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**THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION OF YOUTH WORKERS:  
A ROLE FOR TEACHER EDUCATION?**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper suggests that education faculties are ideally placed to develop, initiate, coordinate the initial educational needs of youth workers, and to prepare teachers to collaborate with other agencies in responding to the needs of youth. Consequently, a role for teacher education exists in the design and development of courses for the initial educational needs of youth workers, to coordinate the implementation of those courses, and to prepare both prospective and practising teachers for a role in responding to youth problems. This extended role for education faculties is new and the result of changing societal and environmental factors currently facing today's young people. This paper describes current issues surrounding the education of youth workers, describes the specific design features of youth worker education and proposes that education faculties are ideally placed to coordinate a multidisciplinary approach to the professional education of youth workers. An extended role for teachers in responding to the needs and problems of youth is also described*

**INTRODUCTION**

There is strong support in the literature for an inclusive or collaborative inter-agency approach for the professional education of people who work with young people and their families, but few papers of practical value appear in teacher

education journals, faculties or programs \* Education faculties seem to have been slow to meet the changing circumstances of youth workers, generally failing to provide for their professional education needs which typically are addressed through social work programs. While research into issues concerning young people has been widely reported in the education studies literature, there are few accounts of how these issues have been addressed within teacher education programs. The authors' recent survey of a number of teacher education journals for the period 1988 to 1995 (specifically, the *South Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* [Australia], the *Journal of Teaching Practice* [Australia], and the *Journal of Education for Teaching* [England]), revealed no articles dealing with issues relevant to the preparation of teachers working with youth, or which saw the preparation of youth workers as part of the role of education faculties.

However, the *Journal of Teacher Education (USA)* recently featured several papers on the development of integrated, cross-disciplinary services for children and their families, for instance, schools share the same clients as youth worker agencies and the needs of young people cannot be addressed solely in terms of the services of one particular profession, but require the expertise of multiple disciplines (Zuniga-Mil & George, 1995). Teacher education needs to be

restructured to work more effectively with other faculties, schools and community services to meet the professional education needs of youth workers. Isolationist approaches to youth worker education are likely to be limited and much less effective than they could be (Winitzky, Sheridan, Crow, Welch and Kennedy, 1995). Teacher educators have the skills and expertise to become active in contributing to the on-going development of youth workers by coordinating a multidisciplinary approach to the education of youth workers.

This paper proposes that teacher educators now need to consider taking up the challenge of contributing to the professional education of youth workers. In initiating this new field of endeavour, it is suggested that the professional education needs of youth workers have to be mapped using a multidimensional approach which addresses the various concerns youth workers face in dealing with their clients and their own needs for professional recognition. Accordingly, the first two sections of this paper describe the main features and problems of youth work and some current models employed or recommended in the professional education of youth worker,. The final section provides a rationale for the location of youth studies in teacher education faculties and proposes how this process might be accomplished to meet the criteria established in the literature as summarised above.

#### **PROBLEMATIC FEATURES OF YOUTH WORKER EDUCATION**

All citizens pass through a period of their life known as "youth". Consequently, youth are ubiquitous and the nature of "youth work" is as

varied as the needs of the individuals covered by the term "youth". However, "youth" and "youth work" are terms generally taken to refer to those individuals who encounter difficulties in the transition from childhood to adulthood, and during this period of development, are "at risk" and in need of assistance. Therefore, youth work contains many different, and often unrelated, issues including, ethnicity, rural isolation, youth accommodation, homelessness, drug education, suicide, AIDS, sexuality, physical disabilities, eating disorders, behaviour disorders, education and vocational training, school retention, crisis support, and mental health.

Currently, youth work itself tends to be defined by the service provided by a specific agency. For instance, a Youth Crisis Support agency may offer individuals support, advocacy, counselling, supervision, assistance with practical needs such as accommodation, safety, transport, and/or financial advice, and refer clients to other mental health services. Alternatively, a Youth Mental Health Agency may assist individuals to manage stress and panic attacks, provide individual counselling, behaviour therapy, family therapy, psycho-therapeutic/educational groups and programs.

The majority (65%) of youth workers are likely to be employed in suburban areas, others (15 %) work in the inner-city area, with the remainder (20%) located in non-metropolitan areas (White, Omelczuk & Underwood, 1991, p. 48). Youth workers in Australia may be involved in a broad spectrum of tasks and functions such as face-to-

face work with young people in a variety of community, residential, juvenile corrections, local government, case work and outreach programs. In addition, senior youth workers may be employed in the management, supervision, coordination, research, policy development and administration of youth workers and youth agencies (Muanders & Broadbent, 1995, p. 21). However, the reality is that youth workers are likely to be part-time, short-term or volunteer workers who have had limited opportunities to gain appropriate education and training (White, Omelczuk & Underwood, 1991, p. 48). Not surprisingly, there is a high-job turnover and significant geographical mobility among youth workers.

Consequently, the preparation of youth workers continues to be problematic. Youth workers are likely to be employed in a variety of geographical locations, in government or non-government agencies, be called on to perform a wide variety of functions for which they have received little or no preparation and for which they hold limited tertiary qualifications. It seems that education faculties may be in an ideal situation to address the problems of the education of youth workers, which is the focus of the following section.

### **DESIGN FEATURES OF YOUTH WORKER EDUCATION**

In the light of the problematic features of youth worker education identified in the foregoing section, this section addresses the design features of youth worker education. The first point to note is that, at the present time, there is a relative absence of formal qualifications and training in

youth work. Forty-five per cent of youth workers have no tertiary qualifications (White, Omelczuk and Underwood, 1991, p. 48), and the Queensland Community Services and Health Industries Training Council (1995) found that youth workers had "lower levels of language, literacy and numeracy skills" (p. 91). Youth workers who do have tertiary qualifications are likely to be graduates of related fields such as teaching. Overall, there is an apparent lack of professional status within the community for youth workers (Denholm & Ling, 1990; Muanders & Broadbent, 1995). The Queensland Community Services and Health Industries Training Council (1995, p. 88) commented that the need for professional qualifications and recognition for youth workers was critical.

Similarly, Muanders and Broadbent's (1995) research indicated the need for professional recognition for youth workers, enhanced opportunities for in-service education and significant changes in the professional education of youth workers. University qualifications would enhance job prospects for youth workers and, combined with work experience, would provide them with the skills for making decisions about their own career paths. On completion of a university degree, possibilities exist for them to capitalise on opportunities in a broad range of human service work, including psychology, counselling, training, consultancy, community health and entrepreneurial activities.

Traditionally, the professional education of youth workers usually is undertaken within a social

welfare framework, tends to be generalist rather than specialist, and attempts to address the multiple needs of youth workers' clients (NVWhite, Omeiczuk and Underwood, 1991, p. 46). In some cases prospective youth workers are permitted to specialise in an elected area or to enhance career options by undertaking electives in a related area such as education, health, welfare, politics, management, counselling, cultural studies, or Aboriginal studies. Generally, youth work courses aim to develop:

- a professional and informed orientation to youth work based on principles for practice, conceptual frameworks, and definitions of professional work;
- knowledge of politics, state funding, youth policies (their formulation and realisation), knowledge of the structure of all three levels of government, knowledge of how these influence the provision of youth and related family services, and the nature of youth work, and knowledge for enskilling young people in developing policy recommendations and related solutions for the problems faced by youth;
- an integrated knowledge of the youth affairs field based on a collaborative, inter-agency framework, one that incorporates education, training, employment, culture, welfare, health, justice, policing, legal matters (including the relationship between youth workers,

young people and the legal system), and working with families and communities;

- interpersonal and communication skills, including group work and counselling skills, placement skills (for employment or accommodation), community organisation and development skills, and networking skills;
- skills for administration and organisational management (including private sector practices), covering issues of financial management (program budgeting, budget planning, marketing, tendering and accountability); and human resource management (particularly staff supervision, review and performance);
- research skills for obtaining and producing information, including strategies for enskilling young people in the conduct of participatory research, and
- advocacy and socio-political education. (Maunder and Broadbent, 1995, pp. 25-26; Alder and Sandor, 1990; Denholm and Ling, 1990, p.26; Eckersley, 1989, p. 8; Vick, 1993, p. 34; VVWte, Omeiczuk and Underwood, 1991, p. 50)

Curriculum development for youth worker education will need to consider these aims and, in addition, will need to consider the recently published youth worker competencies (Community Services and Health Training Australia with the National Youth Sector Training Unit, 1996) and design degrees and diplomas

within the parameters of the Australian Qualifications Framework. The nationally accredited, core curriculum for youth workers is published in the National Competency Standards for the Youth Sector and is now standard practice, is framed in terms of the principles of competency-based training which emphasise learning outcomes. Work on the development of an Advanced Diploma is supported by the Australian Youth Policy Action Coalition, and is currently being undertaken by Victoria University of Technology for offering in the distance mode.

#### **EDUCATION FACULTIES' ROLE IN YOUTH WORKER EDUCATION**

Education faculties which become involved in the field of youth work could reasonably be expected to construct appropriate, useful and testable theoretical frameworks (see Cooper & White, 1994; also see Knight, 1991) which are designed to prepare youth workers for their career and which draw on recognised, relevant educational theory. A theoretically founded, project based approach to the professional education of youth workers has the potential to contribute to the production of knowledge, theory, policy and practice in youth work (Cooper & White, 1994; also see Knight, 1991). The following suggestions seek to concretise ideas concerning education faculties role in the professional education of youth workers and the development of youth studies as a field of endeavour.

First, education faculties could develop diplomas and degrees which meet the requirements of the National Competency Standards for the Youth Sector using theoretically sound educational

principles. Educational expertise, research and theories could be utilised in curriculum design and development and in the evaluation of those courses.

Second, education faculties could coordinate the implementation of specially designed youth worker degrees and diplomas using a multidisciplinary focus. Courses which meet the requirements of the National Competency Standards could be delivered from existing courses offered in education, business and social work faculties. This multidisciplinary perspective has the advantage of providing graduates with a broad-based range of skills and experiences required by youth workers in their future places of employment. In addition, the multidisciplinary perspective models the interagency focus which graduates are likely to encounter in the field. Modelling the collaborative approach in presentation of course content emphasises, for course participants, the overlapping needs of young people and the team approach required in which various types of professions work together to address those needs (Arella, 1993). For example, marginalised young people experiencing psychiatric problems, substance abuse problems, or poverty are also in need of basic educational skills, vocational training and political literacy and youth workers will need to work with other in assisting the young people with the resolution of their problem. Therefore, to model this type of team approach in course presentation seems to mirror the reality of the workplace context.

Third, education faculties could provide youth workers with a language to analyse and critique the institutionalised discourses by which young people are positioned (eg. in government policies, the mass media and the literature of the profession) and through which inequitable power relations operate (Sercombe, 1992; Vick, 1993) as it is to provide them with appropriate training skills. Such an analysis is critical and foundational if social change is to occur (Giddens, 1994, p. 172). For example, each of the orientations to the professional education of youth workers suggested by Cooper and White (1994), namely treatment, reform, advocacy and empowerment, assume various conceptions of youth, youth problems, and the type of intervention required to rectify those problems. An analysis of these assumptions and their consequent proposed interventions would have considerable impact on the perspective with which youth and youth work were viewed. Core units in the course could be oriented towards the development of reflective practitioners able to draw upon theoretical, empirical and experiential knowledge to undertake youth policy advocacy and/or to develop youth empowerment programs (Browder, 1995). Such a change-oriented agenda would be in accord with the uncertainties borne of the local/global restructurings of these 'new times', and education faculties are well suited to this endeavour.

Finally, education faculties are well placed to initiate, develop, and coordinate the implementation of youth worker courses since teachers are youth workers who have the greatest

degree of contact with all youth. That is, all youth are required to attend school until the age of 15 years, many attend until aged 18 years, and as such contact teachers on a daily basis. As such, teachers are youth workers by profession. By contrast, many professional youth workers have contact only with those individuals who have been referred to a youth agency. It is conceivable that many of the youth in need of the services of a youth worker may never be linked with that worker. Therefore, teachers' role in the prevention of some youth problems, support in other youth problems and referral of youth to the most appropriate youth agencies is an extension of their current academic role. In preparing teachers for this extended role, education faculties may add youth studies as a new field of endeavour to their existing programs, and coordinate the delivery of youth worker programs based on a multidisciplinary, interagency model.

### **TEACHERS AS YOUTH WORKERS**

Traditionally teachers have not been perceived as youth workers. However, a large proportion of teachers' clientele are youth who are at risk or who may become at risk if appropriate preventive measures are not implemented. Thus, the changing social and cultural environment which characterises modern Australian society and schooling has implications for teachers. For example, teachers are no longer able to confine themselves to an academic or teaching role and neglect the social and affective factors impinging on those clients. In the same way as youth services agencies have not always placed such educational work at the core of their youth treatment,

intervention, prevention or support programs, educational facilities have not always recognized the welfare of their clients as part of their academic role. The overlapping and multiple needs of young people discussed above suggest that education faculties might usefully broaden the scope of their professional education provisions, and collaborate with social work and other faculties in the interests of youth and youth workers. Arella's (1993) observations are particularly pertinent in this regard:

“The dramatically changing cultural environment, combined with the multiple service needs of growing numbers of young people require new institutional approaches to providing alternative environments in which adolescents can make healthy transitions to adulthood” (p. 291)

Adding a welfare role to the academic role of teachers broadens the traditional definition of a youth worker. On one level, the traditional youth worker receives referrals from doctors, teachers and other professionals working with youth, while on another level, teachers have a specific role in youth work. This role includes the identification of youth experiencing problems which have the potential to escalate and place the youth at risk, the early referral for early intervention by the relevant professional or community agency, and education of youth in various ways to prevent common problems confronting the youth of today. In order to competently discharge their expanded role as a youth worker, teachers need an expanded knowledge base in relation to the availability of

services, roles of various professionals, and the development of listening skills.

In preparing to include youth work as part of their brief, education faculties, therefore, have two levels of youth workers for whom to design courses. At the first level, education faculties may undertake a coordination role in bringing together the expertise required by professional youth workers which is traditionally located in business, education and social work faculties. At the second level, prospective teachers enrolled in faculties of education may be introduced to teachers' role in youth work, a role which complements that of the professional youth worker and which includes teachers as collaborator with youth workers who work together in the best interests of their common clients.

It is recognised that education faculties alone do not have all the expertise required to implement youth worker education. Neither does any other single faculty since youth work is multidisciplinary profession by nature. However, education faculties are well placed to undertake the coordination and inclusion of youth work in their courses since educators have the greatest amount of contact with youth as clients than any other profession. For example, more youth attend school than are referred to youth agencies. Also, education is more generic than any other profession and has the potential to resolve some problems such as drug education, mental health education, financial education, legal rights education. In addition, education has shown that it



is comfortable with developing and implementing courses using a competency-based format.

### **COURSE DEVELOPMENT**

Given the foregoing criteria and issues, the core units undertaken at a tertiary institution in addition to the requirements of the National Competency Standards might address, for example, the following issues (see Browder, 1995):

- a vision statement, accounting for the students' developing awareness and identity as a youth advocate and empowerment worker;
- a needs analysis, focusing on the social, cultural (including educational, ethical) and political economy of youth;
- the development of an advocated policy statement and/or empowerment program proposal, with supporting argumentation based on relevant research findings and informed professional opinion;
- a policy/program implementation plan with an explanation as to its feasibility, administrative and otherwise, and
- a policy assessment and impact plan indicating the procedures for monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes.
- The capstone to the students' studies could be the presentation and defence of their youth affairs policy and/or program before a group of their academic and professional peers as part of an annual youth forum. With regard to mode of

delivery for such a course the Queensland Community Services and Health Industries Training Council (1995) has argued that:

- “relevant accredited training is of little use if not available nor can be accessed by workers in the industries. As demonstrated by the demand for courses offered through TAFE Open Learning Institute, workers will embrace flexible, modularised, self-paced training. Industry has also stressed the importance of on-the-job” (p. 91).
- The changes in teacher education, including modes of delivery, have been significant enough to warrant consideration of the alternative approach implied here. Specifically, the Queensland Community Services and Health Industries Training Council (1995) has recommended professional education provisions for youth workers that:
  - "fit around" work schedules and family commitments;
  - are modularised, short courses which articulate with other short courses to form units which articulate together to form awards;
  - incorporate experiential learning and on-the-job course delivery to ensure the development of relevant workplace competencies;

- offer self-paced modules to cater for different rates of learning, and allow for multiple entry and exit points and include processes for recognition of prior learning; and
- explore opportunities for cross-fertilisation of skills and knowledge through networking among metropolitan, regional, remote and isolated. (p. 91)

Teacher educators need to work in teams together with personnel from faculties such as business, law, psychology, and social work and in addition, collaborate with youth service agencies and other universities, to make such a course as outlined above successful. The selection of course content for the education of youth workers needs to be done on a well-informed basis and must be current and relevant. Barnett (1995, p. 84) suggests that such team work should involve selecting team members who possess the necessary skills, are motivated to contribute to the research and teaching involved in the course, and have the ability to collaborate; establishing clear and elevating goals; developing clear roles and accountabilities for team members; making decisions on relevant, fair and accurate information; team members who are able and willing to develop mutual trust so they can focus on tasks, use their time efficiently, develop open lines of communication, and take over from one another when necessary; team members who are willing and able to access human and material resources, and team members who are given public recognition for their contributions.

A research strategy that could be used for such course development work might involve the following features:

- the identification of the range of current approaches to the professional education of youth workers;
- a broad based review of the relevant research and scholarly literature to establish trends in and prevailing constructions of youth and youth affairs;
- the review of relevant State and Federal Government youth affairs and related policies, including the competency- based training curriculum for youth workers, to establish prospective developments in this field;
- the identification of key Federal, State and regional youth affairs organisations, including leading youth-run organisations, and the interviewing of key representatives;
- negotiations with other co-providers about possibilities for joint-venture provision;
- the organisation and conduct of a forum on youth affairs where leading teacher educators, youth affairs workers and representatives of key youth organisations present their perspectives on the professional education needs of youth workers, explicitly addressing key

aspects of course development requirement;

- data from these consultations and negotiations would be collated along with information from related sources in order to develop a course proposal;
- the development of a course that can be accessed by computer-based information technologies.

Many of the issues, principles, elements, mode of delivery, teaching approach, and research function described above have been included in the National Youth Worker Competencies (Community Services and Health Training Australia with the National Youth Sector Training Unit, 1996). These competencies should be seen as the minimum core course requirements. The remaining principles which do not appear in the National Competencies and which generally involve analysis, critique, of the philosophical issues of youth work, could form the basis of the remainder of the requirements of youth worker preparation which also provide youth workers with tertiary qualifications.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has described some of the problems surrounding the education of youth workers, the special design features required by youth work programs, and the potential role of education faculties in the education of youth workers. An expanded role for teachers for collaboration with other professionals in youth work also was proposed. It was noted that education faculties are ideally placed to coordinate the initial educational

needs of youth workers, and to prepare teachers to collaborate with other agencies in responding to the needs of youth. Consequently, it was proposed that a role for teacher education exists in the design and development of courses for the initial educational needs of youth workers, to coordinate the implementation of those courses, and to prepare both prospective and practising teachers for a role in responding to youth problems. This extended role for education faculties is new and addresses the changing societal and environmental factors currently facing today's young people.

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