Conference Presentation

Discourses from youth work practice: the youth worker's story

Pope, P. and Jones, C.

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Authors: Paula Pope, Colin Jones

Abstract

This paper reports on a pilot study into youth workers' stories of practice. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected via semi structured interviews with ten youth workers in order to develop a meaningful dialogue about their practice and the realities of their professional role with young people. The diverse group of participants reflected positively on enjoyable and creative aspects of their work, some of the dilemmas they faced and experiences which had made a lasting impression. They characterised their work as being 'young people centred', 'about beginnings and not end products' and 'a privilege'.

Key words: youth work, narratives of practice, young person-centred

Introduction

Talking about their practice is something that many professionals enjoy and not least among these groups are youth workers. The process serves as an outlet: *"if you get us on our soap box, we can talk for hours"* as one youth worker in the study put it, but more than that, it can be *"really useful – always good to reflect on practices as we don't often get to do that in day to day life"* (ibid). This type of reaction to the story telling experience is endorsed by others as it can offer 'mutual social support', bringing increased well being and meaning to life (Thorsheim and Roberts, 1995, 194).

Similarly, it is reported that using narrative-based approaches to research general practice and primary care can produce positive psychological benefits (Launer 2002; Greenhalgh and Hurwitz 1998) and also shed light on the professional formation of teachers and others (Lacey, 1977; Archer, 2008).

This study provides an opportunity to youth workers to talk about their experiences in the presence of an interested listener. For the youth worker, this process of reflecting on and sharing your story, thereby making sense of its meaning and its attributes, enables both a taking stock of experiences and a chance to advocate on behalf of the profession itself. For the listener it is about hearing the story through the narrator's eyes, voice and mannerisms. As the conversation evolves, the process opens up insight into the workers and the nature of their investment in these experiences. The listener shares in a journey and wants to know what happened. It has interest in that it offers glimpses of the lives of other people as well as holding up a mirror to the nature of youth work practice.

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<u>What is youth work?</u>

Youth work is a prominent and contested area of activity. Critical elements of youth work practice are not understood as Davies (2005), Williamson (2005) and others confirm. Many of those who work with young people are not necessarily youth workers. However, youth work is a graduate profession in the UK with its own core values and principles whose purpose is the 'personal, social and educational development' of young people' (LLUK, 2008). It has been characterised with five practice strands: 'voluntary participation', 'education and welfare', 'young people', 'association, relationship and community', 'being friendly, accessible and responsive while acting with integrity' (Jeffs and Smith, 2008, 277-8). The effectiveness of youth work methods has led other agencies to seek to harness the skills and expertise of youth workers to achieve their policy goals as evident through government reports such as Youth Matters (HM Government, 2005) and Aiming High for Young People (HM Treasury, 2007).

Work with young people has become more recognised but youth work itself has become more marginalised in the process. There has been increased activity by the youth work sector to challenge thinking at the philosophical level, see for example the 'in defence of youth work campaign' (www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress) whose stance in March 2009 identified the need for "a radical revival of a form of Youth Work that wishes to play its part in the creation of a just, equal and democratic society" (ibid).

That youth work is under threat is recognised in many quarters, not least because of current uncertainty over youth policy under the UK coalition government and budget cuts to services and youth work programmes. The setting up of the 'Youth Work Sector Expert Group', the 'for youth's sake' campaign and publication of 'the benefits of youth work' (LLUK, 2010) are evidence of increased lobbying to restore investment in the sector.

Youth work elsewhere is also under strain and its philosophical basis is not understood. Barwick (2006) points out the "dangers" in the "lack of rigour in defining youth work practice". In a comparative review of contemporary youth work in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, she asserts, "one key common issue…is that youth work in all three countries needs to better define what it is and what youth workers do" (Barwick, 2006, 23).

The Australian youth work context is relevant as half of the participants in this pilot study are based in the state of Victoria in Australia. Australian youth work draws on its British roots (Bowie, 2005) and has similar struggles for recognition. Strong cases have been made for the professionalisation of Australian youth work in order to

promote ethical practice (see Bessant 2004, Sercombe 2004). Despite a continuing demand for skilled youth work graduates (Bessant, 2007), there is ongoing rationalisation of youth service provision on the ground and in youth work training and development.

Governments are increasingly interested in funding youth work programmes that have a cost benefit and enable them to achieve their targets with young people 'at risk'. However, with recent political changes both in the United Kingdom and Australia, further cutbacks are anticipated that will impact on statutory funding for generic youth work programmes.

This backdrop informs this pilot study. It was undertaken to begin to generate findings on the value of youth work from youth workers themselves, to begin to accumulate evidence that might help address some misconceptions about the nature of the work. How are today's youth workers seeing their practice? What are some of the research methods of drawing out these insights so that they can be taken further at the next stage of this study?

A wider aim was to examine current youth work practice to see how it sits within the content and process of programmes that educate the next generation of youth workers and also could contribute to the in-service personal and professional development of youth workers.

Method

Statement of Intent: To explore youth workers' reflections on experiences of their professional role. The study will seek to enable others to see and understand the world through a youth worker's eyes. A further objective is to elicit the suitability of the case study method as a tool for further exploration of this specialist area of practice.

Design: Given the exploratory and narrative nature of the study, a qualitative approach using a case study design was the obvious choice. Yin (1989) argues that the case study approach emphasises the importance of context and offers a fuller exploration of issues under investigation. The case study method is also useful when an in-depth complex or real life situation is the focus (Mohd Noor, 2008).

Methodological justification: 'The richest learning experience comes from the narrative' observed Jerome Bruner in conversation with John Crace in 2007. This interview with Bruner, a nonagenarian academic, offers insight into the value and stimulus that can be attached to story-telling activities. As such, it recognises that the oral tradition is a long established and recognised form of human behaviour.

Reflecting on and sharing your experiences can lead to increased insight of meanings and their implications in other life situations.

King and Horrocks (2010) offer guidance on ways in which this might be undertaken successfully in qualitative research. They characterise it as conducting open-ended interviews, establishing rapport and paying attention to actual experiences. This approach is applied in this study, when participants are invited to relate stories of their experiences in ways that are meaningful to them. This 'sense making' of a situation offers a broadening out of initial experiences both for the speaker and listener. This is not so straightforward. Brent (2004) among others has reported that the value of the youth work relationship and what might be achieved does not sit so easily with the managerial terminology of outputs and accreditation. There are problems over defining what constitutes success and for whom. In this study the youth workers are being asked for their examples of effective practice. This does not discount young people's ideas on what has been successful, for they must be considered even if their view is only discerned through the reflections of the worker.

The idea of listening to what youth workers have to say has come from professional experience of the sector. Youth workers in training are often asked to share examples of fieldwork dilemmas they face, which then serve as incidents for critical analysis to encourage the development of professional judgement (Tripp, 1993). They are also encouraged to identify skilful practice modelled by established practitioners that has helped their own practice to move beyond what Eraut (1994) has called the 'novice' stage to a more sophisticated level of expertise.

Sample: A purposive sample of ten participants was recruited. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to target those who are the best persons to provide the data, providing that the research question or area of investigation is used as a guide (Parahoo, 2006). The sample came from two distinct areas, half of the group were youth workers practising in the Melbourne area of the Australian state of Victoria and they are coded as participants 1-5. The remaining group members are coded as 6-10 and were drawn from the Merseyside area of the United Kingdom. The intention was to explore whether there was some universality of understanding of the nature of youth work between these diverse participants as well as to test out the interview process.

The sample comprised seven women and three men who came from various youth work backgrounds. For some of them, their current role now requires them to undertake managerial responsibilities, working with other agencies but still in the sector of youth and community work. Six of them hold the nationally recognised professional JNC (Joint Negotiating Committee) qualification in youth and community work that is endorsed by the National Youth Agency (England). The remaining four

had other academic qualifications and skills that equipped them to work in this sphere.

Ethics: Ethical approval was sought and obtained. The study was conducted along broad ethical principles of confidentiality, data protection and informed consent in accordance with the research governance framework (ESRC, 2010).

Data Collection: Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and digitally recorded. The question prompts sought to explore work experiences that the practitioners found enjoyable; activities they found to be creative and close to the essence of youth work; some of their realities of youth work and their sense of the lasting impact of their work.

Efforts were made to be inclusive to the participants by interviewing them in ways and settings where they felt comfortable. An example of this approach was shown in tailoring one interview to facilitate a participant who was hard of hearing and preferred to communicate using British Sign Language (BSL). The interviewee was supported by a BSL interpreter and filmed on DVD to capture the visual impact of the speaker's gestures and signs as well as the voice of the interpreter that is heard on the audio recording. Here the body is evidently part of the discourse. Adopting such an approach means that potential barriers may be overcome which is in line with good practice, (see for example Deaf Youth Workers Training, 1993), thereby enabling diverse voices to be heard in such studies.

Further consideration of the appropriateness and rigour of the methodology was sought by interviews being conducted by either a male or female interviewer, one of whom was familiar with youth work practice while the second was from a nursing background. The intention was to try to distinguish any difference that might exist through familiarity with the sector and whether this was distorting the findings. Since the interviews were recorded, it allowed both interviewers to hear and reflect independently on the data before jointly considering their findings.

Data analysis: Data were analysed and subjected to a thematic content analysis inspired by a framework approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Reliability of themes was checked and agreement level was reached in excess of 90%. The process began by the researchers familiarising themselves in the data that led into identifying themes which were then indexed. Four main themes became evident, focussing on the

1.   Youth worker role
2.   Youth work ethos
3.   Youth work skills and approaches
4.   Impact of youth work

Results

Key findings of the study are presented with descriptive narrative from participants.

Theme: Youth worker role	Example of response
A. What the participants say about youth work	P3. 'You walk a very fine line, sometimes you're a mentor and sometimes you're the bus driver or that ear at the end of the phone; sometimes you're the person that puts in those formal structures or supports young people to take consequences. We go along young people's journey, not they along ours, so sometimes that can be a real tricky type of tight rope that you walk.' P10. 'To me youth work is a right just like education is a right. Youth work is a right for an alternative way of learning perhaps more on a personal social moral level, rather than an academic level; you can have all the qualifications but if you don't know how to be as a person those qualifications are pretty useless'.
B. What the participants say is the public's view of young people and youth work	P5. 'Other people think it's targeted at the bad end, at bad kids, young people going off the rails. Programmes here are just about young people who want to engage… there's a role for youth workers across the whole spectrum'. P6. "Looking after young people, keeping them off the streets', that's what others think. They don't care about their welfare; they think 'I'm their mate'. They don't see how we work and set up the youth club and hear their views, give guidance about where to go next; sharing information, making it a place that is safe for them to come to…But it's a different area altogether, they don't see it as a profession, it's just someone else to look after the children.'

Theme: Youth Work Ethos	Example of response
Being young person centred	P1. 'Had to adapt to young people's understanding of how the world works'. P3. 'We walk along their journey, not they along ours and we go on their journey, and at times put in strategic

	interventions, knowing those sensitivities about who that person is'. P7. 'When I went on the course I was studying for the first time with people who had a passion for the work; we're cut from the same cloth so to speak- we're all passionate for young people.'
Learning with and from young people	P2. 'Young people can teach you quite a lot about yourself and young people still have the optimism 'you might be the one to get them through''. P4. 'They are challenging, you are constantly learning alongside them'.

It was clear that the workers felt that good youth work was about respecting young people, creating opportunities that helped to build their self esteem. That for them youth work was the "'*privilege of having a foot print on some one's life*'" (P3).

Theme: Youth Work Skills and Approaches	Example of response
Relationship building	P2. 'It's voluntary. Every time you give them the power they choose to continue, they tend to like us as we talk to them in a way they are not used to hearing, we're happy to help.' P4. 'Ability to communicate with young people, to listen to what they have to say, it's quite rewarding, their open mindedness' P7. 'I think sometimes the quality of what we do is sort of forgotten about- the good old fashioned meeting young people and engaging with them'.
Listening	P1 'Instinctive youth workers, hearing what young people say and accepting it is valid from the off' P2. 'Many are referred by teachers and parents- what they think the issues are is so different to what young people say they are'
Understanding young people	P3. 'They want to be seen and they want to be accepted; they want to be acknowledged; they want someone at the end of the day to say you're going alright'. P4. 'Adolescents (are) trying to fit in, hormones going

	crazy; they need a lot more support and understanding'. P8. 'Working with young people, their lives and the stories, all the things that are going on; they're often not great and yet they're fantastic young people'.
Being flexible and responsive	P6. 'Got to match the skills with the group, that's why it's really important to be flexible and you can't stick with the same things each year'. P7. 'We sat down with young men and asked them what was youth work, that for me was youth work in its purest form- we went really off at a tangent; it opened up some really good discussions we could take elsewhere.'
Building self Esteem	P1 'Active change-providing opportunity for young people, from low self esteem to build skills and knowledge; change happens in them and the way they see themselves' P8. 'Any achievements they make are constantly celebrated in tiny ways or huge ones, helping them work on things they're not comfortable with.'
Breaking the cycle	P1. 'Breaking the cycle- being a circuit breaker. Light bulb moment...Thinking outside the box... Established funding for a positive memory bank - really basic stuff (*providing experiences*) that makes up who you are'. P.10. 'Not stereotyping people and seeing attitudes change; it's only a tiny thing, something you can't record, but to me that's a bigger thing.'

Theme: Impact of Youth Work	Example of response
	P3. 'It's about beginnings and not end products, there's still some young people I wonder about and what happened to them...fortunately or unfortunately that's just part of what we do' P9. 'The lasting legacy of being involved in an application to the European Social Fund, providing supporting evidence that a new centre was needed by the local community...so every time I drive past there now I can say, I've had a bit of input in that and that for me gives a sense of achievement, a sense of belonging you know'.

It is apparent from this research that it is not always easy to ascertain the impact of the youth work relationship on young people's lives. This is particularly difficult at a time when the pressure is on to provide evidence of measureable outputs to external funders within a limited time frame. The skill of the youth worker in establishing such relationships is noted as "a core achievement" by Ofsted (2009, 8) in its inspections of local authority youth work in the United Kingdom. Longitudinal studies into youth work practice could further illuminate this trait and its legacy.

Merton et al. (2004, 42) do offer testimony to the respect and trust that can characterise the youth work relationship and though hard to quantify, "it would be surprising in the extreme if the extent of support identified...made no difference to the lives of the young people concerned" (Merton et al. 2004, 151).

One respondent (P3) offered this particular example of follow up from some young people as they sought her out to share some of their important life events:

"'I worked for five years for young homeless people and you know in the last ten years they're all reconnecting with me to tell me how their life has turned out and I've been to weddings and I suppose for them it's full circle and saying what impact I had on their life ... the biggest privilege is when young people come back, saying that you made a difference..and I think that anyone who lets you into their life, into their heart or into their fragilities or anything like that, that's a real privilege and even having that privilege is enough...it's just really special."

Discussion

In this section we make some theoretical propositions from the data and identify that the use of narratives and narrative approaches has potential for the exploration of youth work experiences.

The researchers believe the data is authentic as it is the actual voices of practitioners from transcribed recordings. There is a contention that such stories are subjective for participants were not asked to provide additional evidence to verify their statements. However, echoes of the stories that are related as the participants discussed and interpreted their experiences are to be found in the common ground of themes that were identified in the data analysis.

These stories appear genuinely representative of the nature of youth work practice as they confirm the research of Spence et al. (2006) and others who describe the dilemmas over the perception of the youth work role as being about 'recreation' and social control,(p.87) leading to a 'compromised' identity (p.89) in relation to other professional groups. Spence et al. affirm the importance of building relationships and listening to the real issues young people face. Offering learning opportunities through

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'serious conversations', creativity and a responsive curriculum are among Williamson's critique of ways to improve practice (Williamson, 2005, 76-8).

The workers in this study are able to express the nuances of their role as evident by remarks such as, "*We go along young people's journey, not they along ours, so sometimes that can be a real tricky type of tight rope that you walk.*" Here, we have glimpses of how the youth worker functions as a sensitive intermediary. Trust here is a significant component in moving relationships along at the grass roots level and staying in contact with others as they change in the process. The youth worker acts as an advocate, bringing those more marginalised in society into view. It also implies that society's current *modus operandi* tends to disengage such individuals and groups.

The youth worker's knowledge and value base may offer much in the various youth settings and interagency teams. There is evidence of a youth work community of practice which has its own particular vocabulary, with references to: 'learning and process'- "*you are constantly learning alongside them*" and "*it isn't an end result youth work, it's someone's journey*"; 'the voluntary relationship' – "*It's voluntary... they tend to like us as we talk to them in a way they are not used to hearing*"; 'reflective practice' - "*staff training to reflect which is much of what we did here (in training), looking at what you are and who you are and moulding that into your practice*" and 'group work'- "*got to match the skills with the group*".

To those 'in the know', particular phrases are invested with meaning. Some participants have internalised these concepts from association with other youth workers during the training experience; spending time "*with people who had a passion for the work*". There is awareness of the history around this professional discipline that tracks youth work over more than a century.

These discourses offer material on work life experiences that participants are tailoring to the listener. They are fragments of longer stories of practice through which we glimpse their concerns and remembrances of what they value in this professional discipline. The youth workers are positioning themselves in relation to their story, offering a possible parallel to young people in having to take on the *status quo* in order to be heard. They appear to be aware of representing a 'youth worker collective' in resisting trends towards a dominating adult agenda that sees "*young people going off the rails*" and society's needs of "*keeping them off the streets*" and having "*someone else to look after the children*". One worker reported a conversation with a politician who was seeking advice on how to involve young people more in local processes. The youth worker's reply '*ask them*' appears basic but is still innovative for some in that it is not part of their mainstream practice with all groups in society.

This research exercise offers the chance to record some of those experiences that youth workers think have been valuable. It has also begun to identify vignettes of practice that can serve as examples for youth workers in training to develop their critical thinking and reflection skills using questioning techniques that facilitate narrative enquiry and reflection (Launer, 2002) or Socratic dialogue (Banks and Nøhr, 2003). Two such examples furnished by the data that could be interrogated further as to 'what would happen if' are as follows:

1.'The drawing pins story' (P9)

"I can remember being on placement and there was a disaffected young lad who would gravitate to the centre on a daily basis; he threw some drawing pins on the floor so … I said 'pick them up; it's too dangerous throwing them on the floor like that' and of course he didn't pick them up. The centre manager spotted this and said to the young man to pick them up. Immediately he picked them up and I was scratching my head and I was thinking to myself, why is it that he'll pick them up for her and not for me? In supervision we discussed this and she said 'what do you know about the lad?' I didn't know anything at all about him so I started to doing a bit of research and I found that he was interested in birds.
Now there's a little sort of library corner in the centre … and I knew he was coming in so I was sitting reading this book on birds and he was as nosey as anything. He came over and … he proceeded to tell me about the humming bird, how many times it could flap its wings and what it did and everything and I was completely gob-smacked that this kid had such knowledge, knowledge that I didn't know, you know what I mean… We began to develop a fantastic relationship, so much so that he started to tell me about an incident which happened in the city centre. He said he saw an old woman getting knocked on the escalator and someone trying to pinch her bag, you know and they pushed her down. I said to him, 'so how did you feel about that?' 'Oh' he said, 'I didn't want to be associated with them. I thought it was bad news what they did, you know'. So I used that opportunity to talk to him about the incident of what potentially could have happened with the drawing pins and he took it. He got it; the light went on; it clicked (clicks fingers)."

2. 'The Catch 22 funding story' (P8)

"The programmes we were delivering, they were meeting the needs of the young people who were accessing them; they were really really good but each year we were having to change them (for the funders), change it and make it new because they said we don't want our name against something you're already delivering, that's working… Having to constantly change and think of something new when there's no need to do that; it doesn't just stay the same, you evaluate it and change it because you don't know who will need and what young people you're going to be working with

but to have to change it massively, to make it something new or whatever is 'sexy', you know what's in the headlines that month. It's not useful and it's not an effective way to spend your time as a manager"

These vignettes offer valuable case studies. Tripp (1993) suggests that interrogating incidents from diagnostic, practical, reflective and critical stances contributes to the formation of professional judgment. It is a means to develop awareness and insight into the realities of professional practice.

At the close, participants offered their initial feedback on the interview process. Their positive comments show they found the experience to be, *'very relaxed and useful, allowing me opportunity to discuss my work'* (P8); *"good informal process with prompts and opportunity to expand on concepts'* (P1); and *'relaxed, informal and also nice to talk about youth work and experiences'* (P7).

Limitations of the study

Given that this is a pilot study and small scale, the researchers recognise that only analytical generalisations can be made. However the semi-structured interview technique appeared valuable in revealing the wealth of youth work narratives. Furthermore, given the pace of evolving political change affecting the sector, the case study approach is sufficiently flexible to take these issues into account. In considering future research, the authors believe a combining of techniques including observation of practice along with interviewing may contribute positively to revealing more elusive aspects of youth work.

Conclusion

This study contributes to work elsewhere to demonstrate the value of youth work to a wider audience. It makes manifest some of the ways in which youth work unfolds at the local level and the rich narrative associated with this process.

It was evident that the youth workers have made personal investments into their work and the semi-structured interview did offer a chance for that to be recognised in another arena. They presented 'progressive narratives' that offered a positive trajectory (Gergen, 1994, 254). They were making sense of their experiences in the telling of them to interested listeners. The naming of aspects of their work did re-assert the common ground of the profession, rooted into person centred enabling work with young people.

As such, a youth work centred stance might be envisioned as: a listening and collaborative attitude towards young people who are the significant actors in their own development; attention and support that builds self esteem and enables

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engagement with groups and communities; evolving and effective responses to young people's needs, transitions and aspirations; and the requirement of coherence and continuity of resource allocation to support youth work practice.

The potential for creative youth work practice to be more widely recognised and financed appears limited. The constraints lie in the way society functions and the dominance of the adult agenda and perspective. In terms of social justice, youth work is positioned to challenge the adult oriented power base but may need to do more to demonstrate its worth in the public arena. According to Barwick (2006, 23), youth workers need to show that they "care about positive outcomes; and ensure that their work serves society as well as young people." Despite its heritage, the profession of youth work still appears at a youthful stage in progressing towards achieving recognition of its intrinsic worth in shaping a society fit for our times.

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Appendix 1: Interview schedule of questions:

1. Things that are enjoyable about your job that you would like to share with others
2. Things you do that are creative or different and that you feel are the essence of youth work
3. The realities of youth work practice. There is a lot of confusion about youth work. What do you find other people think a youth worker does? What is the reality from your point of view?
4. Examples of what you've done in your youth work practice that has made a lasting impression on someone else.

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