essential text for all students learning about working with young people, whether on youth work or allied courses. It includes case studies, tasks, further reading and reflective questions to help readers make connections between their own knowledge and practice.

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This book is dedicated to the many youth work practitioners for their continued commitment to making a difference to young people's lives, particularly in these challenging times. We would also like to extend our own dedications.

Jason: for Raksha and Jasmine

Sue: for Tim, Billie and Ella

Gill: for my amazing husband and ever-expanding family, who support, inspire, advise and encourage me, and particularly for Eloise and Imogen in an ever-changing world.

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# How to use this book

Like all those who write a textbook for students, we hope that this will provide a useful volume to assist your studies. We also hope it will be a living document and throughout we have provided a number of case studies to bring some of the issues to life. We have also included two interactive ways for you to engage with the text, either on your own or with your colleagues, peers or supervisor:

- **Reflections:** these are designed to encourage you to think about your own experiences in relation to the context of the chapter. You may find these useful for relating your own personal and professional experiences to your practice placement. These activities can usually be done on your own but you may also find benefit in discussing your reflections with others.
- **Tasks:** the book contains a number of tasks that are designed to put some of the book's ideas into practice. Here, you may be encouraged to apply models, develop sessions or follow multi-staged processes that could assist your work with young people. In all cases, the tasks are designed to enhance your studies and practice, but all are suggestions – we would encourage you to use, develop, critique and refine the tasks to suit your own circumstances.



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# 1

# Introduction

Whether you are just about to embark upon your journey into youth work or have been a practising youth worker for a number of years, undertaking an assessed practice experience can prove rewarding and challenging in equal measure. Youth workers today enter increasingly diverse settings and contexts, contributing to sometimes contradictory or complementary policy objectives. They are arguably more skilled, more knowledgeable and have more resources than at any other point in the history of the profession.

Youth work itself has been subject to intensive political reform with increased measures of accountability, targeted approaches to work with young people ‘at risk’ and an emphasis on accrediting outcomes for young people (Tyler 2009). Whereas once youth work was predominately located in dedicated youth services and social work, youth workers today will engage with a number of agencies and statutory partnerships that did not exist ten years ago (Wood and Hine 2009) and will be required to make contributions to policy objectives in health, crime reduction, and inclusion in education and employment. Furthermore, at the time of writing, statutory youth services in England are under the threat of unprecedented cuts resulting in the withdrawal of youth work from mainstream local authority provision (Spence and Wood 2011). Student placements increasingly reflect these diverse contexts and varied policy priorities. As a result, it is vital that emerging practitioners can identify their own contribution as youth workers in contexts where the principles of youth work may be tested.

This book is designed to provide you with a companion through the process of undertaking your practice placement. It is built around three important and interconnected components of youth work: principles, context and practice skills.

## **What do we mean by youth work?**

Defining precisely what is meant by youth work poses challenges as it ‘has remained an ambiguous set of practices, pushed in different directions at different times by different interests’ (Bradford 2005: 58). The work itself is diverse ‘whether by the different forms the work takes, the perspectives adopted, the setting, organisational arrangements, or

even ideology’ (Payne 2009: 217). Indeed, youth work may not mean the ‘same thing to every volunteer, youth worker, youth work manager or policy maker’ (Batsleer and Davies 2010: 1). Consequently, a range of practices loosely defined as ‘youth work’ flourish in a wide range of settings delivered by numerous organisations. Like all other human services, youth work is influenced by the social, political and economic context in which it operates, taking on different ‘guises’ according to ‘varying conceptions of youth need’ (Bradford 2005: 58). Despite this ambiguity and debate, there are some key principles, values and methods that can enable us to distinguish professional youth work from other forms of work with young people.

A useful starting point for student youth workers would be to consult the appropriate occupational standards for our work. For example, youth work is defined in the English National Occupational Standards for professional youth work as ‘[Enabling] young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential’ (Lifelong Learning UK 2008: 4). What does such a statement mean? How do we differentiate youth work from other forms of practice that may also seek to work ‘holistically’ with young people to enable them to ‘reach their full potential’? There is obviously much that youth work shares with other forms of work with young people, but some features are worth distinguishing.

### ***Youth work is an educational practice***

Youth workers are primarily educators who engage with young people in diverse settings, using different methods and activities to stimulate informal education and learning (Chapter 5). They build and sustain open and trusting relationships in order to create the conditions for learning and, wherever possible, young people will choose to engage in the learning relationship. Informal education is distinguished from other types of educational practice by its values and methods. The approach relies on starting where young people *are at* instead of using pre-determined learning outcomes and didactic teaching methods. It is primarily concerned with young people’s personal and social development but we reject the rather passive concept of ‘facilitation’ outlined in the occupational standards definition above. Youth workers *purposefully intervene* in young people’s lives, creating opportunities, activities and conversations that aim to enable young people to think, feel and act differently towards their social world.

Alongside the use of informal education, youth workers also undertake a wide range of other personal and social education work that may be pre-determined but is notable for its creativity and diversity. For example, practitioners will find new and engaging ways to impart important information about health risks through participative games or arts-based activities. Whilst this is not informal education, it is often found in the educational practice of youth workers and offers a valuable contributory dimension to the role.

## ***Youth work is a social practice***

Increasingly, many youth workers will adopt ‘case-work’ approaches to working with young people, for example through the provision of personal information, advice and guidance work. However, youth workers seek to prioritise working with groups in order to nurture collective *association* amongst young people (Chapter 12). The reasons for this approach are numerous, not least the fact that young people themselves generally associate with their peers in groups and this provides a useful starting point for engaging with them. Social practice also enables young people (and practitioners) to test their values, attitudes and behaviours in the context of *being with others*: the essence of something called ‘pro-social modelling’. Therefore, youth workers will either convene groups or work with existing peer groups.

## ***Youth workers actively challenge inequality and work towards social justice***

A key ethical standard that underpins youth work is the ‘promotion of social justice for young people and in society generally’ (Banks 2010b: 10). Most youth work takes place in the context of social injustice, often with young people and others who are on the margins, excluded by a number of personal, cultural and structural barriers (Thompson 2006). Chouhan (2009) makes the distinction between anti-discriminatory practice (working within society’s legal framework) and anti-oppressive practice: ‘understanding of oppression and power, commitment to empowerment and the ability to reflect, critically analyse and change . . . practice’ (Chouhan 2009: 61). Crucially, this positions the role of the youth worker as one who seeks to address power imbalances rather than merely say or do the right things to avoid unlawful discrimination. In Chapter 14, we explore this distinction further and establish some of the ways in which these principles can translate into practice.

## ***Where possible, young people choose to be involved***

Young people have traditionally chosen to be involved with youth work, rather than participating because they are compelled to. Whereas young people have little choice in attending school (and may be severely penalised for not doing so), their interaction with youth work is based on a voluntary engagement between practitioner and young person. This is perhaps one of the most contentious points of debate around whether newer forms of work with young people can be considered ‘youth work’. For example, youth workers increasingly engage with young people in a variety of settings where they are compelled to attend (such as the school or a compulsory programme run by the local youth offending team). What then does the youth worker do in these circumstances? It is our view that youth work and informal education not only takes place in these environments, but can make a distinct and positive contribution to the personal and social development of young people.

Payne (2009) argues that the voluntary principle has always posed challenges. Whilst young people may have chosen to attend less formal environments such as youth clubs, their choice was located in the context of pre-determined rules and peer group norms. Put simply: they attend because their mates do, and when they get there the encounters are somewhat constrained. Whilst voluntary attendance is desirable to be sure, it is the *quality of engagement* and *extent to which young people can shape encounters* that are more important (Ord 2007).

### ***Youth work seeks to strengthen the voice and influence of young people***

Youth work has a long history of describing itself as strengthening the voice and influence of young people. Various terms have underpinned this work: empowerment, participation, active citizenship and democratic engagement. According to the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work, practitioners encourage and enable young people to ‘influence the environment in which they live’ (Lifelong Learning UK 2008, value 10) and through the use of educative processes, practitioners seek to move young people from a position of limited power to one where they can exercise influence and make decisions (Wood 2010a). Practitioners create opportunities for democratic behaviour to flourish (Jeffs and Smith 1999) in order for young people to ‘claim their right to influence the society in which they live’ (Young 1999: 22). This work takes place at a number of levels using different methods to stimulate formal and informal democratic thinking and behaviour (Chapter 5).

### ***Youth work is a welfare practice***

It is the contention of this book that youth work is a *welfare practice* that, alongside its primary education role, promotes ‘the welfare and safety of young people’ (Banks 2010b: 10). Youth workers often, though not always, work with young people experiencing greater needs or in areas of higher ‘deprivation’. It is possible to balance the educational goals set out in Chapter 5 with welfare interventions designed to address personal or social behaviours and circumstances that may limit the opportunities available to young people to flourish. If youth work contributes to pre-determined and overarching agency objectives (e.g. a school requiring young people to attend classes or a youth offending project’s need for young people to adhere to licence conditions), then this is an additional bonus that extends the role of the youth worker, rather than limiting it. We are yet to meet a youth worker who would promote exclusion from school or engagement with crime as desirable outcomes.

Finding the balance between working towards pre-determined welfare-oriented goals (such as ‘doing’ a teenage pregnancy reduction project) and the promotion of informal education is a difficult one. Key to effective working is to avoid framing our work as primarily about solving ‘problems’ even if we work in agencies where this may be their sole purpose. The value of our educational approach and its emphasis on working with

young people in a holistic way enables us to counteract the view that young people comprise ‘problem’ categories that need to be managed.

### ***Youth work works with young people ‘holistically’***

In Bradford’s (2005) analysis, the shifting sands that characterise youth policy have led to youth workers often defining their work in the context of what problems they can address. For example, youth work *may* contribute to the reduction of anti-social behaviour in a local community and, as a result, be perceived as a ‘fix’ to problems in ‘hot-spot’ areas. However, the difficulty for us is when this becomes the *primary* driver for youth work. Youth workers can be heard describing their work with ‘young offenders’, ‘teenage parents’ and ‘NEETs’.<sup>1</sup> Despite the pressures from policy and the challenges of working in different agency contexts, using these labels to describe young people with whom we work should be resisted at all costs. We work primarily with young people because they are *young*. Young people encounter difficulties or pose particular challenges and these are often situated in precarious structural or environmental circumstances, and, as we acknowledge above, our contact with them is often in situations of higher deprivation or need. However, this is but one part of their complex, interesting, multi-faceted lives, and to focus only on the narrow policy-defined problem is likely to result in, at best, a limited impact (Yates, S. 2009) or, at worst, further demonisation of young people (Hine 2009). So Tyler (2009) is right to show that youth workers can and do make contributions to various social policy objectives (the welfare approach) but this work is most effective when it takes place *because of the primary work that youth workers do*.

## **What makes a good youth worker?**

### **Reflection 1.1**

- What do you think makes a good youth worker?
- What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are characteristic of youth workers you have met who you consider to do a good job?

As a young person, one of the authors encountered two very different detached youth workers. The first was a fairly young man, dressed in fashionable clothing, loved talking about chart music, smoked and was even known for being able to purchase alcohol for young people if they asked. He was undoubtedly popular with young people! The second knew little about pop music, wore quite old clothes, told young people about the risks of smoking and drinking and was often subjected to light-hearted mockery from young people. These are, of course, two extremes. The comparison helps though

to debunk a common misconception about the right type of youth worker. Whilst it is important to relate to young people and to communicate respectfully, a worker neither has to be young nor cool to engage them. The first youth worker was quickly forgotten after the local authority dispensed with his services; the second had a lasting impact upon a particularly challenging group of young people. The first condoned problematic behaviour and, to some extent, encouraged it. The second continuously challenged young people to consider their behaviours and the possible alternatives available to them. In the end it was the second who tapped into the creative interests of the group and enabled them to make a film about the neighbourhood they lived in.

Young people value youth workers firstly because they are trusted adults. The McNair report (1944) argued that a youth worker acted as a ‘guide, philosopher and friend’ to young people and that this role was dependent on their character and integrity. In the above two examples, we see the first youth worker embodying the surface-level friendship qualities that, arguably, young people are already able to access in abundance from their peer group. The distinctiveness of the second was in his desire to operate as a ‘role model’ to young people, and as a ‘critical friend’, able to respect and relate to young people but with clear professional values and boundaries that guided his interventions.

To act with integrity and to maintain a professional role requires a number of key factors that are explored throughout this book. Good youth workers:

- have a well-developed sense of ‘self’ and can use reflection to understand how their own identity impacts upon their understanding of and work with others (Chapter 3);
- recognise the distinctiveness of their educational contribution and commit to their own lifelong learning (Chapter 5);
- act ethically, both by adhering to professional codes of conduct and to broader virtue ethics and values (Chapter 4);
- seek to promote social justice and equality through anti-oppressive practice (Chapter 14).

### ***Becoming the professional practitioner***

The character of a youth worker, their integrity and their willingness to act as a role model and critical friend are vital. Alongside this is the commitment to learning and development described throughout this book. As a student embarking on a qualification towards professional practitioner status, you will be expected to meet assessment criteria that satisfy the expectations of your awarding institution and the professional body for youth work.

An emerging professional practitioner takes account of good practice that is inherent to all services that work with people. Many supervisors we have spoken to will cite being trustworthy, reliable, consistent and punctual as the minimum expectations they have of students. These might be described as professional behaviour and attitudes, and are somewhat supported by the policies and procedures of the organisation we work

with. They are qualities that, alongside integrity and respect, are seen as most important to young people (Yates, S. 2009).

However, we also believe there are a number of other commitments that professional practitioners need to make in order to enhance their learning experience, their thinking and their practice. These include using reflective practice (Chapter 11) and supervision (Chapter 10) as processes to foster learning and practice development. Some student youth workers (and placement supervisors) can struggle with moving beyond thinking of these as instrumental processes that monitor a person's tasks or workload. Supervision and reflective practice is best when it encourages the practitioner to attend to their feelings, question their practice and think about alternatives for engagement. In order for this to happen, practitioners must be *open to learning*.

Whether you have joined your professional youth work course with decades or weeks of experience behind you, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which you consider yourself 'open'.

## Focus of the book

This is a book primarily for undergraduate students embarking on professional practice placements during their youth work training course, though it will also be very useful for students on allied courses, postgraduate students and practitioners. It is designed to support readers as they engage with testing their skills, drawing the links between theory and practice, engaging with difficult situations and successfully completing placements: it will be the core companion to field practice placements. Through three parts, it is a book that:

### ***Establishes and locates the prerequisite principles required for practice***

In changing contexts and challenging practice situations, the developing student practitioner requires a firm footing in terms of the principles, values and distinct features of modern youth work practice. Though not designed to be an exhaustive exploration of values and principles, there is a need for the placement student to locate themselves and their professional identity in relation to the placement they are about to undertake. Part I of the book revisits key themes of youth work theory: the importance of self-awareness and the impact of identity on our work (Chapter 3); the commitment to ethical practice (Chapter 4) and the recognition that education is the 'business of youth work' (Chapter 5). All of this work is situated in the context of the reader using and developing skills in reflective practice (Chapter 11) and being prepared for practice (Chapter 2).



### ***Explores the importance of understanding the context of work***

Work with young people is affected by numerous contextual factors and three are explored in Part II of the book. First, the importance of ‘local knowledge’ is revisited through developing an understanding of the community (by which we mean neighbourhood, estate or village) in which the practitioner is working (Chapter 6). Second, we examine how social policy contexts can shape, support, challenge and sometimes hinder effective work with young people (Chapter 7). Finally, in an era of increased partnership working, Chapter 8 attends to how a youth worker identifies and asserts confidence in their role when working with others and also gains a better understanding and appreciation of different professional roles.

### ***Sets out the core skills required for effective work with young people***

Having set out the core principles and contexts of modern youth work, Part III examines what we would consider to be some of the core skills of a youth worker who intends to engage meaningfully with young people, their families and their wider community of people. The chapters will enable you to:

- develop frameworks for assessing, planning, implementing and evaluating work with both groups and individuals (Chapter 9);
- be an effective listener and converser – someone who can utilise effective communication skills to engage with different groups of people (Chapter 13);
- understand and apply models, principles and processes of working with groups (Chapter 12);
- apply principles of anti-oppressive practice to effectively challenge discrimination and use educational skills to help young people and others to transcend prejudicial views or discriminatory behaviour (Chapter 14);
- create the conditions where young people can move from passive recipients of service provision to active participants and leaders (Chapter 15);
- use supervision and reflective practice effectively to work towards professional range skills, learn and grow in terms of professional practice, and help develop ethical and value-based practice (Chapters 10 and 11).

Taken together, the three parts form an important narrative for guiding a modern youth work placement student. In order to work effectively with young people, student practitioners require an understanding of and commitment to the *principles* of youth work; an awareness of how *contexts* shape their work; and the core *practice* skills that are required to make a meaningful impact on the lives of young people.

### **Note**

- 1 Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).