

pp. 11-15

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Teitl: Working with Young People

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Defining good youth work

Gina Ingram and Jean Harris

There is a story that may or may not have its origins in truth:

Matt had been going to the local youth centre for six months. His mother decided that she ought to go and see what they did there. She called at about 8.30 p.m. It was a busy night. Two young people welcomed her and took her to see George, the full-time worker in charge. She explained why she had come and George asked two young people to show her around. They took her through the coffee bar where a group was planning a visit to Hungary. They pointed out the murals done by members over a number of years. She saw the arts and craft room where the women's group were working on entertainment for a local hospital. In the yard she saw where the young men and women had set out an outdoor training circuit. She returned via the counselling room: she couldn't enter of course, but her guides explained to her about the help-line that the youth council had established. The young people returned her to George who was in the office talking to a young woman about her portfolio for her Youth Achievement Award. The mother's comment was 'What an interesting hobby you have George but what's your real job?'

This is a revised version of the original text which appeared as Chapter 4 in *Delivering Good Youth Work* by Gina Ingram and Jean Harris. First published in 2001 by Russell House Publishing.

Obviously the joke has its origins in the fact that few people actually know what youth workers do and youth workers are bad at explaining this. If you asked people what youth workers do the general view is often that:

- A 'youth worker is a type of social worker who gets on well with young people.'
- 'They keep them out of trouble by doing things with them and often work with difficult young people whom no-one else wants to know.'
- 'Some do it voluntarily, like guides and scouts. A few are paid, but why that is, people are unsure. They do a bit of training to make sure they do things safely.'

In most groups of adults, there are those who have had experiences of youth clubs, projects or voluntary organisations. They tend to speak warmly of the youth workers and say how a youth worker helped them and was good to them, but they seldom specify what the youth worker actually did.

When asked to describe their job, youth workers often rely on words and phrases that mean little to the general public:

We work to empower young people; to help them take control of their lives.

Youth workers build relationships with young people...and help them to become effective adults.

We offer them learning opportunities through which they grow and develop.

We help young people do what they want to do.

Alternatively, youth workers offer a long explanation:

Well, it's hard to explain in a sentence, can I give you an example? We were working with Mike (that's not his real name, I can't tell you that because of confidentiality, you might recognise him from what I say). Mike had this problem...

No wonder workers can sometimes be seen as being woolly minded! There are a number of difficulties in describing youth work.

Identifying the skills

The first problem is that although the delivery of youth work is very highly skilled, youth workers are not always aware of the skills they are using. When

they can describe their skills, they can accurately communicate what they are doing. Then, instead of saying things like:

Well, I just do it: I don't really know why it works, it just does.

They would be able to say:

I begin by making young people feel safe, no one can learn if they don't feel safe. I make opportunities for young people to talk to me about things that matter to them: for them to tell me their story. If a young person is a bit shy, I always try to...etc.

When people understand what youth workers do, and why they do it, they tend to be more sympathetic and supportive. It can also help people to be more aware of the difficulties that young people face.

The wide range of youth work

The second difficulty about offering an explanation is that youth work takes place in a very wide range of settings using a diverse set of activities. These include:

- Detached or outreach work and work in mobile centres.
- Clubs that may operate every night of the week in large urban centres, or once a week in rural areas.
- Specific project work, for example, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, youth theatres, adventure clubs.
- Work in units based on the identity of the young people (young women's groups, groups of black young people, PHAB groups [Physically Handicapped and Able Bodied], groups for young people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual).
- In specialist projects based around such issues as health, prostitution.
- There are information services, one stop information shops and centres that offer counselling.

Youth workers may work in a wide range of other settings: colleges, schools, health centres, social service units as well as in multi-agency projects such as Connexions, Youth Offending Teams and social inclusion units.

This is a complex situation, difficult to explain to people quickly. It can be put like this:

Youth workers work wherever young people are: in clubs, on the streets, in schools. The work is the same, it just takes place in a range of settings.

Competition between different settings for youth work

Some workers often see the work in their setting as being more relevant and appropriate than work in another setting. For example, workers say:

Detached work is where its at. We work with young people on their territory. This gives them power...they don't see us as an institution like building-based work.

I work in a youth club, everyone says we are irrelevant and old-fashioned but where else is work so embedded in the community? The workers are off the estate: many were members themselves. Young people hear about the club from their parents, we're part of their scene...each generation makes the club their own.

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award is fantastic. OK, so we do appeal to lots of kids who achieve more, they've got needs too, but we also run groups aimed at including disaffected young people. Our young people get a tremendous sense of achievement; a nationally recognised qualification...

There is a need for youth workers to celebrate that they work in a range of different ways. This level of differentiation means that a wide range of young people have their needs met. Additionally, they can move on to different things as their needs change. Youth workers offer a highly accessible and differentiated service. Working in different ways requires different skills. Youth workers are multi-talented.

Why working with the individual is important

We need to tell people that youth workers are not specialists, they are the last of the generalists and they should be proud of this. Educational establishments such as schools, colleges and universities offer a fixed curriculum and a system that takes the learners through it. Youth work is different, youth work starts where young people are, not from where we would like them to be. We identify their learning needs and design a learning pathway through which individuals and groups can have their needs met. It follows that because the learning pathway is based on the age, experience, needs and interests of individuals

and groups of young people, the activities that make up the pathway are very wide-ranging.

In summary:

Schools and colleges work on fixed programmes of learning. Youth workers are different: they base their work on the young people's needs and interests.

We use this as a starting point to offer young people learning that is relevant to their lives and appropriate to their age, experience and interest.

We offer a tailor made service of individual learning pathways.

Why making a relationship is paramount

Finally, youth workers are justifiably proud of offering learning through the caring, equal, relationships that they make with young people. People often do not understand how important this is. From their point of view:

Why do you need a relationship to do what you do? Why don't you just get on with it and set things up for them?

When people say this, we need to explain that many young people do not have good experiences of adult relationships. It is important that they develop a good relationship with someone, to help them to become skilled parents, or good working colleagues, or friends. Youth workers act as role models so young people can learn and develop skills such as:

- caring and being cared for
- disagreeing and remaining friends
- negotiation and compromise
- building relationships that are open, honest and based in trust.

The skills of describing our work to others in ways that they can understand and sympathise with are vital. These descriptions, however, must not betray the work. This is the platform from which we can obtain wide support for the work.