

# The youth work contract

Howard Sercombe  
Youth Work Programme  
Edith Cowan University

## Abstract

*This paper aims to establish some core understandings of the practice of youth work and some of the ethical considerations that follow. The conception of power, and the nature of the power relationship between young people and workers is explored, along with the often conflicting expectations that come from funding bodies, communities, management and other professionals. We also discuss the contribution that understanding youth work as a profession might make to practice, as well as some of the difficulties.*

## What is youth work?

Over the last thirty years in Australia, there has emerged a growing and diverse body of practitioners who identify as youth workers. Over that time, there has been a significant amount of debate (but not enough!) about what constitutes youth work practice: about the range of roles that youth workers take; about the defining elements of the relationship with a young person that makes it a youth work relationship; about whether youth work is, or should become, a “profession”, and in what sense; about the institutional locations that are and should be taken by youth workers.

This conference goes beyond strict youth work practice to address the needs of a broad range of professions who are concerned with young people. But it is important also to try to gain some clarity about youth work as a practice, not only for the benefit of youth workers themselves, but also so that other professionals understand what youth work is, what youth workers are for, how they can be used, and when it is proper to refer a young person to a youth worker.

At this point in its history, in Australia, it is hard to say precisely what youth work is. In other places, youth work can be defined by its relationship to major institutions, such as the National Youth Service in the UK. In Australia, youth work has remained marginal to major Governmental institutions, and has remained diverse and idiosyncratic as a consequence. Youth workers work for churches, for local governments, for nothing, for large government departments, for schools, for small community organisations, for large charities. The responsibility for youth work cannot be tied unambiguously either to local, State or Federal levels of government, and all three levels have been reluctant to take it on. As a result, youth work is, in the best sense, “undisciplined”. It has been this innovative, spontaneous aspect of the trade that has made it effective in work with difficult situations at the local level.

Generally, when even very experienced youth workers are asked about what youth work is (and it is one of my standard job interview questions) they say that it is work with young people. But school teachers, parents, sporting coaches, police, doctors and prison officers also work with young people, to say nothing of sport shop owners, managers of fast food outlets and music shops. Important as much of their work with young people is, it isn't youth work,

either by their own or others' definition. There are also a range of professionals who might not work directly with young people, but take on policy, coordination, resourcing, research or training work. It would be wrong to say that these people have moved out of the field because they have moved out of face to face roles.

Youth work is constituted by a particular kind of relationship between a professional and young people. While there is currently no consensus in the field about what that relationship is, this paper is an attempt to put a skeleton framework in place.

## The youth work relationship

### The worker, the young person, power, and the contracting situation.

In youth work, as in many other spheres of life, a worker is subject to several different contracts. As well as the job contract you sign with the employing organisation, there are spoken or unspoken contracts that you have with a funding body; with a management committee; with individual members of a management committee (who themselves have contracts with a range of constituencies); with other professionals in your area; with other important people in the local area; with police; with the owner of the building in which you work; with your co-workers; with parents of the young people. And, of course, with young people. These are then all constituencies who have given you some kind of mandate, and expect some return from you.

Many of these contracts involve contradictory mandates. The representative of the local shopkeepers' organisation on your management committee may want you to get the kids of the street where they are annoying potential customers. The police may expect you to keep them informed on the whereabouts of certain young people. Parents might want you to make sure that their offspring is in school. Funding bodies may want a decrease in offending behaviour by the young people that you work with. The church might want to see some conversions. And the young people that you work with might not want any of these things. They may have entered into a relationship with you to help them find a job, or to help them stay out of trouble, or because they needed someone to talk to or somewhere to hang out. They might just like you, and think that the contract they are entering into is a friend-contract, not a youthwork-contract.

There are two principles that are important here. The first is to be very clear about the mandate that you are accepting when you enter into a contract with a constituent. Does the local shopkeepers' representative think that you have accepted a mandate to keep the kids off the street? Does the young person think that you will be their friend? *What contract did you make with them, or what tacit contract have you allowed to become established?* You need to be able and prepared to refuse a mandate where necessary, and to continually clarify and affirm it. Then, the young person will have no grounds to be upset when you won't go out with them to a party, or share a joint with them, or kiss them. The police can have no complaint when you refuse to give over a young person's name or whereabouts. Of course, this relies on you being clear about what mandates you *will* take on, about what your role is.

We will discuss that a little more in a moment. This requirement for a clear mandate is, of course, not exclusive to youth workers.

The second principle. What defines youth work as a practice is that, among the stack of tacit and formal contracts that the youth worker is involved in, *the youth worker engages the young person as the primary constituent*. Where conflicts in mandates occur, and they sometimes do and sometimes don't, youth work gives priority to the contract with the young person. So, for example, can a youth worker act as a mediator between young person and parent? A mediator accepts a contract of objectivity and impartiality. A youth worker cannot accept a contract of impartiality, because they have a prior obligation to the young person. They can be a negotiator, but not a mediator. Can a youth worker be involved in a programme to clear the streets of young people? Perhaps if this is a byproduct of a service to young people that actually gives them somewhere to go and something to do, but not if it involves impinging on their civil right to assemble in public space. Funding is accepted from Governments, churches and other bodies on the understanding that it will be used to put into practice the mandate given by young people, given the lack of resources available to young people to act on their own behalf and to pay for the advocacy that they need. Management committees, if they are to manage *youth work*, exist under the same mandate, derived from the same constituency.

Now, all sorts of other benefits may flow from the empowerment of young people, including decreased levels of crime, higher levels of school attendance and so on. Indirectly, mandates from other constituents whose interests lie in greater social order may be honestly fulfilled. And greater social order is often in the interests of the primary constituency (the young people) as well. But if a project is a *youth work* project, it accepts young people as the primary constituency, holds itself accountable to them, and will not take action which undermines the mandate given by them.

This is half way towards distinguishing youth work as a practice. There are, however, other professions which will take on the young person as a constituent: medicine being the obvious example. A further point of difference is that youth workers work with the *whole person* in their *social context*. Youth work has become famous, and rightly so, for its analysis of social processes which impact on young people. While young people never cease being agents, actively working and constructing their own situation, the social forces and constraints under which they live are important.

## Beyond contract: the stance of the professional

Before we are able to use the idea of "the professional" productively, there is a bit of ground to clear. "Professionalism" as a term is ambiguous, and there is by no means consensus that professionals are a good thing to have around. Critics point to a number of problems with the professions that are pertinent to youth work as well.

The standard formula for a profession is that it involves formal training, has a recognised body of knowledge, a code of ethics, and registration (through a professional association) supported by recognition in law. While the justification for this is that the interests of the client are best served by the security of a properly trained and qualified person, subject to the discipline of his or her fellow-professionals through the threat of deregistration, the effect is often different. Professions, it is argued, use these arguments to gain power for the profession by artificially inflating the qualifications required for practice, and restricting entry into training and registration. This creates a monopoly for those in the profession, allowing them to increase fees and improve their own status, often at the cost of clients. Professional associations act as industrial unions for the profession, refusing to cooperate with legislative reforms if they have the potential to erode the power, money or privileges of the profession. Specialist languages are developed to mystify everyday processes, shrouding matters in complexity so that ordinary people no longer feel competent to deal with matters which would otherwise be well within their grasp. Competing professions fight for exclusive claims over different fields of attention, and vigorously attempt to increase their monopolistic reach. Professionals take on the role of the expert, assuring clients that they and only they are competent to deal with the matter in hand, and keeping clients ignorant of the basis for decisions they make, the processes involved and the often quite simple things that need to be done. In the process, while their needs may be met, clients are further disempowered and less able to deal with matters in the future except through a continuing dependence on the professional. Claiming to work in the best interests of clients, professions work in the best interests of professionals.

This is the dark side of the professions. There is another side. This refers not so much to the industrial advantages of professionalism for the professional, but the ethical nature of the *professional relationship*.

The professional relationship starts from an understanding that there are a number of situations in which a person needs to be able to make themselves vulnerable, by telling secrets, by exposing the less savoury aspects of their character or behaviour, by revealing their ignorance or insecurity. The ability to expose oneself in this way is often a prerequisite to healing. A professional relationship is an intentionally limited relationship in which a constituent can expose themselves safely. The limits to the relationship are precisely what guarantees the safety of the constituent, and sets up the conditions under which vulnerability and intimacy can be entered into with minimal risk.

These limits mean that the professional refuses to take for themselves benefits (like expensive gifts and sexual favours) which might be OK in other kinds of relationships. It may be that some things, like sexual contact, might produce beneficial results for a client. However, once those lines have been crossed, the relationship is no longer a professional relationship. Maintaining the peculiarly professional quality of the relationship is actually more important in this case than producing beneficial results.

It is the concept of the professional that exposes the limitations of thinking about the youth work relationship as a contract in which a service is provided in the mutual self-interest of the young person and the worker. May (1988:93) argues that a deeper notion, expressed by the term "covenant" is required. There is an element of mutual gift in the professional

relationship. Working with a young person transforms both the young person and the youth worker in ways that make the strict notion of contract a limited vehicle for expressing the relationship. The client is an active participant in the process, and growth and healing is more *facilitated* by the professional that *performed* by him or her. Needs are often unpredictable, and can't always be anticipated by the contract. And while the contract implies self interest on the part of both parties, a professional relationship sometimes needs to go above and beyond self-interest, perhaps even to contain an element of self-sacrifice, in order for the relationship to be satisfied.

The limits imposed by the professional relationship, in youth work and other professional parlance, are frequently called "boundaries". Because the professional relationship is deeply ethical in nature, it is incumbent on youth workers to be clear about what their own boundaries are, not only for the sake of the young people they work with but for the sake of their own survival. Unfortunately, there is no consensus on what the boundaries are: for example, some people regard a constituent having one's home phone number as OK, others wouldn't. In addition to real disagreement about where the limits are, boundaries are highly contextual.

So it is difficult. There are no blanket rules that can be imposed. Like other areas of ethics however, this doesn't let us off the hook - it doesn't mean that its open slather, and that we can be immune from criticism or censure because there is no consensus. Rather, it puts the onus back on us as individual persons, operating with integrity in situations that involve highly vulnerable people in highly charged emotional and political contexts, to work out where we stand, where our lines are. And to make that clear to colleagues, management, and the young people we work with.

The professional relationship is not primarily a matter of effectiveness, efficiency, or even competence, although it has implications for all these. The professional relationship involves an ethical stance taken by a person with a vocation to serve people in particular ways. Paradigmatically, it is the position of the healer. The position of the healer needs to go beyond mere contract - the supply of a service for a fee as negotiated up front. It is not as any person that a youth worker takes on a contract with a young person, but as a *professional*.

## A definition of youth work?

Pulling together the components raised above, we can perhaps define youth work as the practice of engaging with young people in a professional relationship in which:

- The young person(s) are the primary constituency, and the mandate given by them has priority
- The young person(s) are understood as social beings whose lives are shaped in negotiation with their social context
- The young person is dealt with holistically.

## Conclusion

This paper has established the practice of youth work as a unavoidably *ethical* process. We have explored two complementary perspectives which define the boundaries of that relationship. The first is based on a notion of contract in which a worker takes on a mandate from a young person as a client, or youth in general as a constituency. The notion of contract specifies the origin of the power of the professional, determines the locus of accountability, and limits the degree to which youth workers prescribe action “for their own good”. While we accept that a worker deals with a number of constituencies within any given contract, we argue that youth work practice is distinguished by the priority it gives to the young person as client.

Youth work is of course not the only profession that deals with young people. The roles of teacher, lawyer, social worker, priest, police officer and doctor are legitimate and important. It is quite legitimate that in some of these practices the young person is not the primary client, and that the interests of the community or the institution may need to be enforced against the interests of the young person where interests conflict. It is important for youth workers to have working relationships with other professions, and to be able to refer when appropriate. But while a youth worker is free to refuse to take on a client, we do not believe that the youth worker may take on a client and then act against them.

The second perspective explores the concept of the *professional* in the practice of youth work. The professional relationship goes beyond the minimal contractual code of tit-for-tat or fee for service to embrace the worker’s position as a healer. It is this stance of the worker as healer, and the covenant with the client that is established in the professional relationship that makes a worker a professional, not membership of a professional association, a nice neat office or a regular salary. (Which is not to say, of course, that there is anything wrong with a regular salary. Or a neat office for that matter, although that is outside my experience.) Boundaries are therefore set not only by the contract, but from the nature of the professional relationship. The relationship is intentionally limited to allow a client to be vulnerable within it, to be confident that material revealed in the relationship will not be used against them, and that the worker will not take for themselves things that could be legitimately offered and accepted in another kind of relationship, like a friendship or a sexual partnership. The notion of the professional guides the kinds of contracts that should and should not be accepted.

These two positions together define the frame of ethical practice within which youth work is conducted.

## References

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# A (draft) code of ethics for youth work

Howard Sercombe, in consultation with the Western Australian Youth Affairs field, September 1997.

## Prologue

Youth workers exist in the space created by young people's exclusion from full membership of the common wealth, in the struggle by young people for survival and recognition on the one hand and the struggle by society for order and control on the other. The core of youth work practice lies in the relationship with the young person as the primary client, expressed through a commitment to advocacy and healing in their work with the young person and the parent society. The following principles are informed by this core position.

### 1. **Primary client.**

Amidst the many demands the youth workers have to answer, amidst the many contracts that they enter into, amidst the many constituencies that make claims upon them, **the primary client of the youth worker is the young person** with whom they engage. Where conflict exists between obligations to one young person and another, it is resolved in ways that avoid harm and continue to support the person least advantaged by the resolution

### 2. **Ecology**

Youth workers recognise the impact of ecological and structural forces on young people. Their work is not limited to facilitating change within the individual young person, but extends to the social context in which the young person lives.

### 3. **Equity**

Youth workers' practice will be non discriminatory.

### 4. **Empowerment**

The youth worker seeks to enhance the power of the young person by making power relations open and clear; by holding power-holders accountable; by facilitating their disengagement from the youth work relationship; and by supporting the young person in the pursuit of their legitimate claims. Youth workers presume that young people are competent in assessing and acting on their interests.

### 5. **Transparency**

The contract established with the young person, and the resulting relationship, will be open and truthful. The interests of other stakeholders will not be hidden from them.

### 6. **Confidentiality**

Information provided by young people will not be used against them, nor will it be shared with others who may use it against them. Young people should be made aware of the contextual limits to confidentiality, and their permission sought for disclosure. Until this happens, the presumption of confidentiality must apply.

### 7. **Knowledge**

Youth workers have a responsibility to keep up to date with the information, resources, knowledges and practices needed to meet their obligations to young people.

### 8. **Self-awareness**

Youth workers are conscious of their own values and interests, and approach difference in those with whom they work with humility.

### 9. **Cooperation**

Youth workers will seek to cooperate with others in order to secure the best possible outcomes for young people.

### 10. **Corruption**

Youth workers and youth agencies will not advance themselves at the expense of young people.

### 11. **Sexual propriety**

The youth work relationship is a chaste relationship. Youth workers will not engage sexually with a client, nor with any young person under the age of consent.

### 12. **Self-care**

Ethical youth work practice is consistent with preserving the health of youth workers.