The youth work career: Exploring long-term careers of professional youth workers in Western Australia

John Sutcliffe
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The Youth Work Career: Exploring Long-term Careers of Professional Youth Workers in Western Australia

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Social Science

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School of Arts and Humanities
Edith Cowan University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore the meaning and experiences of the long-term careers of youth workers. This study selected a Western Australian sample group of 10 degree-qualified youth workers who had graduated between 1990 and 1999 and had experienced careers in youth work spanning 20 years. The existing literature pertaining to long-term youth work careers was sparse in certain aspects, which established the primary need for the research focus. The related literature was found to represent a negative image of youth work as a career. Youth work was considered lacking in professional identity and was most commonly characterised by burnout, temporary employment prospects and an occupational pathway to other related professions. The deficits and barriers to retention and career longevity prompted the question: How does this explain those individuals who have forged a long-term career in youth work?

Two research methods were used in this study: phenomenological inquiry, to seek the shared experiences of the youth work career, and grounded theory methods, to examine the extent to which the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model could be applied to improve understanding of youth work as a long-term career. The study found important differences in comparison with findings of the existing literature. Participants described careers characteristic of continuous employment; sustainability through supportive connections; longevity through leadership opportunities; and a diverse fusion of opportunities, variety and flexibility in roles undertaken. In stark contrast with the existing literature, these findings led to the development of a synthesised provisional model of the long-term youth work career.

Key contributions to knowledge from the study include a constructive representation of the long-term youth work career, with significant factors of longevity being continuous employment, leadership opportunities, diversity in roles and workplaces, and supportive connections. Appraisal of career theory also resulted in suggested revisions to the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model. A provisional model of the long-term youth work career was developed, which was synthesised from the findings and key discussion points of this study. The provisional model reflected the youth work career as a
knowledge-based profession, a distinct practice, a sustainable profession and a long-term career prospect. The findings also have potential implications for the youth field, particularly individual and organisational ethical practice, the importance of workplace and role flexibility, the inclusivity of youth work contexts, and the prioritisation of professional supervision and mentoring.

**Key words**—Youth work, long-term career, youth work qualifications and training, youth work practice, profession.
DECLARATION

1. I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:
   
   i. incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
   
   ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or
   
   iii. contain any defamatory material;

Signed:

[Signature]

Date: 5 February 2021
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you to my wife Sarah for your support and understanding when my life has been well out of balance at times over the past two years, and our two sons for reminding me of what is most important. You keep me smiling and grounded. To my extended family members, I am extremely grateful for your continued encouragement and support of my academic and career pursuits; I could not have completed this project without you all.

To the 10 participants of this study, I cannot thank you enough. It has been a privilege to hear your stories and journeys throughout your life and youth work careers, and I thank you for your insights and honesty, which have allowed me to complete this important research. I have reflected upon your experiences as youth workers throughout this research project, and I wondered—if each of you had positively influenced the lives of five people per week on average throughout your careers, what kind of positive change might that look like? The answer was 65,000 lives: what an amazing legacy.
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>CYSS</td>
<td>Community Youth Support Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPET</td>
<td>Job Placement, Employment and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEQSA</td>
<td>Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>vocational education and training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YWA</td>
<td>Youth Worker’s Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMCA</td>
<td>Young Men’s Christian Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>YACWA</td>
<td>Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia</td>
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A small number of studies on youth work careers have been conducted, either nationally, for example, Maunders and Broadbent (1995), Taylor et al. (1991) and White et al. (1991b), or internationally, for example, Barford and Whelton (2010), Harland et al. (2005), Huebner et al. (2003), Keller (2007), Savicki (2002) and Thompson and Shockley (2013). Of the studies that do exist, none has sought to capture the shared experiences of the long-term youth work career, and there have been no studies conducted in the twenty-first century in Western Australia concerning youth work as a career. The gap in the literature presents a clear research problem: what does a long-term career in youth work entail? To address this significant gap in the literature, this thesis poses the central question, ‘What does it mean to have a long-term career in youth work?’ This chapter outlines the research purpose and the importance of the study and provides a background on youth work in Western Australia, including a preliminary definition of youth work.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore the long-term careers of professional youth workers in Western Australia. The intention of this exploration was to understand the essence and characteristics that comprise the long-term youth work career in Western Australia as a phenomenon in and of itself. Uncovering factors of career longevity contribute to understanding how youth workers are retained in the field. Further to this exploration was the examination of the phenomenon through the lens of the self-concept theory of career development. The central question of this research was, ‘What does it mean to have a long-term career in youth work?’ From this central question, further research questions were developed to develop a phenomenological understanding of the long-term youth work career, as well as appraise the self-concept theory of career development in relation to understanding this phenomenon further.
Importance of the Research

The findings of this study provide insights into the common factors that motivate and support individuals to pursue and maintain long-term careers in youth work. This will be useful for youth work education, for youth work employers and organisations, for youth work management and supervision practices, for youth work professional associations, and for the development of career-oriented youth work education and training curricula. The importance of this research lies in its examination of youth work as a distinct career beyond notions of burnout, entry-level employment, and reliance on goodwill and altruism, which have been historically linked to the occupation of youth work (Borden et al., 2004; Maunders & Broadbent, 1995; Savicki, 2002; Taylor, 1991; Thompson & Shockley, 2013).

It is anticipated that the findings from this research will provide clarity for those considering youth work as a viable long-term career path. The study ascertains how youth workers sustain their careers, outlining the opportunities and benefits for prospective entrants into youth work. Moreover, it identifies the factors that influence retention that have not been examined to date (White et al., 1991b). These insights will also be important for youth work curricula and will provide educators with further knowledge of the factors that result in the retention of long-term youth workers. Youth work courses can draw from the findings of this research to enhance their curricula to provide students with a clearer understanding of what the long-term youth work career entails.

The youth work field will potentially draw benefits from this research in relation to professional development and supervision practices. Understanding the factors that mitigate attrition and promote retention will be vital to the ongoing development of youth workers within organisations. It is anticipated that the research findings will provide useful material for organisations to embed into their professional development and supervision of staff in the pursuit of fostering retention and employment satisfaction.

Youth Work in Western Australia

The number of youth workers in Western Australia is difficult to ascertain accurately because of the limitations of available data. The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) identified 1,439 services related to the youth category state-wide (YACWA, 2019). Popular
social media pages Youth Work WA and West Australian Youth Workers (formerly known as Perth Youth Workers) have 4,374 followers and 1,400 followers, respectively, many of whom are professional youth workers employed in the field. According to census data from 2016, the Western Australian occupational category of ‘Community and Personal Service Workers’ was calculated at 122,890 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016). Based on these sources of data, it is estimated that the number of youth workers in Western Australia sits conservatively within the range of 3000 to 5000 employees across various service types, predominantly within homelessness, local government and education settings. Youth work in Western Australia is conducted within government and non-government organisations, has an established higher education degree program, a professional body (Youth Work WA), a code of ethics and a peak body for youth affairs (YACWA). Youth work in Western Australia is a well-established field; however, diversity and debate exist because of the government–non-government divide, and there are ongoing differences of opinion and perspective regarding what constitutes youth work and, in particular, youth work as a profession. These elements are discussed further throughout the literature review in chapter 2.

Since the introduction of youth work associations in Western Australia and Victoria in 2006 and 2008, respectively, the move towards professionalisation has progressed in these states (Youth Work WA, 2020; YWA, 2020). Cooper (2013) discussed the appropriate fit of professionalisation of youth work in post-welfare Australian society within new public management practices: “In the Australian context a traditional professional association is culturally appropriate, is well suited to the Australian institutional context, and fills important institutional gaps” (p. 120). Since the formation of professional bodies, many Australian states have developed or adopted youth work codes of ethics.

It is important to outline the main areas of employment for youth work practitioners in Western Australia in order to place the profession in context. Prior to professionalisation in Victoria, Bessant and Webber (1999) stated, “there is tremendous occupational diversity within the youth sector, and quite often it is not clear where the boundaries are between youth work and other human service work” (p. 1). Taylor et al.’s (1991) Western Australian study discussed how youth work roles could be distinguished from other human service professions. Although diversity still exists within the youth work field, most employment opportunities in Western Australia exist within three areas of service delivery: youth accommodation services, local government youth services, and youth work in secondary schools and alternative education.
programs. The evolution of youth work in Western Australia is contextually distinct, given the formation of a professional association, qualification standards and access, and key employment areas for youth workers.

The socio-political environment has also affected the evolution of youth work nationally and internationally. Since the mid to late 1990s, the development of new public management approaches within neoliberal ideology has played a significant role in shaping social service delivery in accordance with risk mitigation and organisational operations (Connell et al., 2009; de St Croix, 2018; Spence, 2004). Taylor et al. (2018) explained this impact succinctly: “neoliberal ideology is instrumental and reductive … and, as we shall see, youth workers are led by outcomes” (p. 85). Mirrored by Cullen and Bradford (2018) are the relationships between outcome-based accountability and risk focused youth policy and funding arrangements. The adoption of economic rationalisation as a funding framework has resulted in a shift from recurrent government funding models prior to the 1990s towards competitive tendering funding models from the mid-1990s and beyond (Bessant, 1997; Cooper, 2018). Philanthropic funding and small grants, such as from Lotterywest, provide supplementary funding, particularly for not-for-profit organisations. In Australia, this has resulted in many organisations implementing results-based accountability frameworks of measurement and evaluation (Cooper, 2013; Keevers et al., 2012; Ord, 2013; Sercombe, 2015). In turn, this has led to tensions between numerically output-based funding expectations and the process-driven practice of youth work, particularly within smaller organisations (de St Croix, 2016; Houlbrook, 2011). How youth work is defined within Western Australia is reflective of these broad factors, all of which were important when framing the intent and methodology of this research.

**Defining Youth Work**

Defining the boundaries and meaning of youth work was contextually important for this research. Youth Work WA adopted the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition definition of youth work in 2013, which constituted the baseline definition for this study since it was conducted in a Western Australian context. The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (2013) provided the following national definition of youth work:

Youth work is a practice that places young people and their interests first. Youth work is a relational practice, where the youth worker operates alongside the
young person in their context. Youth work is an empowering practice that advocates for and facilitates a young person’s independence, participation in society, connectedness and realisation of their rights. (p. 3)

While this definition forms the basis of understanding the youth work profession in Australia, Cooper (2018) expanded on this definition by highlighting the aspects of informal education and acting with the highest degree of integrity as key to a meaningful definition of youth work. Jeffs and Smith (1988, 1990, 1999) foreshadowed the importance of informal education, explaining how youth workers focus on both the welfare and education of young people rather than welfare only. This background provided the basis for understanding and defining youth work for this study in unison with qualification standards and the professional status of youth work. The definition used for this study is reflective of the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, with its emphasis on how intentional informal education is integral to the process of youth work (Batsleer, 2008; Flowers, 1998; Smith, 1999). More discussion of the conceptual understandings of youth work is presented in the literature review chapter, under ‘Theorising Youth Work’.
CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

A review of the existing literature found no recent research concerning the careers of youth workers. Taylor et al. (1991) conducted a study into the career pathways of youth work graduates from Edith Cowan University in Perth. Meanwhile, White et al. (1991b) surveyed over one hundred youth workers in Western Australia, with a range of qualifications and experiences in the sector. Similarly, Maunders and Broadbent (1995) investigated graduates’ early careers from Coburg College and Philip Institute in Melbourne. These studies constitute the only targeted discussions of youth work careers in Australia.

This literature review first examines the theory of youth work to establish the knowledge foundation that underpins the role of the youth worker in society. The history of youth work is then outlined, along with definitions and models of practice, culminating in a conceptual understanding of youth work. This understanding guided the research design and is referred to in the discussion chapter to illustrate the research findings. Second, youth work education and training are discussed conceptually to provide context to the youth work preparation and qualifications. The third and most sizeable element of this literature review explores the existing literature pertaining to youth work as a career. This section of the literature review is organised into six key themes using a thematic literature review process (Ridley, 2012). Finally, the literature on youth work ethics, the sociology of professions and career theory is reviewed. These elements finalise the literature review by positioning the study’s scope, leading into the research design.

This review includes academic literature on youth work education, burnout and stress, staff development and the professionalisation of youth work. These areas of youth work were reviewed given the scant research available pertaining to youth work as a career: hence the need to review concepts that relate to the core phenomenon in question. It is important to note that the literature examined included research studies, journal articles and opinion pieces. Empirical research studies are prioritised where possible in this literature review to analyse academically rigorous research first. Analytical discussion articles are prioritised before opinion pieces, since they are anchored by conceptual and systematic academic reference points, whereas opinion pieces are less academically grounded. Many of the articles analysed were from a North
American context of youth care, youth development and youth mentoring, which differs from Australian youth work parameters regarding professionalisation and roles (Fusco, 2018; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Many of the North American youth development roles concern after-school activities for young people, which are not highly transferable to a Western Australian youth work context, for example, see the studies of Barford and Whelton (2010), Savicki (2002) and Thomas (2002). Moreover, much of the Australian literature reviewed was written in the 1990s, posing further limits of transferability, for example, Taylor et al. (1991) and White et al. (1991b).

Theorising Youth Work

A review of the literature presents historical, ideological and sociological interpretations and offerings in relation to theorising youth work. It is necessary to explore the diverse perspectives on youth work to arrive at a pragmatic foundation of understanding youth work in a contemporary context, starting with historical considerations before discussing youth work definitions and models in more depth.

History of Youth Work

The youth category in a Western context is historically understood as a product of industrial society, with the emergent scientific discourse of adolescence resulting in policies and institutions affecting young people (Arnett, 2006; Epstein, 2007, 2010; Graham, 2004; Moshman, 2009; Musgrove, 1964; Springhall, 1983; White & Wilson, 1991). Exclusion of young people from the labour market through protective factory Acts throughout the nineteenth century resulted in young people becoming street present, considered too old for school and too young for the workplace (Muncie, 1984). Responses to industrial and societal change in the mid-nineteenth-century United Kingdom have often been considered the genesis of youth work. Responses came in the form of the voluntary church-led ‘child savers’ concerned for the welfare of young people and recreation-based intervention to kerb the undesirable behaviours of young people from working class backgrounds observed by those from the emergent middle class (Bessant et al., 1998; Jeffs, 2018; Maunders, 1984; Platt, 1969). The age of mandatory education increased incrementally throughout the twentieth century, normalising the functional role of young people as conforming citizens with well-developed moral characters, in line with middle class values (Barcan, 1988; Bessant, 1991; Bowie, 2005; Roberts, 1983).
Youth work in Australia drew strong parallels with the British experience, with labour trends in Australia including significant agricultural industry and the mid-nineteenth-century gold rush. Decent wages resulting from labour shortages saw the emergence of the young Australian ‘larrikin’, with concerns from the middle and upper classes about behaviours deemed immoral paralleling the British construction of youth (Bessant et al., 1998). In Western Australia, the experiences of Aboriginal young people included being employed in agricultural settings; however, exploitation of many Aboriginal people was significant during this time, and payment by ration rather than wage was common (Haebich, 1992). Early responses to the perceived immoral behaviour of young people largely followed the diversionary recreation model, which saw youth groups such as the Eureka Youth League, the Scouts and the YMCA established in Australia in the early to mid-twentieth century. Youth work in Australia was focused on diversionary recreation and producing positive citizens throughout most of the twentieth century, with policies of ‘street clearing’ being introduced and maintained (Maunders, 1984; White, 1990). In Western Australia, the YMCA was established in the early twentieth century, focusing on gymnasium and camping programs running out of Hay Street, Perth, and similarly in Kalgoorlie and the Eastern Goldfields (YMCAWA, 2020). Drawing from child migrant schemes, Fairbridge Farm School was established in 1912 in the rural town of Pinjarra. The school sought to educate and raise ‘orphaned and underprivileged’ children from the United Kingdom to develop them into agricultural workers for the Australian labour market (Fairbridgekids, 2019).

Youth work turned towards welfare and social development in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, when recurrent government funding models provided increased stability for youth services focused largely on accommodation and employment. This stage of youth work evolution is regarded as the early shift from Australian youth work as voluntary and recreation based towards a qualified and paid profession (Mason, 1987; Maunders, 1999; White et al., 1991a).

The Homelessness Persons Act of 1974 instigated funding for youth refuges, with a service focus on shelter staffed by voluntary live-in adults to support homeless young people. The nationally funded Supported Accommodation Assistance Program developed in the 1980s provided more stable funding for youth homelessness services and shifted from a reliance on voluntarism to paid employees (MacKenzie & Coffey, 2012). Moving into the 1990s, the Burdekin report (Burdekin & Carter, 1989) propelled the issue of youth homelessness beyond
simply shelter and housing towards one of human rights that called for a more holistic program design. Services developed into a range of specialist crisis, transitional, medium-term and long-term youth homelessness programs funded primarily by the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (Cooper & Brooker, 2020). The 2008 white paper titled *The Road Home* furthered youth homelessness policy by developing a youth-specific strategy focused on homelessness prevention, support, exit planning and consolidation once young people progressed out of homelessness (Lazzari, 2008).

Employment policy and services for young people also became a priority of federal funding. The Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS) and the Job Placement, Employment and Training (JPET) program were significant in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. The CYSS sought to assist young people through social connection, employment skills training and voluntary community participation, while the Commonwealth Employment Service focused on job seeking (Koller et al., 1980). The CYSS therefore provided programs that young people could attend to prepare for job seeking and address other extenuating circumstances in a holistic manner. The JPET program was implemented in the early 1990s recession era as a response to rising youth unemployment and the societal need for young people to be meaningfully engaged in employment or training programs, if not in formal education (Vu et al., 2012). Employment-focused schemes and programs such as the CYSS and JPET became important ancillary services for existing homelessness programs, leading to integration and partnership between the two areas of service provision. This can be seen in contemporary Western Australia with the implementation of projects such as Foyer (Steen & Mackenzie, 2017).

Youth work in Australia, and particularly Western Australia, has been largely undocumented in recent times. Much of the existing literature points to the need for research and documentation regarding this history in order for contemporary youth work to adequately define and distinguish itself from related professions (Bowie, 2004; Daughtry, 2011). Youth work in contemporary Western Australia has developed into a diverse mix of the early underpinnings of diversionary recreation programs along with the more professionalised forms of accommodation for and the social development and education of young people in various government and non-government contexts.
Definitions and Models of Youth Work

Defining youth work has historically been challenging. The literature points to a diversity of contexts and settings along with ambiguous practices in youth work as core points of contention (Wood et al., 2014). Key points of contention that have been debated in attempts to define youth work include the values and ideologies that inform youth work practice, boundaries with allied occupations such as social work and teaching, and voluntarism versus paid occupation. Geldens and Bourke (2006) reflected on how youth work is a “career that is continually debated and redefined” (p. 33). This section examines a range of youth work definitions and models to draw out a background understanding of youth work as a philosophy and a practice.

Drawing from a historical context, Smith (1988) outlined a model of traditions in youth work, with movement-based social and leisure approaches contrasting with movement-based child saving, character building, politicising and religious conversion constituting the early traditions in youth work. Smith (1988) considered a third tradition, one of professionalised youth work concerned with personal and social development and the welfare of young people. These traditions provide some foundations for youth work; however, they are also contested because of their adherence to social and functional conformity (Cooper, 2018).

When attempting to define youth work, Smith (1999) proposed that the approach must be, “looking to the education, and more broadly, the welfare of young people” (p. 2). This is most classically found in detached youth work, in which the power relations between young person and youth worker move towards equilibrium (Daughtry, 2011; Sercombe, 1998; Young, 1999). Informal relationship building with an emphasis on voluntary participation is commonly agreed upon in the youth work literature (Rodd & Stewart, 2009; Smith, 1999; Spence et al., 2006). Coupled with principles of emancipating young people in an effort to promote overall wellbeing and human flourishing, informal education is an intentional purpose and method of youth work and one of its distinctive features (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Cooper, 2018; Ord, 2008; Smith, 2013). Models of youth work practice are built upon these core principles, with socio-political perspectives expanding the conceptual understanding of youth work beyond mere definition.

Another early interpretation of youth work was offered by Butters and Newell (1978) and was informed by “Critical pedagogy, radical social work, and Marxian social action” (Cooper, 2018, p. 5) to establish youth work within educational sociology. While their original descriptors were historically rigid, the work of Butters and Newell (1978) prompted further discussion on the
importance of informal education and Freirean dialogue as both process and purpose within youth work (Batsleer, 2008; Cooper, 2012; McInerney, 2009; Tiffany, 1994).

The work of Hurley and Treacy (1993) offered a sociological youth work model in which regulation and conformity contrasted with calls for radical change. This model is contextually applicable in Ireland owing to the non-government provision of service delivery; however, it is not wholly transferable to the Australian context where youth work exists in both government and non-government arrangements (Cooper, 2018;). Nonetheless, Hurley and Treacy’s (1993) model can be useful in organisations that have the capacity and purpose to champion radical approaches to functionalist and conservative policies of regulation and conformity, such as the YACWA. North American approaches to youth work are more in line with a youth development approach underpinned by positive psychology and character building with a focus on resilience (Sanders et al., 2015). Paralleling elements of Smith’s (1988) model of traditions, the youth development approach presents potentially re-packaged views of deviance and deficiency concerning young people. Also developed in the North American context is Brendtro’s (2006) ‘circle of courage’ model, which is grounded in the anthropology of Native American culture, along with Bronfenbrenner’s model of social ecology (Brendtro, 2006; Brendtro & Brokenleg, 2009). While also drawing from positive psychology (Brendtro et al, 2005), Brendtro’s model differs because of the context of Native American culture in which young people are included and valued within society more than in contemporary Western societies. The latter has been influential and useful in the Australian context, particularly in formal education settings (Van Bockern & McDonald, 2012). The circle of courage has also been an appropriate model within some New Zealand (Cooper & Baxter, 2019) and South African (Coetzee, 2005) youth work contexts.

Drawing on the theory of social ecology and elements of humanistic psychology, it is commonly agreed within Australian literature that youth work holds working with young people holistically within their own context as a central axiom (Bessant et al., 1998; Cooper, 2018; Spence et al., 2006; White et al., 1991a). Included in holism and context is the political environment within which youth workers engage young people—a consideration that was not discussed in youth work theory and models until Cooper and White’s (1994) political models of youth work in Australia. Turning to the full gamut of political ideology, the political models of youth work provide six perspectives and approaches that both reflect and guide youth policy as well as youth work practice.

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Smith (1988) observed that “it is helpful to think of there being competing and different forms of youth work rather than a single youth work with commonly agreed characteristics” (p. 51). Cooper (2018) echoed this perspective by proposing a conceptual rather than definitional understanding of youth work: “I have suggested that youth work is a pluralistic occupation” (p. 14). Skott-Myhre and Skott-Myhre (2018) also discussed the complexities of twenty-first century youth work, imploring youth workers to “not get stuck in any one register but to keep experimenting with the different elements in material and conceptual ways” (p. 178). For these reasons, the theoretical framework used to position youth work contextually in Western Australia for the purpose of this research was conceptual rather than definitional to allow for difference and diversity while still providing distinctiveness and clarity. First, central axioms that draw from definitions and international models that have been discussed were used as a basis for understanding youth work. Second, Cooper and White’s (1994) political models of youth work were utilised with a focus on reform, radical empowerment, and both radical and non-radical advocacy, given the organisational contexts of youth work in Western Australia.

The dominant areas of youth work operations and employment are found in the three contexts of homelessness, education and local government in Western Australia. Within these contexts the political models most drawn upon in youth work practice are those of radical and non-radical advocacy, radical empowerment and reform, which are also reflective of the overarching political two-party preferential model influencing social democratic to neoliberal policies (Cooper, 2013). The non-radical empowerment and treatment models are less prevalent; however, they are called upon where necessary and appropriate depending on circumstance and service type, usually on the periphery of the three dominant areas identified (for example, mental health specific services, sexual health services, substance treatment programs and juvenile justice programs). A specific framework of youth work used in this research is outlined in the research design chapter (chapter 3) under ‘Framework of Youth Work Theory’.

Youth Work Education and Training

Youth work education and training approaches have long been diverse. Debates about approaches have ranged from youth work as service, to youth work as a vocation, to youth work as profession. Wojecki (2007) explained how such diverse perspectives on what constitutes youth work have resulted in a range of philosophies that value life experience, experiential
learning, theoretical frameworks of knowledge and intrinsic values as legitimate arguments for valid youth work preparation. This has in turn resulted in training and qualification standards ranging from no formal training through to higher education qualifications.

Curriculum frameworks for vocational education and training (VET) courses are underpinned by the national training packages developed in the 1990s in pursuit of more transparent and transferable courses and qualifications (Marginson, 1997; Wheelahan & Carter, 2001). The national training package for youth work comprises key competencies initially developed by the National Youth Sector Training Unit in 1993, before being revised and endorsed between 1996 and 1998 (Corney & Broadbent, 2007). Falling under the umbrella of the community services and health industry, the youth work national training package includes shared competencies deemed as common within the industry, as well as specialised competency standards for youth work focused on service delivery (Broadbent, 1997, 1998). Youth work–specific diploma qualifications are available through a variety of VET institutions online. Western Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) offers youth work at certificate four level through a number of campuses via both on-campus and online study modes, as well as a youth work diploma through on-campus delivery.

Higher education curriculum standards are quality assured and regulated by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). Curricula are designed in accordance with the Higher Education Standards Framework developed by TEQSA, covering student engagement, learning, teaching, institutional quality and governance, and information management (TEQSA, 2015). The higher education youth work curriculum is driven by frameworks of values including social justice, equality and inclusion (Cooper, 2014; Corney, 2004a). Referring to value frameworks and socio-political theory, Bessant (2005) argued that this level of education is necessary for youth workers to effectively reduce “systemic disadvantages, discrimination, and unequal access” (p. 11). Current higher education level qualifications are offered in Perth and Melbourne at self-accrediting public universities. Tabor College, a private non-self-accrediting higher education institution in Adelaide and Perth, also offers both diploma- and degree-level courses in youth work. Edith Cowan University, based in Western Australia, offers a higher education bachelor of youth work, which students can study on-campus or online.
Youth work qualifications are driven by significantly differing underpinnings, depending on whether they are VET courses or higher education degrees. Certificate- and diploma-level qualifications are characterised by a focus on skills development and competency, whereas degree-level qualifications are driven by socio-political theory frameworks for understanding young people, in conjunction with providing practical skills (Cooper et al., 2014; Corney, 2004b). Bowie (2005) encapsulated the different approaches, explaining that VET courses “aimed at developing skilled technicians rather than ethical and reflective youth work practitioners” (p. 37). The development of higher education youth work qualifications was evident through the early 1990s, when advocates argued for the importance of contextualised knowledge rather than the VET approach of information provision and attainment of demonstrable skills (Bessant, 2004a; Bowie, 2004; Brooker, 2016; Cooper, 2013). In Western Australia, the development of Youth Work WA and the adoption of the Youth Work Code of Ethics have also driven qualification standards towards degree-qualified youth workers—a standard championed by many youth work writers (Barwick, 2006; Bessant, 2007; Cooper et al., 2014; Corney & Maunders, 2014; Emslie, 2013).

**Youth Work as a Career: Six Key Themes**

Six key themes were found within the national and international literature when exploring the youth work career. The six themes emerging from the existing literature were youth work as an entry-level occupation, motivations that retain youth workers, qualifications and training, perceptions of youth work as a distinct profession, barriers to retention and career progression, and professionalisation and standards. Table 2.1 provides a visual representation of the key academic literature used in this review and its organisation according to major themes.
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<td>Low status and respect</td>
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<td>• Thompson and Shockley (2013)</td>
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Theme 1: Youth Work as an Entry Level Occupation

An important theme drawn from the review of relevant literature was the perception of youth work as an interim employment prospect (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Hartje et al., 2008; Maunders & Broadbent, 1995; Thomas, 2002). While closely aligned with the theme of barriers to a career in youth work, this concept arose as an important perspective in its own right. Conceptually, the issue of youth work as a stepping-stone to other job prospects differs from that of barriers since it could be viewed as limiting or altering the youth work career rather than ceasing it altogether. Content from the existing literature suggests that this theme is related to the professional status of youth work and the qualifications required.

Maunders and Broadbent (1995) conducted research in an Australian context in which the career paths of 29 youth workers were tracked between 1979 and 1992 in Melbourne, Victoria. The sample group comprised a combination of diploma- and degree-qualified youth workers, of whom many had begun in program roles and progressed to service coordination. In the study, youth workers described how “youth work is a good steppingstone for a lot of directions” (p. 5). When further exploring this theme, the link with youth work professionalism became apparent. Youth work as a profession was perceived to have ebbed during the period of the study; it was discussed as part of the larger community sector rather than as an identifiable sector in and of itself. The work of Maunders and Broadbent (1995) also highlighted the impact of qualification and educational standards: “It is likely that those without vocational qualifications have shorter careers and pass through youth work on their way to other goals” (p. 11). The combination of professional identity and qualification standards provides legitimate drivers behind the concept of youth work as an interim, transitional career. Further Australian literature was consistent with the theme of youth work as an interim employment prospect, with Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew’s (2006) conceptual journal article on professional development for youth workers describing how “many youth workers regard working in youth programs as a ‘stepping-stone’ or supplemental job opportunity” (p. 2).

Throughout the literature it was apparent that youth work presented as both an entry-level position as well as a means of gaining experience in order to pursue related careers. Hartje, et al. (2008) found youth work to be “a temporary job that brings in needed income for college expenses, or a stepping-stone toward a career in a related field” (p. 2). Their study was conducted using an internet survey through self-reporting. This North American study examined how individual characteristics and competencies acted as predictors of intent to
remain in the field of working with young people in future (Hartje et al., 2008). While the intent to continue working with young people may not have been in question, the youth work role was seen to be an interim means of paid employment, whereby individuals could gain relevant experience as they continued their training and studies. Similarly, Thomas (2002) explained youth work in North America was “Considered by many as being an entry-level job that prepares an individual for a higher status professional position” (p. 14) in an article in the Journal of Child and Youth Care Work. The apparent phenomenon of youth work being viewed and treated as an interim job prospect intersected with other themes to be discussed further, including qualifications and standards, professionalisation and youth work as a distinct profession.

It is important to note how the context within the existing literature poses issues for current transferability. Maunders and Broadbent’s (1995) study was finalised 25 years prior to 2020 and well before the foundations of professional youth work associations were introduced. Furthermore, Maunders and Broadbent (1995) included diploma- and degree-qualified youth workers in their study, whereas this current study will be limited to youth work degree-qualified participants. Conducted in North America, where youth work is not professionalised, Hartje et al.’s (2008) study used a web-based survey as a means of data collection. Hartje et al. (2008) identified limitations with this method when they noted, “the findings of the study are based on self-report” (p. 14). The limited depth of rich qualitative data within the survey method along with the American context of youth work presents significant limitations to transferability of these findings to different demographics. The transferability of these findings may still be relevant in terms of the nature of the youth work role more generally; however, caution must be exercised given vast contextual differences in training and education standards between the time of the study and the present day.

Theme 2: Motivations and Retention

A theme pertaining to the careers of youth workers was that of motivations, the reasons that individuals entered the youth work profession and the factors promoting retention. The key motivators to enter and stay in the youth work profession related to the unique relationship that youth workers built with the young people they were supporting (Bouffard & Little, 2004; Taylor et al., 1991), along with a commitment to social justice fostering career satisfaction through altruistic service to others (Light, 2003). The final motivating factor found in the
literature was that of supportive organisational environments, including formal supervision, collegial support and mentoring (Hartje et al., 2008; Robertson, 1997; Thompson & Shockley, 2013).

An empirical study conducted by Taylor et al. (1991) in Western Australia explored the occupational outcomes of youth work graduates from Edith Cowan University between 1986 and 1988. Thirty-six participants were interviewed in questionnaire form, which focused on early career paths, how many graduates obtained employment and in what timeframe, and the obstacles faced by participants in the early stage of their careers. Taylor et al. (1991) found a common sentiment that “direct work with young people was challenging, rewarding, satisfying and meaningful work” (p. 17). This finding correlated with Bouffard and Little’s (2004) article that discussed professional development amongst after-school care workers in North America: “A critical link has been found to exist between youth outcomes and positive relationships with skilled staff” (p. 2). With the importance of the professional relationship between youth worker and young person being a fundamental and defining characteristic of the youth work profession, it is perhaps of little surprise that such motivators were emphasised.

The work of Light (2003) assessed the ‘health’ of the human services workforce in North America, with the only indicator adjudged ‘healthy’ by the author being the commitment and motivation of workers to serve others and their communities. The study used a random-sample survey to reach 1,213 individuals working with young people and families across a range of disciplines including welfare, youth services, employment and justice. Light (2003) found that the majority of participants “were highly motivated not just by interest in their work, but because they wanted to serve their clients and communities” (p. 15). Light’s (2003) study found all other measures of the state of this field to be either at risk or in a critical condition, further emphasising altruistic service as a crucial motivating factor for those employed in the human services sector. Bessant (2004a) extended this foundation, considering social justice and advocacy for young people as the core drivers of “professional virtues like altruism” (p. 20).

Further to the key motivator of working with young people being personally satisfying and meaningful, positive and supportive organisational environments represented additional factors of retention. Weng and McElroy’s (2012) research into organisational impacts on turnover surveyed 396 participants and discussed how staff were found to become emotionally invested in a program or organisation when provided with career goals through professional
development. Thompson and Shockley’s (2013) North American research used a case study methodology to explore how career ladders could improve the retention of youth workers in the field, finding a strong correlation between supportive workplace supervisors and job satisfaction. In a conceptual journal article on organisational values and commitment to staff development, Robertson (1997) proposed that “the likelihood of retaining qualified staff may be enhanced when the culture and climate experienced by employees embodies the stated values of the program” (p. 8).

Echoing the work of Robertson (1997) and Thompson and Shockley (2013), Hartje et al. (2008) found, “the more supervision, support, and voice in decision-making youth workers believe they have, the more likely they are to indicate an intention to continue working with youth … a supportive and inclusive work environment appears critical to staff retention” (p. 13). Included in the concept of a supportive work environment was the importance of peer-based learning and mentoring. This was supported by Walker’s (2003) North American journal article on youth development work, which stated, “youth workers have ‘voiced enthusiasm for work-related training’ and would prefer to get that training from people who work ‘in the trenches’ in either formal (e.g., university) or informal (e.g., on the job) settings” (p. 13).

The motivating factors of retention found within the existing literature were associated with the importance of the relationship with young people, elements of intrinsic values such as altruism and commitment to social justice, and the need for supportive organisational environments on a multitude of levels. Findings from the research and articles cited are limited in transferability because of the age of the research and the North American context in which most of the literature is set. Nevertheless, commitment to social justice and the unique relationship between youth worker and young person are both consistent with more contemporary Australian literature, as discussed in the ‘Theorising Youth Work’ section of this literature review. The question that is therefore posed concerns how important these factors are to the long-term youth work career in a contemporary Western Australian context.

**Theme 3: Qualifications and Training**

An examination of the level to which qualification standards are required and valued within the youth work field revealed important perspectives and some disagreement within the literature. The overarching theme of qualifications was commonly found within the existing literature, with research conducted exploring implications for career pathways, formal tertiary education
programs, ongoing professional development and internal organisational training practices. Thompson and Shockley (2013) found that “experiences in higher education result in job promotion and professional retention” (p. 447). Curry et al. (2010) supported this stance in their North American analytical journal article on the competence of those working with children and youth, describing the strategy of formal training for youth work retention as best practice. Bessant and Emslie (2014) discussed the importance of university-qualified youth workers in their conceptual journal article, critiquing the limits of human capital and competency-based youth work training, and arguing that critical reflective practice exists beyond these approaches. However, difference exists within the literature, and informal training from experienced co-workers was rated as highly important. Hartje et al.’s (2008) study “did not reveal that formal education or youth development-specific education were significant predictors of intent to continue working with youth” (p. 12). Rather, job-related training and learning from senior colleagues was found to be of greater importance within the study (Hartje et al., 2008).

In Australia, Windon (2018) interviewed eight youth workers from various backgrounds to explore their lived experiences of learning to become youth workers. Windon (2018) found that youth workers developed their practice through intentional reflection supported by professional supervision and collegial mentorship in the pursuit of best practice. Reflective practice involves more than simply learning on the job at a vocational level (Barnett & Coate, 2004); for example, Windon (2018) discussed how workplaces become relational learning spaces in the youth work field. Windon (2018) highlighted the need for further research into the impact of professional supervision within organisations in order to improve understanding of the reflective learning process within youth work.

Further analysis of Australian literature provided additional perspectives and nuances pertaining to specialisation within career paths. As identified by Bessant and Webber (1999), “A youth work degree may also be combined with another degree or a major. This combination is very attractive to many employees. It also provides workers with attributes that enable them to work more effectively with young people” (p. 8). Maunders and Broadbent (1996) further identified “the need for specific skills as workers moved into specialist sectors of work with youth such as health, training and case work” (p. 6). While both studies present an important perspective that existed within an Australian context, it must be noted that their findings occurred before the introduction of professional associations within the youth work field. White et al. (1991b) used a survey methodology with over 100 youth workers in Western Australia
and found early indications of higher education qualified youth workers in Western Australia experiencing longer retention periods in the profession than those with lower academic credentials. Cooper (2013) offered more recent contextual insight by analysing both functions and methods of institutions affecting youth work training: “the youth work content of youth work qualifications has declined since the early 1990s” (p. 119). Further examination of the link between formal training and the need or desire to specialise or combine qualifications would require consideration within the context of professionalisation in the twenty-first century.

An interesting concept was the need for, and benefits of, flexibility in educational delivery. As Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2006) explained, “professional development options have become increasingly diverse, reflecting the diverse paths people take to become youth workers” (p. 1). Online and after-hours methods of delivery were considered highly important by participants in the North American case study research conducted by Borden et al. (2004). The case study examined how the YouthNet program in Kansas could provide higher education credit for youth development workers in the field and what the benefits might be of these staff members engaging in formal youth development training. Findings from this study included the benefits of informal networks among other youth work students as well as not needing to relocate geographically to further their formal education. These perspectives were echoed by Thompson and Shockley (2013), who found youth work cohorts fostered a sense of belonging among participants studying via online delivery. Formal education was also found to enhance understandings of youth work–specific language, resulting in an increased sense of self-efficacy for some participants. As Bandura (1997) highlights, “This type of change typifies self-efficacy in which accomplishment encourages belief in one’s capacity at that task” (p. 450). Intersecting with the concepts of youth work as a distinct profession and youth work professionalisation, the qualifications’ theme is significant within the existing literature.

When examining the youth work career, it is apparent that further research is required to establish the role that formal qualifications play in retention and overall career experience. Furthermore, localised research is imperative, given much of the literature exists within North American contexts where qualifications in youth work are limited and education requirements are lower than those of the Australian youth work field.
How youth work is perceived and understood has subtle yet important implications when exploring youth work as a specific career path. Cooper (2018) described the 2009 In Defence of Youth Work movement as a campaign “to defend youth work as a distinctive educational practice founded on a voluntary relationship with young people and shaped by their agendas” (p. 5). With more distinctive understandings of youth work apparent in contemporary times, it is beneficial to explore how these understandings affect the lived experience of youth workers within the framework of careers.

A clear understanding of the youth work role may be further confused as a result of funding and program directives. As Borden et al. (2004) explained, “multiple funding streams employ a variety of job titles, such as outreach worker, prevention specialist, and youth leader” (p. 80). More recent Australian research also points to issues with defining youth work via funding sources: “it is not possible to define youth work by how it is funded … In Australia, for example, multiple federal and state government departments fund youth work” (Cooper, 2018, p. 4). The existing literature also reveals contention even when a role is defined as youth work, with disagreement pertaining to tasks performed by youth workers themselves (Huebner, et al., 2003). Borden et al. (2004) took this one step further by adding, “Youth workers frequently do not self-identify as youth workers” (p. 80). Further to this point, a study of youth work graduates in Northern Ireland found that youth work had diversified and broadened which created employment opportunities whilst also diluting the distinctiveness of youth work (Harland et al, 2005). Indeed, these findings represent contextual issues given the particular studies involved. Studies situated in North America exist within a youth work context of minimal educational standards and requirements, including a “lack of a nationally agreed-upon curriculum for youth development workers and the lack of an accrediting body” (Borden et al., 2004, p. 84). This may present issues of transferability within a Western Australian context, with further localised and current research being required.

Issues regarding perceptions of the youth work profession also exist externally. Barford and Whelton’s (2010) Canadian study on burnout among youth care workers emphasised how “Child and youth care workers have faced considerable difficulty gaining respect from society as well as other professionals” (p. 274). Focusing on the occurrence of burnout, Barford and Whelton’s study comprehensively measured the experiences of 94 participants across multiple agencies, using the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The Maslach Burnout Inventory assesses burnout from
the intersecting perspectives of work environment, individual personality factors and social support (Maslach et al., 1986). These findings were consistent with Savicki’s (2002) research on burnout in cross-cultural contexts. Using a convenience sample across 13 countries to explore the impact of the employment environment against individual coping mechanisms, Savicki (2002) drew similar conclusions: “This lack of respect has created a stigma around child and youth care work and has made it difficult to attract and retain qualified employees” (p. 161). While somewhat comparable, ‘child and youth care workers’ is a related field and not specifically concerned with youth work. Neither study incorporated Australian contexts of youth work.

**Theme 5: Barriers to Career Longevity**

The theme of barriers to a youth work career presents the largest area of research within the existing literature. Taylor et al. (1991) described an industry characterised by “low salaries, adverse working conditions, lack of professional status, and uncertain funding arrangements” (p. 5). The view of youth work characterised as a field of deficits is pervasive within the literature, with burnout and sector instability comprising the most dominant concepts (Quixley & Westhorp, 1985; Taylor et al., 1991).

The concept of burnout was discussed frequently within the literature and encompassed elements of staff turnover, personal and emotional effects of the profession, and workload issues. Thompson and Shockley (2013) reported that youth workers “face chronic issues like heavy workloads and poor support which are linked to job turnover” (p. 447). While turnover is discussed as a common characteristic of the youth work field, Keller (2007) found that “no facts and figures are available to suggest the actual scope of the problem” (p. 7), whereas Savicki’s (1993, 2002) cross-cultural studies claimed evidence of burnout and turnover in the field of youth care. This disagreement suggests further research is required to understand the extent and impacts of staff turnover within the youth work field. Personal and emotional impacts resulting from the nature of youth work are widely mentioned within the academic literature; however, few focused studies exist. As Barford and Whelton (2010) highlight, “little research has gone into better understanding the difficulties these workers face” (p. 272). Further research is clearly required to fully understand the personal impact of the nature of youth work on those working within the field. Burnout is more consistently reflective of other factors
throughout the literature, including sector instability and employment conditions, rather than being an independent variable.

Maunders and Broadbent (1995) discussed how in Australia, “Respondents stressed that a career in working with young people imposed limitations on their options. Some raised the issue of short-term funding and its link to the length of stay” (p. 5). Furthermore, the nature of short-term funding arrangements was found to negatively affect permanent positions within the field. Borden et al. (2004) concurred with this position, citing poor wages and limited job security combined with a lack of clear career paths as significant reasons for youth workers to pursue employment in related fields. The combination of low pay, limited term funding and casualisation within the field presented significant barriers regarding career longevity. Bessant et al. (1999) built on this position: “privatisation and contracting out may impact on the supply and nature of youth work, particularly in respect to the division between government and non-government services, and ultimately affect where the jobs are” (p. 1). The relationship between funding sources and youth work service delivery touches on a recent shift in the Western Australian landscape of local government outsourcing, for which no academic literature exists. Again, a contextual issue pertaining to time and place in the youth field, this gap in the literature is significant when examining factors that shape the careers of youth workers.

When examining barriers to career longevity within the existing literature, further evidence points to limited organisational professional development and support rather than burnout resulting from the client group itself. When examining the relationship between youth workers and stress, Bowie (2008) found that “a youth work team under stress is often one that has unclear aims and expectations, and poor communication and conflict resolution procedures” (p. 41). In terms of professional development, Krueger (2007) discussed how youth organisations in North America are commonly unable to provide, or are averse to providing, the necessary levels of ongoing training as well as professional supervision to adequately support staff members. Professional supervision is presented as crucial to career sustainability and reflective practice (Herman, 2012; Jenkinson, 2010). Thompson and Shockley (2013) agreed that “Lack of training and poor support cause many to leave the field” (p. 1). Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2006) also highlighted how smaller agencies find it even more difficult to source affordable training for the ongoing professional development of their staff members, with preference for development given to those identified as possessing leadership qualities.
Elements within the theme of barriers were found to be related to funding arrangements resulting in sector instability. This point was central to the Northern Ireland study of youth work graduates, with over half of the participants describing the negative impact of being employed on fixed or short-term contracts (Harland et al, 2005). The specific impact on career longevity and overall experience for youth workers within the field remains unclear, with assumptions pertaining to burnout and turnover being dominant and in need of contemporary examination and analysis.

**Theme 6: Professionalisation and Standards**

Youth workers have long debated the benefits of professionalisation, with early underpinnings of youth work moving towards a profession occurring in Victoria during the 1960’s, impacting the recognition, remuneration, conditions, and education of youth work (Goodwin, 2014; Irving et al, 1995). Bessant (2004b) contended that the professionalisation debate is a reoccurring theme and that “each time the question is raised we tend to get similar arguments” (p. 1). Opposition to professionalisation has cited resistance to power structures, undermining of the autonomy of youth workers and the infiltration of increased bureaucratic processes inhibiting youth work effectiveness (Grogan, 2004; Quixley & Doostkhah, 2007; Sercombe, 1998; Sercombe, 2004). The move towards professionalisation of youth work is supported on the grounds of ethical practice, qualification standards and the requirement to work parallel to funding requirements and legislation (Beker, 2001; Bessant, 2004a; Corney et al., 2009; Emslie, 2012; Krauss et al., 2012; Sercombe, 1997; Sercombe, 2004). Cooper (2013) examined this concept in a more contemporary context, supporting the case for professionalisation as a result of implications arising from Australia shifting into a post-welfare society and the rise of neoliberalism. With youth work in Western Australia having an established professional association that is voluntary to join and a code of ethics that equally is voluntary to follow, exploring the literature on professionalisation and standards further was important for this study.

Literature within the Australian context concerning professionalisation was largely written prior to the introduction of professional youth work associations. Maunders and Broadbent (1995) recognised “the limited community understanding of the skills, qualifications and training of youth workers” (p. 4), and further noting implications pertaining to the lack of distinction between youth work and related professions. Sercombe (2004) discussed the
importance of professional bodies driving ethical and training standards within the youth work field. Discussion of these concepts was reflective of Maunders and Broadbent’s (1995) call to youth workers within the field: “This recognition needs to come from youth workers themselves by forming a professional association and defining codes of practice and criteria for entry to the profession” (p. 11). These perspectives mirrored the non-Australian literature regarding youth work professionalisation, supporting the need for professionalisation to strengthen these aspects of the field.

The literature revealed that individuals seeking professionalisation within the context of youth work as a career were hindered in this pursuit on a number of levels. Keller (2007) outlines the link between qualifications and perceptions of youth work through professionalisation, stating how youth work in North America “does not yet have a clear set of employment qualifications or a strong sense of professional identity” (p. 4). Hartje et al. (2008) pointed to the need for future research in North America: “As the field continues to move toward professionalism, the relationship between staff characteristics, recruitment, and retention will remain a central issue to efforts aimed at promoting positive youth development” (p. 14). While these studies provide an important background on the culmination of qualifications, youth work identity, recruitment and retention, their findings exist contextually within non-Australian settings.

The academic literature is sparse regarding professionalisation of youth work and its impact on career paths after the formation of professional youth work associations. Emslie (2012) recognised the formation of youth work associations as “the need for improvements to the preparation, performance and management of youth workers” (p. 17). Citing recent budgetary constraints for an already shrinking tertiary discipline, Emslie (2012) further emphasised, “The professionalisation of youth work is urgently needed to help stem the tide and threats of cuts and closures to undergraduate youth work education in universities” (p.18). Bessant (2007) concurred, explaining how rationalisation of youth work–specific university courses has led to more generic qualifications in human service work, which is detrimental to professional youth work standards. Cooper (2013) also contributed to research conducted after the introduction of youth work associations in Australia: “In the Australian context a traditional professional association is culturally appropriate, is well suited to the Australian institutional context, and fills important institutional gaps” (p. 120). The implications for the youth work career are critical in this context; however, a lack of current research presents a significant gap in the literature, particularly when considering recently formed professional associations in Australia.
Summary

The six themes emerging from the existing literature point to a negative image of the youth work career; moreover, existing literature from the 1990s highlights factors leading to attrition. Youth work was portrayed as an occupation lacking distinct practices and standards, an entry-level employment option on the way to other more viable careers and characterised by burnout and a range of barriers. According to the existing literature, it could be concluded that youth workers have been in a position wherein retention hinged upon sound qualifications and training, as well as a reliance on personal intrinsic values such as altruism. Figure 2.1 presents a visual model of this literature review, with the scales tipped in favour of attrition rather than retention for youth workers pursuing a career in the field. This visual model becomes an important comparative point when analysing the findings of this study.

Figure 2.1: Negative Image of the Youth Work Career from the Literature Review
Youth Work Ethics

Central to the conceptualisation and historical debate concerning professionalisation of youth work is the topic of ethical practice. Debate and discussion about ethical youth work occurred during the 1990s and continued through the early 2000s in Australia, with perspectives of rights-based ethics and virtue-based ethics dominating the conversation (Banks, 2004; Sercombe, 1998). The paradigms of rights and virtue informed the professional codes of ethics for youth work in Australia.

At its core, rights-based ethics is concerned with human rights, resulting in a commitment to respect in relationships. Correlating with understandings of the social contract concerning consent and privacy, rights-based ethics guide moral judgement first through the principle of natural rights by virtue of being human (UNICEF, 1989; Von Leyden, 1956). Holding rights entails a level of responsibility for the rights holder, which requires accountability and trust to facilitate the realisation of rights (Hinman, 2012). This philosophy was captured by Sercombe (1998) when discussing ethical youth work practice: “In the process of making young people aware of the accountable relationships in which they are involved, youth workers, teachers and others should also make their own relationship with young people, as an accountable relationship, transparent” (p. 21). Informing principles such as promoting equality, transparency, confidentiality and cooperation, the approach of rights-based ethics was highly influential in what was to become a code of ethics for youth work in Western Australia.

Dating back to classical Greek philosophers, including Socrates and Aristotle, virtue ethics proposes that ethical behaviour results from having moral character (Anscombe, 1958; Banks, 2004; Ord, 2014). Given the diversity of practice and approaches to youth work both internationally and by specialisation, virtue ethics presents a strong case for youth work since it is incumbent on youth workers to examine and develop their character in order to foster ethical behaviour in practice (Banks, 1999; Banks & Gallagher, 2008; Bessant, 2009; Smith, 1988). Influential in principles such as integrity, boundaries, knowledge and self-awareness, virtue ethics provided an essential foundation in the pursuit of developing a code of ethics for youth work. Viewing an ethic of care as a contemporary youth work virtue has furthered the case for discussions about ethics to place integrity centre stage through conscious reflective practice rather than simply adopt a “taken for granted understanding of ethical youth work” (Spier & Giles, 2018, p. 1).
In Western Australia, the *YACWA Code of Ethics*, originally presented as the *Fairbridge Code*, was adopted by the YACWA in 2003 (YACWA, 2003). Originally developed by Sercombe, the code was underpinned by a commitment to reflexive empowerment, social ecology, advocacy and a relationship in which the young person is considered the primary client (Sercombe, 1997; Sercombe, 1998; Sercombe, 2010). When considering the development and implementation of a code of ethics, Davie (2011) raised issues of professional accountability: “how will the code be enforced? What will be the repercussions for transgressions?” (p. 59). These questions point to the challenges faced by an emerging profession; for example, while youth workers may understand and agree on the values and commitments driving the code of ethics, the practical implementation of such a code is far more complex.

In Australia debate regarding a unified national code of ethics for youth work continues, with states and territories differing significantly in their positions. Amended versions of the original Fairbridge Code have been loosely adopted by New South Wales, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, while the Northern Territory has yet to finalise or implement a code of ethics for youth work. South Australia has adopted the Western Australian code of ethics in its entirety. Victoria established a distinct code of ethical practice for youth work in 2007 and later revised it in 2014 in consultation with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVIC, 2007). The Victorian code differs from the Western Australian code by identifying young people as the primary consideration of youth work rather than the client, as well as a distinct commitment to the recognition of Indigenous peoples. Underpinned fundamentally by a human rights framework, the Victorian code directly reflects a commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Corney, 2014; UNICEF, 1989). Operating as a set of eight practice responsibilities rather than a guiding code of principles, the Victorian code also includes elements of diversity ethics (Hinman, 2012) that are representative of the state’s context and requirements (Corney & Hoiles, 2007).

Following a revision of the original code by Youth Work WA and YACWA in 2014, the *Youth Work Code of Ethics* was developed into the form that exists in Western Australia currently. Described by Youth Work WA as “the core document which informs and guides the ethical practice of youth workers” (2020, p. 1), the code has been developed into a deliverable training package for the youth work sector in Western Australia. The code remains a non-mandated guide for youth work professionals in Western Australia in line with the voluntary membership to the Youth Work WA professional association.
Sociology of Professions

Multiple attempts have been made to develop criteria to define professions and distinguish them from non-professional occupations (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Greenwood, 1957; Hearn, 1982; Hurley, 2005; Jackson, 1970; Klegon, 1978; Kornhauser, 1982; Wilensky, 1964). Early attempts focused on delineation through a taxonomic approach by applying maxims of recognised theory, client recognition of authority and community recognition of authority, and ethical codes and professional bodies to regulate standards (Cullen, 1983; Greenwood, 1957). According to this foundation, professions are best understood on a continuum, from task-based occupations at the one end through to highly knowledge-based professions at the other. This is a helpful model for understanding professions because it begins with conversation about the relationship between knowledge and occupation without relying upon, or discounting fully, the taxonomy of characteristic criteria.

Understood as both a form of social organisation and processes of social interactionism, the question of ‘what is a profession?’ provides an important reference point for this research. Saks (2012) discussed the importance of defining professions around “knowledge and expertise … as it is actually at the root of what professions are and how they operate” (p. 1). Classical inquiries into the sociology of professions have a tendency to focus on the division of labour, particularly in relation to gender, as well as the practice of rewarding workplace behaviour by external means to perpetuate class divisions (Davies, 1996; Hearn, 1982). For the purpose of this research, these two areas will be used as a macro backdrop, rather than as a focus, when considering the data. More contemporary revisions of understanding professions in the context of this research will focus on the relationships between occupations and knowledge, and occupations and identity (Australian Council of Professions, 2003; Barnett & Coate, 2005; Fook et al., 2000; Gorman & Sandefur, 2011; Krejsler, 2005; Scanlon, 2011; Young & Muller, 2014).

Drawing from Marxian and feminist ideology, the sociology of professions, as a means of labour division, and externally rewarding behaviour have long been ingrained in the literature of sociological inquiry into professions (Hearn, 1982). This approach to the concept of professions results in the discussion of areas as barriers within the literature of the youth work career, with concerns about low salaries and poor working conditions, and the altruistic voluntary roots of youth work being reflective of the professions traditionally considered feminine in nature. Abbott and Meerabeau (1998) provided a discussion relevant to youth work,
describing caring professions as “professions imbued with a service ideology. The professional ethos is profoundly ‘client centred’, with a strong commitment to respect the individual, to be non-judgmental, to start where the individual is at, and to allow client determination” (p. 4). Similarly, the Marxian critique of functionalist societal structures leading to externalised rewarding of behaviour may provide a reference point if research participants raise issues of rewards and bonuses, or a lack thereof. These perspectives may be particularly fitting as a backdrop within the context of a contemporary neoliberal society that has made gains in gender role equality but is still inexplicably linked to capitalist requirements (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2012). The macro background of theorising professions on a structural level within the context of this research will therefore be drawn from a Marxian-feminist position.

The balance of skill acquisition and execution along with theoretical knowledge has resulted in a praxis approach to understanding professions (Kornhauser, 1982; Wilensky, 1964). The praxis model highlights the concept of professional practice as an ongoing relationship between theory, reflection and action, knowledge and skills with constant reflection. This is a fitting model for understanding youth work as a profession and distinguishing it from a non-profession, as reflected by Bessant (2005): “when it comes to the human services … skills and expertise may not be as easily or as sharply distinguished” (p. 9). It is important not to frame youth workers as simply being competent in the execution of skills, but also as ethically competent and theoretically competent professionals. Bessant (2005) stressed the importance of professional youth workers requiring a knowledge base that transcends the skill acquisition paradigm: “Qualified youth workers have completed courses designed to provide them with insights into how laws connect to other forms of regulation” (p. 11). This position was also discussed by Corney (2004b), who explained how the youth work curriculum is underpinned not only by knowledge but also by values. In summary, the knowledge of the youth work profession extends to theorising young people as a dynamic and marginalised societal group, and to understanding historical and contextual impacts on young people in order to work professionally with them.

Barnett and Coate (2005) furthered the conceptual understanding of professions when discussing the curriculum of professions: “Is there any place for a sense of students as human beings as distinct from being enquirers after knowledge or as possessors of skills?” (p. 1). The concept of ‘being’ was pivotal for Barnett and Coate (2005) when conceptualising professions and curricula, and it introduced the importance of personal and professional identity. Using the
triple engagement framework of “knowing, acting and being” (Barnett & Coate, 2005, p. 3) furthers the understanding of professions beyond knowledge, skills and even praxis. This framework invites self-awareness, ethical examination of values and the development of individual identity into our sociological understanding of professions. Hurley (2005) highlighted how the element of ‘being’ is imperative to understanding professions within the broad field of working with people. This is an area of interest for this research; the preceding literature explored points towards youth workers having a weak professional identity, which will be discussed further in this literature review.

Analysing professions through post-structuralist sociology offered writers such as Klegon (1978) the opportunity to discuss how broader socio-political power sources influence our understanding of professions, particularly niche professions. Through the analysis of ‘semi-professions’, Klegon (1978) examined the emergence of the niche profession as relating to arrangements of power rather than definitional-based attempts. Niche professions can be understood as requiring particular distinctiveness among the larger professions, impacting upon the survival of the occupation as a profession as well as individual and collective ‘professional identity’. When discussing the concept of professions, Hall (1979) identified how the categorisation of a profession as ‘niche’ is largely dependent upon who constructs the identity of a profession, the constituents of the profession, government legislators or the public. While understood fundamentally as a profession that has been carved out for a small albeit significant population group and purpose, niche professions are often precariously placed in terms of relevance, legitimacy and, ultimately, funding. Furthermore, Cooper et al. (2014) extended this understanding and concern to the field of educating and training niche professionals, calling for a synergy of competency and knowledge-based curriculums to maintain professional status as well as prepare graduates for industry employment prospects. It is therefore important to understand youth work as a niche profession and the subsequent implications this has for education and training, a sense of professional identity, the maintenance of a knowledge base within the profession and considerations for employers as well as broader economic demands placed on curriculum and courses.

In consideration of the literature pertaining to the sociology of professions, the foundations for this research are threefold. First, the Marxian-feminist perspectives assist in providing a macro backdrop for understanding the structural impacts of socio-economic and patriarchal influences of professions. Second, understanding and defining youth work as a knowledge-based
occupation frames it within the bounds of a profession, with the contemporary context positioning youth work within the niche professions. Third, the interactionist approach of professional identity offers important insights into the self-concept of youth workers and those with whom they interrelate professionally as well as personally.

**Theorising Career**

Career theory began in the early twentieth century through the work of Frank Parson (1909), which focused on personality traits and abilities, a principle that persists in many theories developed since. For the purpose of transferability and application to this study, it is important to recognise that career theory is largely North American centric and historically focused on matching personality traits with occupation type (Betz et al., 1989; Leung, 2008; Zunker, 2002). Furthermore, career theory has been historically geared towards male experiences and developmental stage theory, thereby imposing additional limitations for application in a contemporary context (Arthur et al., 1989). This background begs the question: how then are we to understand the youth work career through existing career theory? Leung (2008) proposed five robust career theories that are most applicable in international contexts, those being the theory of work adjustment, vocational personality theory, circumscription theory, social cognitive career theory and, finally, the self-concept theory of career development. This section provides an overview of each theory and explains why the self-concept theory of career development is most applicable as a theoretical framework for this research project.

The theory of work adjustment purports that career is understood through a relationship of competing satisfaction between the employee and the employer, or the work environment in general. Competing satisfaction reflects how needs are, or are not, being met by each party, creating a tension of ongoing negotiation to foster tenure. Dawis and Lofquist (1976) articulated the basis of this theory: “Individuals and environments are described in terms of their mutual responsiveness to each other. The concept of work adjustment, therefore, is envisioned as the continuous and dynamic process” (p. 55).

The largest study of the theory of work adjustment application as a theoretical framework was the Minnesota work adjustment project, which used variables of aptitude, skills, needs and the interests of individuals against work environments in order to ascertain job satisfaction and performance (Dawis, 2005). Findings from this research pointed towards the theory of work
adjustment being useful in career counselling with individuals who were contemplating career change. Thompson and Blain (1992) explained this as, “particularly useful for clients that might be called ‘career changers’, that is, adults with considerable work experience in one or more chosen occupations who are dissatisfied with their work” (p. 62). Swanson and Schneider (2013) concurred with this perspective, concluding that the theory of work adjustment is most applicable in a pragmatic sense for individuals who are dissatisfied with current employment or for those seeking primary career guidance.

With a focus on needs-based satisfaction for both the employee and employer, the theory of work adjustment leaves little room for individual values as drivers of career choice and tenure. Leung (2008) identified how the theory of work adjustment prioritises cognitive and physical needs when considering the satisfaction of individuals, summarising the theory as “a continual process or cycles of work adjustment initiated by dis-satisfaction and dis-satisfactoriness” (p. 117). Lofquist and Dawis (1978) discussed this further, identifying values as secondary to physical and psychological needs when measuring satisfaction in career choice and longevity. Furthermore, Leung identified that “theory of work adjustment variables were developed in the USA and should be validated in other cultures before being used for hypothesis testing” (p. 118). With these limitations in mind, the theory of work adjustment would not provide an efficacious theoretical framework for the youth work career within the bounds of this research.

Gottfredson’s theory of circumscription explained how genetics shape the personal characteristics of an individual, which in turn lead to a selection process of vocational elimination (Gottfredson, 2002). Largely a developmental theory, circumscription proposes a process of vocational choice by ruling out those choices that do not resonate with the individual’s characteristics, requiring compromise within the bounds of what the individual’s society has to offer. Gottfredson (1981) outlined how early childhood experiences shape cognitive development, which orients the application of circumscription theory to early career choice to be utilised predominantly by career counsellors. Recommendations for practical application suggest focusing on the school years of individuals to determine appropriate career options for adolescence (Gottfredson, 2005). Further to this preparatory use, Swanson and Gore (2000) explained how circumscription theory “remains quite difficult to test the theoretical propositions, and unfortunately, an untestable theory is not particularly useful” (p. 243). Given the orientation towards career guidance application and difficulties in measurement, circumscription theory would be unhelpful for this research project.
Described as a segmental model, social cognitive career theory, developed largely by Lent (2005), proposes that individuals make career choices based on self-efficacy: a vocation they believe they will be able to undertake successfully (Bandura, 1997; Lent, 2005). Linking personal beliefs with behavioural performance, social cognitive career theory is underpinned by the confidence of the individual to perform tasks within a vocation. The theory is broken down into three interacting segments: academic and vocational interest, choice and performance. These segments interact with one another to manifest expectations of an outcome—a key concept within social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994). Outcome expectations of an individual essentially draw conclusions on what tasks individuals believe they can master. Individuals will therefore be drawn to vocations in which such tasks are involved.

Studies conducted with social cognitive career theory employed as the theoretical framework have largely been found helpful in assisting people when choosing higher education courses in congruence with their perceptions of self-efficacy (Arulmani et al., 2003; Hampton, 2005; Nota et al., 2007). The social cognitive career theory framework appears to provide a sound basis for working with individuals in the early stages of career choice, as do the theories of theory of work adjustment and circumscription; however, social cognitive career theory has proven to be more successfully applied in different contexts. Nevertheless, an Australian study conducted by Creed et al. (2006) was less effective. The study found vast discrepancies between reported self-efficacy of high school students and their early career choices. Leung (2008) summarised the study findings: “The authors suggested that a causal linkage between the two variables as hypothesised by the social cognitive career theory process model might not exist and that early self-efficacy status might not buffer a person from future career decision-making conflicts” (p. 127). Leung (2008) concluded that further measures and instruments would require development to successfully apply social cognitive career theory in a non-American context.

Developed by John Holland, vocational personality theory is underpinned by a suitable union of personality type and occupation. Holland (1997) described occupational choice as an expression of one’s personality rather than a tendency towards favoured skill sets or areas of interest. Categorised through the taxonomy of six personality types (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional), vocational personality theory sets out to identify an individual’s personality using three of the six typologies, with one being dominant and the remaining two being secondary. As Leung (2008) explained, “If a person’s degree of
resemblance to the six vocational personality and interest types could be assessed, then it is possible to generate a three-letter code (e.g., SIA, RIA) to denote and summarise one’s career interest” (p. 118). Vocational personality theory is often used as a framework in early career guidance work rather than being applicable to long-term career inquiry.

Central to vocational personality theory is the concept of occupational congruency, whereby a workplace environment that matches the individual’s personality tendencies will more likely result in interest and tenure. The use of vocational personality theory in research would require measurement procedures initially to establish personality traits, as well as congruence and incongruence with work environments (Hogan & Blake, 1999). Reviews of vocational personality theory have criticised the foundational assumptions of rigidity in personality, with Arnold (2004) suggesting, “congruence assessed using Holland’s constructs and measures has a much weaker association with outcomes than might be expected theoretically and required for effective us in practice” (p. 96). Spokane et al. (2000) echoed this suggestion, finding vocational personality theory to be helpful in certain vocations but less so in occupations where environmental factors are of more influence than those of the individual.

Vocational personality theory is helpful in career guidance and counselling roles within a largely North American context. International research applying this theory has found it to be susceptible to cultural variables, resulting in the need to adjust the framework to fit the cultural context (Leung & Hou, 2005; Tak, 2004). As Leung (2008) concluded, “there is a need to conduct more research studies to examine the cross-cultural validity of Holland’s theory and the various interest assessment instruments developed” (p. 119). Application of vocational personality theory to the youth work profession is likely too narrow given the range of occupational roles within youth work as well as the diverse contexts in which youth workers are employed.

Developed by Donald Super (1980), the self-concept theory of career development proposes that career choice and development is reflective of, and evolves with, an individual’s personal development and identity (Leung, 2008). Self-concept involves a relationship between individual growth, experiences and a range of environmental impacts (Super, 1980). To provide a framework for the application of self-concept, Super initially developed a life stage theory of career development, associating key growth and maturity stages of life with the characteristics of an individual’s career development. This model evolved into a more context-rich framework
known as the ‘life career rainbow’, which allowed not only for life stages but also for life roles (Super, 1994). Freeman (1993) summarised this concept thus: “what we’ve been learning is the fact that careers really evolve over the years—they emerge from a person’s experience” (p. 255). Consideration of individual growth and experience when examining youth work careers may provide deeper understanding of the essence of this phenomenon in a broader life context. Figure 2.2 presents a visual representation of the life career rainbow model.

Within Super’s self-concept theory of career development is the concept of career maturity, which has been used as a variable measure with success in two Australian studies (Creed & Patton, 2003; Patton et al., 2002; Sverko, 2001). Career maturity was in line with Super’s original conceptual framework of career experiences occurring through various developmental stages across the life span, whereby the individual would require maturity that matched the stage they were in at any given time. Super’s implementation of the work importance study provided strong evidence of international transferability of the self-concept theory of career development across North American, European and Asian countries (Sverko, 2001). However, these studies were conducted in the 1970s, when gender roles and life transitions were largely linear and more narrowly defined than in the twenty-first century. Reconsiderations of the self-concept theory of career development were offered by Herr (1997), who called for a more flexible conceptualisation of adaptability rather than maturity to be developed.
Patton and Lokan (2001) examined how Super considered career to be an unfolding process, as opposed to an early life singular decision. In their review of Super’s original inception of career maturity, Patton and Lokan (2001) proposed a more contemporary revision in which adaptability was a more applicable concept for understanding careers. Adaptability was found to be more efficacious in contemporary times as well as in cross-cultural contexts, framing career roles more in terms of timing and the ability to adapt to opportunities (Savickas, 1997). Patton and Lokan (2001) concluded that “The career maturity construct has itself matured to a point where it may change in name or form to better reflect the rapidly changing world of work in the 21st century” (p. 44). Zacher (2014) furthered the conceptual shift towards adaptation more recently, concurring that adaptability was the concept that separated the self-concept theory of career development from the personality and trait-based theories, providing a constructivist and transferable career theory for the twenty-first century.

Contemporary refining of the self-concept theory of career development has called for even more focus on the importance of social context for the development of an individual’s career (Savickas, 2002, 2005). Furthermore, the constructivist approach within the ‘boundaryless career’ of the twenty-first century would provide a more contemporary theoretical framework (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The self-concept theory of career development would provide meaningful application when examining the long-term youth work career given the life career rainbow model can be used across the duration of career and changing life roles. The link between personal life experiences and growth with the development of career may provide greater understanding and depth, particularly given elements of self-awareness, self-care and reflective practice within youth work. These elements are central to the practice of youth work and are congruent with self-concept theory. Application of the self-concept theory of career development may offer insight into broader life contexts, such as marital status, lifestyle and spirituality, allowing for social context when exploring career development (Savickas, 1994). This perspective was captured by Blustein (1997): “By expanding the horizons of one’s inquiry, it may be possible to view career exploration as having a richer source of influences, shapes, and outcomes” (p. 271). When examining the long-term careers of youth workers, this contextual and holistic framework may prove the most helpful for this particular study.

Career theory has historically been driven by a focus on personality traits and individual aptitudes. The evolution of career theory has seen a shift towards including broader contexts in the pursuit of work–life balance, a seemingly elusory goal and perhaps an idealised ambition.
Further to the central focus of traits and aptitudes is the tendency for career theory to be one of pragmatic early career choice used by career counsellors to assist school leavers in deciding their most suitable occupational pathway (Phillips & Blustein, 1994). The career theories discussed in this literature review present potential frameworks for further investigation and understanding of the youth work career.

Contrasting positions are evident between the theories, most notably the internal focus on personality and occupational match found within vocational personality theory, social cognitive career theory and circumscription theories. These theories tended to be used pragmatically in early career choice rather than long-term career measurement, an element that has been criticised in more contemporary career theory literature (Gunz & Heslin, 2005; Heslin, 2005). The theory of work adjustment proposed a framework centred on negotiation between employer and employee and a more responsive and changing model of career. This model was narrow in scope, focused on the micro relations within the workplace and tended to be concerned with individuals who were dissatisfied with their current employment. Examinations of self-concept allowed for sociological and environmental considerations of career development, as opposed to only evaluating the individual’s internal world and tendencies. The self-concept theory of career development may lend itself towards a more holistic and meaningful lens in which to analyse data from this research, given the central purpose of this study is to explore meaning and development within career. Furthermore, the life career rainbow model provides a practical framework whereby emergent themes may be analysed and positioned in order to understand the shared experiences of the long-term youth work career.

Gaps in the Literature

When examining existing academic writing within the youth work field, Bowie (2008) summarised, “Much has been written about the theory and practice of youth work, and there has been a particular focus on the youth worker/young person interaction” (p. 36). By contrast, limited literature exists in terms of youth work being studied as a distinct career. This may not present an alarming revelation to those within the youth work profession, since the youth worker seeks to consider the young person as the primary consideration in all areas of their work, including research and academic pursuits. White et al. (1991b) identified this gap clearly in their early 1990s research project that surveyed over 100 Western Australian youth workers:
“A more in-depth analysis of the field experience of workers would be able to address other issues such as the length of tenure in the current and previous positions, and length of experience in different types of youth services” (p. 10). The lack of focused research into the youth work career as a phenomenon presents a major gap in the literature in and of itself, particularly when considered in the context of a professional association within a Western Australian context.

Existing Australian literature is both limited and contextually problematic. As previously discussed, the study conducted by Maunders and Broadbent (1995) was based in Melbourne well before professionalisation and therefore limits transferability regarding time and place. Taylor et al.’s (1991) work regarding early youth work careers, while conducted in Western Australia, was again contextually limited given the timeframe was set 16 years prior to the organisation of a professional youth work association. Understandings and definitions of youth work have also changed over these timeframes, with twenty-first century youth work mirroring post-welfare societal changes along with professionalisation and higher regard for tertiary qualifications in the Western Australian youth work field (Bessant, 2007; Bessant & Emslie, 2014; Cooper, 2012; Cooper, 2018).

Given the lack of literature specific to youth work as a long-term career, this literature review has explored related works covering articles on youth work professionalisation, youth work qualifications and training, and barriers to career longevity, including burnout. Issues of transferability were evident given the amount of non-Australian literature pertaining to time and place, with clear implications concerning professionalisation and qualification differences. It must also be noted that while related through the common theme of ‘working with young people’, many of the articles referenced included fields such as youth care, youth development and youth mentoring. These forms of youth engagement are not congruent with youth work, particularly in terms of contemporary understandings of youth work as a distinct profession in Western Australia (Cooper, 2018).

Regarding career theory, this literature review has identified a gap in the application of theoretical frameworks of career in the context of long-term careers. Traditionally focused on individual traits and early career choices and planning, career theory was found to lack insight into the importance of how careers evolve and change. This research will explore the
phenomenon of the long-term youth work career, as well as appraise a framework and model of career theory that will help close this current gap in career literature.

In summary, further research is necessary to explore the nature and experiences of the youth work career within a contemporary Western Australian context. Given the focus on deficits and negatives within the existing literature, further research is required to unveil more balanced perspectives on the youth work career and understand more comprehensively the career experiences and characteristics within this field. The use of career theory in a contemporary inquiry of the youth work career will enhance understandings of meaning: a method of investigation that has not been conducted in the youth work field to date.

**Informing the Research Question**

Conducting the literature review and identifying consequent gaps within the existing literature presents a developed storyboard that informs the research question. Thomas (2017) described this process as essential to developing an achievable and precise research design. This study seeks to explore the long-term careers of professional youth workers in Western Australia; however, this aim presents as a purpose statement rather than a research question. As discussed in the literature review, there are key gaps, including a clear lack of inquiry into youth work as a viable long-term career. The studies that have been conducted are outdated and focused on early career pathways; moreover, findings regarding youth work as a sustainable career are deficit focused. Further studies are not required to track or examine early pathways into youth work, but rather to explore long-term careers of youth workers who have continued working within the youth work field rather than leaving the field, as the pre-existing literature suggests. These gaps in the literature inform the central research question of this study by highlighting the need for understanding why youth workers stay in this profession in the long term, and what the characteristics of a long-term career might look like through shared experience.

Drawing on the gaps evident in the literature, the central research question of this study is, ‘What does it mean to have a long-term career in youth work?’ Use of the terms ‘career’ and ‘mean’ reflect the major gaps in the existing literature by focusing on the essence of the long-term youth work career rather than simply tracking and observing career choices and progression. Reviewing the existing literature presented a stark absence of inquiry into the
essence of the youth work career within Western Australia. This research question will provide the genesis of meaningful exploration of this phenomenon.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This study examined the long-term youth work career by exploring the shared experiences of participants and applying established career theory to the emerging data. Ultimately, this research sought to uncover the essence of a long-term career in youth work. The approach of social constructionism was a suitable epistemology for this research study. Individual experiences are highly subjective and socially contextual, with people forming meaning according to processes of social construction (van Krieken et al., 2000). This perspective was captured by Denzin and Lincoln (2005): “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Critical realism approaches phenomena not as a whole discoverable truth, but rather pieces of truth collectively experienced by individuals, whereby the researcher plays a pivotal role in the interpretation of data (Crotty, 1996; Levers, 2013). The research design for this study assumed a critical realist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology, and it used a phenomenological approach to data analysis. Grounded theory methods were used as a secondary form of analysis in the pursuit of appraising the self-concept theory of career development. The research design outlined in this chapter was fitting for this research project, seeking meaning and understanding of a phenomenon through the contextual exploration of shared individual experiences.

Theoretical Frameworks

Framework of Youth Work Theory

Youth work theory was discussed in the literature review chapter, with considerations given to a range of contextual explanations of what youth work is and what youth workers do. For the purpose of this thesis, youth work is understood within a contemporary Western Australian context that continues to respond to ongoing societal change and needs. Youth workers are employed within government and non-government sectors, predominantly in homelessness services, education programs and local government organisations. Western Australian youth workers exist within an evolving field of professionalisation, where the higher education degree
program is held as the preferred qualification by many agencies in the field and is endorsed by Youth Work WA. The development of Youth Work WA as a professional body has driven the standards of youth work, along with YACWA as the peak body for youth affairs in Western Australia. Youth Work WA has adopted the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition definition of youth work, along with the revised *Youth Work Code of Ethics*, both of which were developed and revised in 2013 and 2014 respectively. The alignment of these elements provides the context in which youth workers in Western Australia find themselves and the contextual basis of youth work for this study.

Defining and explaining youth work is more difficult, however, which is why a conceptual understanding of youth work was chosen for the purpose of this research. Within the conceptual understanding of youth work are central axioms that were drawn from the literature review on youth work theory. Following are the central axioms of this conceptual understanding, along with the models of youth work developed by Cooper and White (1994):

1. The relationship between youth worker and young person is friendly and informal, where the young person is the primary consideration.
2. The application of informal education as both purpose and practice to promote emancipation and wellbeing.
3. Holistic work where young people are understood and worked with in their social context to facilitate their rights and inclusion.
4. Ethical youth work practice guided by the Western Australian *Youth Work Code of Ethics*.

Models of youth work that are most congruent within the Western Australian context are the reform, radical empowerment, and both radical and non-radical advocacy models (Cooper and White, 1994).

This conceptual framework of youth work theory is reflective of the literature review discussion of professions as well as ethics. It was anticipated that this framework would be reflected in participant experiences of youth work, with interest being paid to how youth work has developed in the experiences of participants from the 1990s to 2020.
Framework of Career Theory

The literature review examined a range of career theories and their application to research in different contexts. Accounting more for the individual’s internal world and tendencies, theories such as vocational personality theory and social cognitive career theory risk overly narrowing down the understanding of youth work careers to particular personality types. Grouping research participants by personality type could lead to over-generalised categorising of career pathways and choices rather than to understanding the youth work career more broadly and comprehensively. Referring to the central research question, ‘What does it mean to have a long-term career in youth work?’, the self-concept theory of career development lends itself as a suitable theoretical framework in pursuit of this proposed inquiry.

The self-concept theory of career development was selected as an appropriate theory for this study because of the emphasis this theory places on interaction between career and broader life developments. Central to this theory is the concept of reflexivity, which was appraised in the second phase of data analysis. Applying the concept of reflexivity to major themes emerging from the data provided a baseline of analysis for this research, which was important to test the usefulness of the self-concept theory of career development when applied to the long-term youth work career. The aim of appraising the self-concept theory of career development as a second phase of analysis was to seek further theoretical understanding in answer to the central research question of this study.

Building on the self-concept theory of career development and the concept of reflexivity, Donald Super (1994) developed the practically applicable life career rainbow model. As discussed in the literature review chapter, the life career rainbow model provides a visual aid whereby individuals can assess the extent to which their career fits within the stage of life they are in as well as their competing life roles. The second phase of analysis positioned emergent themes within the life stages and life roles found within the life career rainbow model using grounded theory methods. The extent to which the life career rainbow model is useful in understanding the long-term youth work was evaluated as a result of this process.
Methodology

Phenomenological Inquiry

This research used phenomenology as the primary qualitative methodology in the pursuit of seeking meaning and the ‘essence’ of a long-term career in youth work. Rather than objective observation, phenomenological inquiry seeks to investigate meaning within the lived experiences of individuals through an open-ended exploration of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 1990). A key feature of phenomenological inquiry is to explore the shared experiences of a group of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Christensen et al., 2011; Von Eckartsberg, 1986). The concept of subjectivity is integral in phenomenological research, whereby shared experiences are strengthened when the inquiry reflects individual worldviews and partiality within the breadth of the phenomenon in question (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996). This methodology allows space for individual subjectivity of experience and seeks shared language and commonalities in themes discussed to explicate the shared essence of the phenomenon.

Exploration of shared experience must also exist within parameters of a defined context in order to develop clear and meaningful findings. The phenomenological methodology was fitting for this research, which was bounded within the Western Australian youth work context, with participants sharing the same educational background and the study imposing a clearly defined timeframe in which to explore the essence of the long-term youth work career. The timeframe of examination was an important factor of this research, with participants also experiencing pre- and post-professionalisation eras of youth work within this context.

Phenomenology in research involves specific branches of inquiry: transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology offer differing approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcendental phenomenology is the pursuit of essence without bias or interpretation from the researcher, involving heavy bracketing out of the researchers pre-existing knowledge and experience with the phenomenon and subject matter (Dowling, 2007; Husserl, 1970). Developed originally by Husserl, transcendental phenomenology aligns more strongly with positivist empiricism, a pursuit that many have critiqued as unachievable or at best highly difficult to achieve for researchers who are embedded in the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994). Hermeneutic phenomenology, developed by Heidegger (Polt, 2013), instead focuses on understanding the phenomenon as opposed to simply describing it.
Interpretation and reciprocity of the researcher therefore becomes important in seeking a rich understanding of the phenomenological essence (Koch, 1996; Lowes & Prowse, 2001; Racher & Robinson, 2003). Todres and Wheeler (2001) are strong on this point: “phenomenology without hermeneutics can become shallow” (p. 6). Further advanced by Gadamer (1989), the hermeneutic approach hinges upon dialogue between researcher and participants to extricate rich data pertaining to the phenomenon. Given the researcher had been involved in youth work in a variety of roles and contexts, the hermeneutic phenomenological method was used in this research in the data collection phase particularly, with transcendental techniques being applied in data analysis. The data analysis techniques of horizontalisation, Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, and essence statement development, are classically transcendental. The approach taken in this research is therefore best described as what Dowling (2007) refers to as new phenomenology, whereby the researcher does not entirely abandon hermeneutics during data collection in the pursuit of pure objectivity. Rather, the researcher applies a hermeneutic approach to data collection, with a more transcendental approach to data analysis.

**Role of the Researcher**

The hermeneutic phenomenological methodology calls for reflexivity of the researcher, with the researcher becoming an interpretive instrument that is not only analysing the data, but is involved in it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stewart, 2010). The researcher in this study had a fifteen-year career in youth work across a range of contexts including local government youth services, not-for-profit homelessness services and education programs. Within these settings, the researcher undertook face-to-face roles including detached youth work, community development, residential youth work and case management. The researcher also undertook a number of leadership roles including program coordination and service management. Hence, the researcher in this study was well placed to understand the language, theory, concepts and experiences of the research participants. The researcher was conversational during the participant interviews in order to reciprocate understanding through shared experience in the field. This approach enhanced the depth and richness of the data, allowing the researcher to become active in the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

While the researcher was experienced and involved in the youth work field, there remains a fine line between reciprocity and imposition of personal subjectivity during the interpretive process. Writers on phenomenological research frame the latter as a potential threat to, or
undermining of, the validity of constructivist research (Chenail, 2011; Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). This forms the rationale for implementing the member checking strategy, which is discussed further in the validity and reliability section of this research design chapter. This strategy allows the researcher to become immersed in the research data through the interview process, knowing there is a backstop in place to check that participants feel the interpretation of the emerging data is consistent with their experience of the phenomenon.

Within the process of interviewing, it is imperative that the researcher is aware of personal experience and bias in order to successfully explore the phenomena in question. The immersion of the researcher and role of co-participant in phenomenological research can be profound, as van Manen (1990) articulates: “Indeed, phenomenological research is often itself a form of deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness, increased thoughtfulness” (p. 163). While utilising the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology during data collection, bias on the part of the researcher must be identified and mindfulness exercised. This reflects the Gadamerian approach, whereby bias is identified and minimised as opposed to completely bracketing out personal experiences (Gadamer, 1989/2006). The researcher in this instance was mindful of any emerging discussions relating to senior management negatively affecting career, since this has been an experience of the researcher within some working roles.

*Grounded Theory Methods*

This study used grounded theory methods as a secondary qualitative methodology in the interest of appraising career theory to draw out further knowledge from this study. Traditionally used to develop a new theory, grounded theory opens avenues for data analysis beyond description and towards theoretical contribution (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser, 1992). For the purpose of this research, however, grounded theory methods were applied to a pre-selected career theory (self-concept theory of career development) and subsequent career model (life career rainbow) rather than in the traditional sense. The methods applied were axial coding and selective coding, which are outlined in the data analysis section of this chapter. A brief overview of grounded theory is now provided.

Developed by two influential sociological researchers, Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory offers a methodology for research that draws theory directly from participant data entrenched in practice in the field rather than from texts or abstract concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
Consideration and inclusion of social interactions are integral to grounded theory, with new theory reflecting the sociological approach of symbolic interactionism that was so influential in the development of constructionism that opened new avenues of critical inquiry (Denzin, 2008; Jeon, 2004; Mead, 1934). Examples of theory emerging from this methodology are prevalent throughout sociology and disciplines of the humanities, for example, Stan Cohen’s (2002) moral panic theory, has been described as “a brilliant and subtle exercise in grounded theory” (p.1). Within grounded theory, however, two perspectives eventuated from disagreement between Glaser and Strauss.

Grounded theory for Glaser (1992, 2001) was fundamentally underpinned by a commitment to a constant comparative approach, allowing for the ongoing consideration of data in its entirety and incorporating a high degree of reflexivity from the researcher. This perspective on grounded theory was further developed by Charmaz (2006) into the constructivist approach of grounded theory. Charmaz’s revision of grounded theory furthered the extent of constructivism by incorporating postmodern perspectives, hence purporting that theory developed through this methodology is highly dependent upon principles of discourse, subjectivity and continual constructionist processes (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Mills et al., 2006). Conversely, Strauss considered grounded theory to be a pragmatic and structured process, with clear approaches to data analysis in the pursuit of developing theory. Referred to as systematic grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), the Straussian approach applies axial coding to determine how research data relates to a core concept on which to build theory. Selective coding is then used in this methodology to position meaning units emerging from the research data to strengthen the validity of the developing theory.

When comparing the Straussian approach with the Glaserian approach, the academic literature is clear that the appropriate research method is dependent upon how involved the researcher is in terms of reflexivity and involvement (Heath & Cowley, 2004; Howard-Payne, 2016; Walker & Myrick, 2006). While this current study involved a high degree of researcher reflexivity in the primary phenomenological analysis, the secondary grounded theory analysis was more systematic and pragmatic. This is because the purpose of this secondary phase of analysis was to appraise existing career theory using axial and selective coding methods, a more iterative process in this particular research design. Therefore, the Straussian approach of systematic grounded theory was applied in this study.
Central Research Question

The central question of this research is, ‘What does it mean to have a long-term career in youth work?’ This research question provides a broad basis for exploration of the concept of career within the Western Australian youth work field. The contextual element of Western Australia is discussed further when considering sampling procedures. From this central research question further avenues of inquiry were guided by the six emerging themes from the literature review, the application of career theory and a potential reflective stage of secondary interviews dependent on emerging concepts from the initial interview process (see data collection). Figure 3.1 presents a visual map of the central research question, along with the two avenues of phenomenological inquiry and grounded theory methods and their consequent sub-questions.
Central Research Question: What does it mean to have a long-term career in youth work?

Research Question 1. (Phenomenological Inquiry) What is the shared experience of a long-term career in youth work?

- Sub-Question 1. What has changed in the youth work field from when you first started your career?
- Sub-Question 2. What are the key factors of longevity in the youth work career?
- Sub-Question 3. What are the positives and negatives of a youth work career?

Research Question 2. (Grounded Theory Methods) To what extent is career theory useful in understanding the long-term youth work career?

- Sub-Question 1. To what extent do career and life experiences interplay with one another?
- Sub-Question 2. To what extent do life roles influence the youth work career?
- Sub-Question 3. To what extent do career stages inform an understanding of the youth work career?

Figure 3.1: Research Questions and Sub-questions
**Sampling**

The participants required for this proposed research were selected through a purposive and bounded sampling procedure. The central research question guided the rationale behind this approach to sampling, with participants having experienced the phenomenon in question to a degree that would provide information rich data (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Polit & Beck, 2008). The participants needed to have been in the field over a suitable timeframe to reflect on a long-term career rather than simply employment in the field, to have experienced both pre- and post-professionalisation stages of youth work in Western Australia, and to be suitably qualified as a professional youth worker. Given these parameters and targets, the sample was considered from a distinct timeframe of graduates from the Bachelor of Youth Work Degree between 1990 and 2000 at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. The proposed sample size was 5 to 20 participants in accordance with phenomenological methodology guidelines (Morse, 1994, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1989).

Issues were anticipated with the proposed sample during the planning phase of this research, including difficulty accessing graduate details, reluctance in engaging and potential lack of participant numbers because of a variety of factors. Given the proposed sample was from a particular higher education institution up to 30 years prior to the proposed time of implementation, it was a possibility that graduates might have proved difficult to locate. It was also possible that participants may have been reluctant to engage even after transparent explanations of the proposed research, including detailed information and consent procedures (see Appendices 1 and 2). Further to these possible issues, potential participants may not have currently resided in Western Australia or may have moved out of the youth work field soon after graduating. These potential sampling issues may have required either revision of the research question or limiting potential participants because of limited career time in the youth work field. Whilst identified as possible obstacles, these issues did not eventuate during the undertaking of this research.

**Data Collection**

The method of data collection for this study was in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the participants in accordance with the phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The initial procedure was to conduct one interview per participant, with potential secondary interviews being conducted dependent on the level of data saturation. The
phenomenological interview approach began with two broad questions, those being—what have the participants experienced in terms of the phenomenon, and what contexts or situations have influenced or affected their experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994)? Using this approach as a basis, the two key interview questions for this study were:

1. Can you outline your career and the roles you have fulfilled in the youth work field?
2. What has happened in your life outside of work that has impacted on your career?

These two key questions formed the basis of the interviews, allowing for phenomenological inquiry along with grounded theory methods. While allowing for expansion and open discussion, these two questions built upon the central research question, ‘What does it mean to have a long-term career in youth work?’ Further specific questions were prepared to reflect the six themes emerging from the literature review, along with questions pertaining to career theory (see Appendix 3).

The participant interviews were conducted using the timeline interview technique to produce a visual representation of career development and life history simultaneously. The timeline interview technique involved participants drawing their responses and discussions, as described by Adriansen (2012):

The backbone of the method is the drawing of a timeline in the middle of the paper. I usually draw it horizontally, but it could be any other way the interviewee prefers. Ordering of events can be guiding the interview. An important issue is when the timeline should begin and end. (p. 43)

The rationale for using the timeline interview technique has been best captured by Goodson and Sikes (2001), who described the method as a means of capturing one’s history inclusive of multiple facets of life. This approach was appropriate for the proposed research because it allows for relational discussion between life and career experiences over a long period.

Further questions would be developed for potential secondary interviews if necessary and would be guided by the emerging concepts from the initial interviews. It was important for participants to be informed of the possibility of secondary interviews at the outset of recruitment. The interview style was open ended and conversational, using the common ground of the researcher’s own experience in the youth work field to build rapport with participants.
Participants were informed of the requirements of consent and their right to withdraw, as well as the interview being audio recorded. It was explained to participants that the recordings were confidential, were only to be used for the purposes of research analysis and would be stored securely. Interviews were conducted at participants’ workplace in an appropriate room to maintain confidentiality.

Analyzing the Data

This study used two phases of analysis to interpret the data on a phenomenological level and through grounded theory methods. The two phases of analysis were necessary given the focus of this research was to uncover the essence of the phenomenon and to include an appraisal of how useful the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model are to further understanding of the phenomenon on a theoretical level.

Phase 1: Phenomenological Analysis

The data analysis method began by transcribing the interviews and reflecting on the overall process of conducting the interviews before organising the data into themes. This particular approach was important for the central question, since exploring a broad phenomenon such as career within the Western Australian youth work context requires recognising an overarching appreciation of the data in its entirety. This method was explained by Giorgi (1994) as an adaptation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, whereby the researcher engages reflectively with the whole before venturing into the specifics of the data. The coding process reflected the initial research question by focusing not only on themes pertaining to experiences of the youth work career, but also on the shared experiences between participants of variables and contextual causal factors driving those experiences.

The analysis process then followed the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis, which involves developing a list of significant statements before grouping the statements into meaning units (Cloonan, 1998). Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight how this process is a sound interpretive tool as it mitigates repetition. Through the horizontalisation coding process, the meaning of what the participants experienced as well as how the participants experienced the phenomenon gains clarity. The significant statements were then grouped into themes to avoid
repetition and seek focus in analysis. Major and minor themes were developed pending the emerging data, and these themes were organised as meaning clusters comprising sub-themes.

A textural description was developed from the themes, which is presented in the findings chapter (chapter 4) of this thesis to reflect ‘what’ the participants experienced. A structural description is then presented in the discussion chapter (chapter 5), developing meaning from the major themes with reference to the literature review. Finally, a composite description was synthesised into the ‘essence statement’, which is presented at the end of the phenomenological discussion in chapter 5. Creswell and Poth (2018) declared the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis to be a highly rigorous approach to phenomenological inquiry. Organising the data through the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method within the sampling boundaries provided a sound structure for capturing the shared experiences of participants.

**Phase 2: Grounded Theory Methods Analysis**

It must be clearly reiterated that the second phase of data analysis was not the core focus of this research, but rather a supplementary procedure with the objective of appraising the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model. Methods traditionally used in grounded theory research were applied to test the usefulness of the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model in pursuit of further understanding the phenomenon. This second phase of data analysis involved a process of axial coding. Through axial coding, the meaning units developed through the coding process in phase 1 were positioned against the self-concept theory of career development. This axial coding process was applied not in the pursuit of developing a career theory pertaining to youth work in the traditional grounded theory sense but rather to expand on the causal factors of the experiences of the candidates. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained the benefits of using axial coding to investigate causation behind the phenomenon in question. This process examined the interplay between self-concept and career identity and to ascertain the extent to which career stages, life stages and life roles affect experiences of the long-term youth work career.

Following the axial coding process, selective coding was used to refine the interrelations between the meaning units and the life career rainbow model. This process is explored in the discussion chapter (chapter 5) of this paper, with conclusions and recommendations drawn regarding the usefulness of the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model in understanding the long-term youth work career.
The grounded theory methods of axial and selective coding facilitated use of the lens of career theory in the pursuit of meaning, which is the key interest of phenomenology (Grossoehme, 2014). Through the two phases of data analysis, a comprehensive and meaning-rich understanding of the youth work career was achieved. The aim of using grounded theory methods as a secondary phase of analysis in this research was to add further depth and theoretical rigour to the pursuit of understanding the long-term youth work career.

Table 3.1 outlines the two methodologies employed in this research, along with their specific research questions and sub-questions. The data sources are clarified in the table, and the interview questions can be found as an appendix to this thesis.
### Table 3.1: Research Questions and Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Research Sub-questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. (Phenomenological inquiry) What is the shared experience of a long-term career in youth work?</strong></td>
<td>1A: What has <strong>changed</strong> in the youth work <strong>field</strong> from when you first started your career?</td>
<td>• Interview questions 3 and 5&lt;br&gt;• Literature review&lt;br&gt;• Timeline activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1B: What are the key factors of <strong>longevity</strong> in the youth work career?</td>
<td>• Interview questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6&lt;br&gt;• Literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1C: What are the <strong>positive and negative</strong> experiences of a youth work career?</td>
<td>• Interview questions 4, 5, 6 and 7&lt;br&gt;• Literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. (Grounded Theory Methods) To what extent is the self-concept theory of career development useful in understanding the long-term youth work career?</strong></td>
<td>2A: To what extent do career and life experiences <strong>interrelate</strong> with one another?</td>
<td>• Timeline activity&lt;br&gt;• Interview questions 1, 3, 4 and 8&lt;br&gt;• Literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2B: To what extent do <strong>life roles</strong> influence the youth work career?</td>
<td>• Timeline activity&lt;br&gt;• Interview questions 1, 2, 8 and 9&lt;br&gt;• Literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2C: To what extent do <strong>career stages</strong> inform an understanding of the youth work career?</td>
<td>• Timeline activity&lt;br&gt;• Interview questions 2, 3 and 7&lt;br&gt;• Literature review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Validity and Reliability

Creswell and Poth (2016, p.206) explained that “We consider ‘validation’ in qualitative research to be an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher, the participants, and the readers”. This approach to validity asks not whether the research requires verification but rather that the processes of the research are reflective of the research question and congruent with ethical and accurate research methods (Noble & Smith,
To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of this research, the strategies of supervisory review and member checking were implemented.

The process of supervisory review involved a reputable qualitative researcher to critique the findings and processes conducted in the research. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified the importance of the reviewer asking critical questions regarding methodology and data interpretation throughout the research process. This method of review provided a level of constructive critique of all phases involved in the research. This review also provided an opportunity for feedback regarding potential biases of the researcher to be identified, further validating the rigour of the research. Throughout the entire process of this study, the research supervisor was consulted on a consistent basis to ensure continuity of feedback and guidance.

Member checking was key to the validity of this research, with opportunities presented for participants to provide feedback regarding analysis and interpretation of the data. Ensuring the data and emerging themes are a true and accurate representation of those experiencing the phenomenon is vital to ensure credibility and validity of the research (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sandelowski, 1986). Throughout the interview process, the researcher provided reflective summaries to the participants, inviting them to confirm or clarify the researcher’s perception of the interviewee responses. This process allowed participants to identify and scrutinise the researcher’s interpretations of emerging themes and concepts. Participants could agree, disagree or offer alternative terms and perspectives, which added to the accuracy of participant experiences of the phenomenon (Riley, 1990). Duffy and Hedin (1988) confirmed the importance of this validity technique, outlining its usefulness in achieving congruency between participant responses and the interpretations of those responses by the researcher.

Participants were invited to respond to the seven major themes that emerged from the data (see chapter 4, Findings) via email. Seven participants responded and were confident that the emergent themes reflected an accurate representation of their interview responses, with two participants providing feedback on which specific themes resonated most with them. Creswell and Poth (2016, p.208) considered member checking to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” in qualitative research. This participant feedback added to the validity of this research significantly and confirmed that second-round interviews were not required because data saturation had been achieved through the initial interviews and data analysis.
**Ethical Issues**

As explained by Creswell and Creswell (2018), “Ethical questions are apparent today in such issues as personal disclosure, authenticity, and credibility of the research report” (p. 88). While many potential ethical issues exist in the forum of research, the following were identified as relevant and key considerations for this research. Initially, the research required approval by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. This process was undertaken prior to commencing contact with organisations and potential participants. The research was approved on the 14 January 2020 by the Human Research Ethics Committee with a negligible risk rating and included a risk management plan to mitigate potential areas such as coercion of participants, distress experienced by participants and confidentiality. Further risk assessment was conducted and revised because of the impacts of COVID-19 during the research period, with continuing approval granted. Key measures proposed and implemented were flexible interview methods, comprising Zoom, Facetime and phone interviews, as well as the use of an online whiteboard application, which allowed participants to complete the timeline activity throughout the interviews. This ensured consistency was maintained across all interviews in the research. The Human Research Ethics Committee was satisfied that this research project remained at a negligible risk rating with adequate measures in place to mitigate potential risks.

Significant ethical issues regarding participants could potentially have involved the purpose of the study not being disclosed, as well as participants feeling that their involvement was compulsory. Moreover, while participants might be aware of the voluntary nature of research, they might still feel pressured by the researcher or organisation to be involved. Measures undertaken to mitigate these issues included transparency in explaining the intent of the study via the information form (appendix 1) and clear communication in the consent form regarding the voluntary nature of involvement, including the option to withdraw at any time (appendix 2). These particular measures also lend themselves to alleviating the ethical issue of deceiving participants, as Creswell and Creswell (2018) discussed: “To counteract this problem, provide instructions that remind the participants about the purpose of the study” (p. 94).

Respecting privacy and confidentiality were also key ethical considerations of this research, along with appropriate storage of data. The information letter (appendix 1) and consent form (appendix 2) reflected measures to mitigate these issues. Non-identifiable text was utilised by referring to interviewees as participants 1 to 10 in the findings chapter rather than by name.
Further identifiable text, such as organisation, service, program, supervisor and colleague names, was omitted where possible to ensure the participants remained anonymous. Where this information is required in this thesis, the specifics, such as organisation names, are replaced with three underscores to maintain participant anonymity. Data from the research project will be stored securely for seven years, of which participants were made aware before interviews were conducted.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings from the data analysis. The findings are organised by first providing a descriptive overview of the participant profiles, followed by descriptions of seven major themes and four minor themes. Analysis of the interview data resulted in the emergence of seven major themes: Qualifications and Training, Supportive Connections, Values, Youth Work as a Distinct Profession, Leadership, Diversity and Barriers. Minor themes also emerged, including genesis and wisdom, professional development and further study, recognition, and employment roles in tertiary/higher education.

Participant Interviews and Profile

Participants for this research project were interviewed in March, April and May of 2020, with interviews averaging 90 minutes in length. All participants were women (not by design), with one participant identifying as Aboriginal Australian and the other nine participants identifying as non-Aboriginal or Torres Islander Australians. Adjustments to ethical procedures and risk management strategies because of COVID-19 resulted in flexible interview methods, which comprised face to face, Facetime, Zoom and phone interviews. The first two interviews were conducted face to face with participants, as originally planned. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the participant interview profiles.
### Table 4.1: Participant Interview Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Date Consent Signed</th>
<th>Date Interviewed</th>
<th>Interview Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26 February 2020</td>
<td>9 March 2020</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13 February 2020</td>
<td>9 March 2020</td>
<td>Face to face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 March 2020</td>
<td>16 March 2020</td>
<td>Facetime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4 March 2020</td>
<td>1 April 2020</td>
<td>Zoom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 April 2020</td>
<td>14 April 2020</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20 April 2020</td>
<td>21 April 2020</td>
<td>Facetime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28 April 2020</td>
<td>1 May 2020</td>
<td>Facetime</td>
</tr>
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<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20 April 2020</td>
<td>1 May 2020</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20 April 2020</td>
<td>6 May 2020</td>
<td>Phone</td>
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<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18 April 2020</td>
<td>7 May 2020</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In their interviews, the 10 participants explained their lives and career development, most having obtained initial paid employment through their work placements. They provided diverse accounts of their careers, with some participants working in one area of youth work for their entire career and others working across two or more key areas of the sector. The participants described employment in organisations that were mostly funded through competitive tendering.
The majority of participants were employed in two or more areas of the youth work field. As anticipated, the most prevalent employment by youth work type was in local government youth services and homelessness services, both representing 35% of career employment across all participants. The third most prevalent area of employment was in education, with other types of youth work comprising 8%. The ‘other’ category included leisure and recreation organisations, disability services, and alcohol and other drug-specific services. The specifics of these services are not discussed in this thesis to maintain the anonymity of participants. Figure 4.1 provides a visual representation of employment prevalence by youth work type.

![Figure 4.1: Participant Profile by Youth Work Type](image)

**Seven Major Themes**

Seven major themes emerged from the interpretation of the data through the coding process: Qualifications and Training, Supportive Connections, Values, Youth Work as a Distinct Profession, Leadership, Diversity and Barriers. Qualifications and Training was expected; however, elements of this major theme, including the extent to which the process of enlightenment through knowledge acquisition was shared among participants, were more prominent than expected by the researcher. The themes of Values, Youth Work as a Distinct Profession and Barriers were very much expected by the researcher, with much of the
participant responses aligning with existing literature, particularly in the themes of Values and Barriers. The theme of Leadership was more prominent than expected, as was the theme of Diversity. Both themes were central to the key findings in this study and provide insight into important drivers of career longevity for participants. Each of these major themes contained sub-themes, which will be described with supportive statements from the raw data.

**Major Theme 1. Qualifications and Training**

The theme of qualifications and training was a common theme throughout participant interviews. Participants explained the impact of their study in the youth work degree, the importance of work placements, experiences of retrospective learning and the phenomenon of having their ‘eyes and mind’ opened through the youth work course content as a process of enlightenment.

When considering the experience of studying, the youth work degree participants shared common experiences regarding the course content preparing them well for the youth work field. In particular, participants regarded learning the theoretical frameworks and models essential to their understanding of youth work, as well as the practical skills for application in the field:

Participant 1: Without my degree, I would never have got into the field. Learning about the frameworks consolidated this and gave me a language to what I wanted to do.

Participant 3: It gave me a really good grounding and the skills I learned at University still stand true today.

Participant 10: I was always a really practical learner and a practical person. So, when we were doing role plays and talking about case studies, that was where my attention was really focused.

Participant 6: Mainly doing strategic planning and grant writing, both which were skills that I had done again in my youth work course … I did a lot of work using what I had learned from my youth work degree.
Retrospective learning emerged as a sub-theme within the qualifications and training major theme. Participants described how some of the theoretical learning at university made sense to them later through their practice in the youth work field.

Participant 1: I can only now sometimes go, that’s what they were talking about, I’m not academic, it was so, what’s the word, abstract to me ... Yeah, but now I get it and it’s all fallen into place down the track.

What was evident in the participant comments was a shared affinity for understanding young people as a contextual group in society. Understanding young people as a social construct within multiple layers of societal structures was common throughout the comments, particularly in terms of political and sociological analysis.

Participant 6: When I look back on my youth work degree and when I look back on the variety of topics that we covered, you know, everything from philosophy to you know, understanding young people through to the political space they occupy in the world.

Participant 2: The best thing about the degree was that it just, I guess, opened your mind to the complexities of the world and young people, and I think that’s what it did for me the most.

The element of understanding young people through sociological and political contexts was accompanied by a broader ‘opening of eyes and mind’, an enlightenment process, as expressed by multiple participants. Described as both self-reflective and a broadening of knowledge, this experience of enlightenment was common among participants and expressed as being highly important for understanding not only young people but society as a whole and their place in it.

Participant 8: It gave me a really good understanding of who I was, where I came from, what my values were, you know, a good understanding of sort of the context of me in the world. It gave me that philosophical basis of what I was doing and where I was going and why I was doing it.

Participant 6: I have a very good grasp of the broader picture and I think that’s what youth work gives you … when you do a youth work degree, you have to see young people in a context. And so, I think for most people that I know
who’ve come through they then see the world in a context. You don’t just see numbers on a page ... I think it really does lead you to see the world in different ways.

The component of practicum work placements was a pertinent element of the youth work degree experience among participant comments. In particular, participants explained a range of enjoyment and finding their place through practical work placements, along with establishing connections in the field (to be discussed further in the Supportive Connections theme). The practical work placement provided a reflective space where participants could execute skills learned in the youth work course, apply theoretical frameworks and models through reflective practice and obtain paid employment in the youth work field.

Participant 3: Through that placement I got my first youth work job. I also was doing a placement at the City of _____ Youth Centre and also got a part-time job through them, and I was doing some stuff for the City of _____ and then got casual work too, so I had three part-time jobs in my first year of youth work.

Participant 7: Definitely the practical element. I mean, the fact I’ve got most employment out of those prac’s was a huge thing. And I guess that’s what you learn most, being out and about in that field. I think when it came to go for interviews just having that degree, yeah, I think they were definitely valuing that experience in youth work.

**Major Theme 2. Supportive Connections**

Participants commonly referred to a range of supports and connections as an essential characteristic of their youth work career. Supportive connections were highly influential in terms of career longevity and as a safeguard against burnout. This theme was characterised by the importance of a mentor in the youth work field, particularly at the early career stage for most participants. Supportive teams and organisations emerged as a sub-theme, with professional supervision also emerging in conjunction, and networks in the youth work field was the final emergent sub-theme.

The role of the mentor was clearly an influential element of the youth work career experience for the majority of participants. Often the bridge between the professional placement
component of the youth work degree and entering the workforce, the workplace mentor was important to participants in establishing their role, place and standards as an employed youth worker. Some participants also explained how the mentor became a lifelong connection and support, leading to personal as well as professional support later in life:

Participant 3: When I was in my first youth work experience, definitely _____, who was my boss at the time when I was a student on placement … Still to this day I have contact with her.

Participant 6: I had a boss who was completely supportive, _____ and I sort of developed a relationship that we still have up to today … definitely a mentor in both my personal and professional development.

Participant 4: He would lead the way but allow me the space to develop my views, and just to look outside a situation for what’s going on around it ... I ended up getting my first job with him ... he was pivotal in my development in youth work for sure ... I’m still in close contact with him.

Participant 2: He was really a very supportive supervisor for a young youth worker, I spent a couple of years there … it was amazing, well-structured policies and procedures, a really good place to learn and grow and become more professional.

Participants also explained how supportive teams and organisations enhanced their positive experience in the youth work field and affected longevity:

Participant 10: The people that I’ve worked with has been what made or broke it. My work relationships and my work enjoyment. We have just formed this amazing work relationship ... that’s why I’ve stayed here so long because within the team, we are a team, and we are a unit.

Participant 3: For me, the team is the most important asset to any organisation. If I didn’t have good supports around me personally and professionally, I would never have survived. If you build a good workplace with a good healthy environment where you can be yourself, you can go through trauma struggles,
happiness, sadness, whatever and still come back and be able to do your job with a little bit of flexibility. That’s what keeps you in the job.

Participant 1: I think working for a good organisation has given me longevity.

Further to supportive teams and organisations was the sub-theme of supervision. Professional supervision was highly valued by many participants as both a form of professional growth and self-care. The link between supervision and self-care was evident in participants acknowledging that their wellbeing was both a personal and organisational responsibility. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of the availability of external supervision:

Participant 2: There’s a lot more supervision and support, _____ gave me external supervision ... at least fortnightly, and those sorts of things are really important, and I think that’s why youth workers do so much better and deal with things so much better … Some of the stuff you deal with is full on and not being able to talk about it is problematic … to be able to offer that debriefing and support I think is really important because, again, I’m lucky it has happened to become more professional, and I’m passionate about youth workers being supervised well.

Participant 3: So, I’ve done supervision and performance management depending on the organisation with staff, and to offer them group supervision as well outside of the agency or individual supervision I think is very important because sometimes you don’t want to tell your boss everything, and an outside party can articulate that in a much more effective way.

Participant 4: I’m a big believer in you can’t, you know, fill anyone else’s cup if yours is empty. I would be looking for that support to be internal as well as having that external support provided by the organisation. Yeah, it’s really important, whether it’s personal or professional focused. I think I’ve always used extra support when I need it.

Participants expressed the importance of building networks and connections with the broader youth field. The benefit of these networks was evidently related to a genuine sense of being
part of something greater than the individual role or organisation itself. Of particular interest in
the data were inter-agency networks, and connections with Youth Work WA and YACWA:

Participant 4. I think I’ve always had that connection to those people. Yeah, which continue to inspire me in that space and the having that connection with Youth Work WA I think keeps you connected to why you’re doing this.

Participant 2: People knowing each other is really helpful and I’m always using my connections, yes, it would be connections. I had always kept in contact with what was going on.

Major Theme 3. Values

Participants expressed the factors of internal values, having contact with young people and enjoyment in the industry as contributing strongly to longevity and retention. Internal values of participants were found to correlate with the ‘genesis’ (see minor themes) that initially led them to youth work, with the common shared value of social justice being evident. Maintaining contact with young people was also an important sub-theme, particularly for participants who had moved into senior leadership and management roles. Finally, continuous employment emerged as an important sub-theme across all participant experiences of the youth work career. It is important to clarify that values as a major theme were reflective of those identified by the participants, and not exclusively ‘youth work’ values per se.

The strongest sub-theme within participant values was clearly a commitment to social justice and making a difference to the lives of others:

Participant 6: Why would you do youth work if you didn’t have any desire to want to make the world into a better place? That’s what you’ve got to want to do in youth work.

Participant 9: From a young age I would always be making sure things were fair ... I’ve always had that, you know, that whole justice sense and everyone being equal and not being above each other.
Participant 2: When I was in year five, I wanted to help people ... I never changed from there, so I’ve always been very sure I wanted to be in the helping field. It was the best decision I ever made, and I’ve had such a big, amazing career.

Participant 3: I always wanted to work with people, if you can make a difference every day in someone’s life that’s what gets you out of bed.

Maintaining contact with young people was a common shared sub-theme among participants, particularly for those who had moved into leadership roles and their face-to-face contact with young people had consequently diminished:

Participant 9: It is such a privilege to have been a part of their lives.

Participant 2: It’s still young people … if I left that I’d be a bit lost … their energy, their vulnerability … they’re still learning, and they still have lots of opportunity.

Participant 5: That’s why you do what you do, you know, although I’ve learned as I’ve aged that, you know, your advocacy at a systems level can perhaps improve the lives of more young people than just that individual, but I think as youth workers you need to remain connected in some way to what’s happening for young people.

The final sub-theme shared among all participants was continuous employment throughout the entire youth work career. While not explicitly stated by any participant, the data showed no experiences of involuntary or unwanted prolonged periods of unemployment across all participants. On the contrary, participants shared careers marked by constant employment, while some described being directly sought after for paid employment in the youth work field:

Participant 3: Whether it’s, you know, service-based or program based or however you want to deliver it, I haven’t ever had to actually look for work, it’s just come my way through the connections that you’ve had and the people that you’ve worked with. So, I’ve never actually had to apply for a job formally.

Participant 8: I did 12 months maternity leave, and I was going to quit and be a stay-at-home mum. My supervisor didn’t want me to quit and said what did you
want? I said, I only want to work eight hours a week, so I went on a contract one day a week.

The continuous employment sub-theme was incredibly significant, with all participants experiencing continual and sustained employment over a minimum 20-year career. This sub-theme has strong connections to the qualifications and training theme because most participants gained paid employment through workplace practicums; it also has links to the major themes of supportive connections and diversity.

Major Theme 4. Youth Work as a Distinct Profession

Youth work as a distinct discipline and practice was expressed in differing forms throughout the interview process. Standards and ethical practice constituted a sub-theme with links to external influences such as legislative occupational health and safety requirements and resultant organisational policy. In terms of ethical youth work, the elements of young person as the primary constituent, maintaining boundaries and practising self-care were most evident. Youth work professionalisation was a strong sub-theme emerging from the data, with the importance of having a strong professional identity being evident. In saying this, respect for youth work as a distinct profession varied in the experiences of participants.

The professional standards and ethical practice of youth work were consistently experienced as having evolved throughout the careers of the participants:

Participant 2: In terms of professionalism, youth work is so much higher standard now. Back then we really had no contingency plan, no risk management plan … most youth services are now well-structured and have clear policies and procedures in place to support people to ensure that they are getting the best service would be the biggest thing that’s changed. We definitely have higher expectations and standards, you know, we expect youth workers to know the code of ethics and to work within the code of ethics, we expect them to have strong boundaries.

Participant 8: It brings credit and credibility to the role … this is who I am, this is what I stand for, these are the ethics I abide by.
Participant 5: I think we need more people that have the degree as a qualification … youth work is also a philosophy, it’s also a really integral kind of practice.

Participants self-identified as having a strong professional identity not only through the personal values held and undertaking ethical practice but also by explaining the distinctiveness of youth work as a profession. Central to the shared experiences were the distinct features of informal education, the young person as the primary client, and working holistically and contextually with young people’s individual circumstances:

Participant 7: I was thinking of moving into social work and had ruled out psych. It was a lot of, back then, a lot of hospital work and assessments within the home that put me off and that’s when I found youth work and went, that’s my target, you know, in terms of the young people. Yeah, so that was probably the lightning bolt moment.

Participant 5: I’ve worked with a lot of social workers and I’ve worked with psychologists and I think youth work does it very differently, it’s almost more of a script to the way that they operate. With youth work it’s about being in that moment with that young person and not going in with that hidden agenda that you think that you know what’s best, because everything is centred around the young person. And that whole empowerment model, I don’t actually see it in its true form as much as I do in youth work.

Participant 9: I’m very strong on the importance of education but I’m not talking about academic education. More youth workers providing that informal education and life skills education on simple things like you’re not going to get told in school. So, it’s about how do I put the needs of the young person first within this setting.

Participant 3: When I first started, anything that we put out was never recognised, whereas I think now it’s a skilled industry, it’s a specialised industry.

Participant 4: Professionalism was a discussion that we were having when I was at university. I feel like it’s more embedded and things today, you know, if
you’re signing on to youth work nowadays, you’re signing onto that level of professionalism. Whereas I suppose when I was still going through it was sort of, like, you know, a conversation, but yeah, certainly seems to be much more consolidated and embedded now.

Participant 2: I really strongly identified with my career. That’s me. That’s who I am.

In terms of how youth work was perceived externally to the youth work field, participants revealed mixed experiences. Some participants experienced an external shift of higher respect and understanding of youth work; however, most felt this had not progressed in the views of those external to youth work. These discussions focused largely on the professionalisation of youth work:

Participant 3: It’s now come to real fruition and it’s recognised in society as important, and we are valued in what we do and what we have to say and what we offer. Youth work over the years has become much more respected, and people value, I think, youth work more today as it has become more professionalised. Yeah, it’s just seen in a much better light.

Participant 9: When Youth Work WA came about and a code of ethics came about, it made it seem more professional. However, a lot of people external still see youth work as just the drop-in centre.

Participant 10: I feel like we’re underappreciated because there’s times where we don’t receive the level of professional courtesy that we deserve. If we came to a meeting and there were three of us sitting here, you know, my profession would be seen as less than theirs because there is a level of hierarchy, they sit higher than what we do. Sometimes the inequality of it can be quite frustrating.

**Major Theme 5. Leadership**

The major theme of leadership emerged as a combination of formal leadership roles and informal leadership opportunities. Mentoring new youth workers was a sub-theme strongly shared amongst participants. The concept of strategic advocacy became prominent within this theme, with participants describing their experiences of advocating for young people through
systematic change and service design. Related to this was the sub-theme of responsiveness in practice.

Mentoring new youth workers, or ‘becoming the mentor’, emerged from the data as a strong sub-theme within leadership. Mentoring new youth workers involved guiding and coaching on a collegial level through the experience and wisdom gained throughout participants’ careers. Formal roles of management and supervision also involved mentoring new youth workers, either as new members of staff through reporting lines or as students on workplace practicums. Participants described the mentoring experience as challenging yet highly enjoyable, and one of the key aspects of the long-term youth work career identity:

Participant 2: Managing people is always one of the hardest jobs. I have direct supervision of six youth workers to support them into supporting young people, which is what I’ve always been passionate about … just being able to influence and mentor the young youth workers. I can see the direct impact of supervising youth workers when I see them out in the field, and to know that I was part of that is really important.

Participant 5: You can be that mentor and personal coach, and you need to draw out the strengths of each of your staff.

Participant 1: I do a lot of development with youth workers as well, which I really enjoy.

Strategic advocacy emerged strongly from the data, with participants sharing experiences of being highly involved in structural level organisational change as well as societal change. Participants discussed how they were in positions of leadership whereby they introduced significant reform regarding policy, organisational strategy, complex community plans, and achieved funding access and service stability:

Participant 5: What my role has emerged to is advocacy at a systems level not necessarily with the individual young people. And I’ve succeeded in that. I created a youth development framework … and really expanded the youth leadership programs ... it was a new strategy that needed to involve all kinds of divisions around how they engage and incorporate young people into their
planning and into their service design. So that was fantastic. It was the first time that young people were included.

Participant 1: I developed the _____ program in response to that issue faced by a young person in our service and established the _____ program, which was quite pivotal in progressing towards a very holistic organisation for young people.

Responsiveness and service design was described by participants as crucial to meeting the needs of young people. This sub-theme was prevalent in discussions about leadership, whereby participants experienced higher levels of autonomy in decision-making in leadership roles. This position allowed participants to respond effectively to the needs of young people and communities at the program delivery level as well as higher level service design.

Participant 3: We are driven by what the young people need. I think organisations in youth work are allowed to be a little bit more creative.

Participant 2: So, designing these programs, yeah, definitely to meet the needs of young people. The service has grown a lot.

**Major Theme 6. Diversity**

A persistent theme emerging from the data was the extent to which participants experienced diversity. Whilst diversity does conceptually carry various meanings, as a major theme in this study it speaks to variety in job roles, flexible working arrangements, and a range of opportunities that presented throughout the participant’s careers, often unexpectedly.

The sub-theme of variety was integral to many participant experiences pertaining to enjoyment and longevity within their careers. The concept of variety took two forms in the data: variety within youth work roles and variety between different youth work roles experienced by participants:

Participant 8: It’s never the same job. It’s never the same day. Yeah, always being able to do something different, and I think that is definitely something that, you know, I’ve enjoyed about working in youth work.
Participant 5: There’s some evening work, and then there was daytime, so I really enjoyed it, very different young people that have come to drop in than the ones that were referred to the drug and alcohol program. I think that’s the best thing of youth work to be honest, I got the opportunity to work on a diverse range of programs within that role. I loved the youth centre that had the balance of drop-in centre but also the structure of school holiday programs. Yeah, so, and as I said before, just about balancing, I think, some of that recreation part as well. I think I want to be creative, and you’re able to be quite creative too.

Participant 10: I just loved doing the outreach work there. I loved the freedom. I loved going into people’s home, really supporting young people. I loved the holiday programs. I just loved everything.

The shared experience of day-to-day variety was frequently voiced and expressed as highly important to longevity among participants reflecting on their careers in youth work. Participants also shared the common positive experience of how variety between youth work roles and settings enhanced their career and warded off stagnation.

Participant 2: I think it’s been very diverse … I think there’s lots of opportunities and it’s diverse. It is a diverse profession, and you can work for local government and not-for-profits and government, and I think, yeah, it’s just been really worthwhile.

Participant 3: I couldn’t stay in the industry for 40 years still doing the same sort of job. I’ve had so much variety where I’ve been able to grow and develop and build on my career.

Participant 1: Finding my niche has given me a lot of longevity.

The sub-theme of flexibility in youth work roles was also a common shared experience among participants. Participants explained how the overwhelming majority of their youth work career had allowed for flexibility and balance with other aspects of their lives, this being an important contributor towards career longevity.
Participant 7: We can do flexi time, TOIL [Time Off in Lieu]. I’m 0.8. So, I do get one day off a week and I don’t have to be a full absent school mum and can still assist down at the school. It is a pretty good balance.

Participant 8: After my first child I started to look for a role that was more, you know, school hours ... was more of a part-time role and they were quite open to being flexible in terms of times ... was looking for something that was more, I guess, family-friendly for me in terms of hours and that role was really flexible.

Participant 10: I had to structure my life a bit more around my children and my work balance ... so I was able to kind of fit in with my home balance and it was just enough to kind of keep me in the field doing something.

As a shared experience, the sub-theme of flexibility was found to be mostly associated with balance between work and family commitments, but not in all cases. Flexibility was also found to be a significant factor in enjoyment of the youth work career for lifestyle reasons other than family:

Participant 1: I guess you always think you want office hours, but I kind of thrived on the flexibility of shift work. I kind of really enjoy being able to go to the beach when I was there, or, you know, be in my garden during the day and work at night and stuff. I did find it interesting to adjust to office hours, but it wasn’t for me, so then I did go back to shift work.

Participant 6: The jobs I do are fun … I’m a lucky person with the way my career has gone, I’ve just made lifestyle choices throughout my career really.

The final sub-theme was that of opportunity, particularly unexpected opportunities and career destinations. Opportunity often resulted in leadership roles, which was presented as a major theme in its own right.

Participant 6: It’s been almost like a bit of a charmed life, you know, like I never set out to achieve anything and yet that ended up in very substantial and very highly regarded roles … For most of my career the only qualification I had was my youth work degree.
Participant 7: If you asked me if I thought I’d be here earning this money 15 years ago, not a chance, not a chance.

Participant 5: Experience leads you into your leadership and management roles ... there are opportunities to, you know, to earn a fairly decent wage and career opportunities, and into management and leadership positions.

Participant 8: It’s a really good platform to get a good understanding of who you are, what you want to do and how you want to work … It gives you that and then you can take that anywhere … I don’t know that I even thought about local government when I was studying youth work … local government has provided some different experiences. I certainly have appreciated all the different opportunities and different portfolios that I have been a part of.

**Major Theme 7. Barriers**

The seventh theme to emerge from the data was barriers in the youth work career. Within the theme of barriers were the sub-themes of bureaucracy, unsupportive organisations, funding issues, salary and lack of professional respect. Bureaucracy was more common in the career experiences of participants who had worked in local government roles than in the experiences of those from the non-government sectors of youth work:

Participant 2: Being able to answer directly to management versus the rigmarole and bureaucracy of _____ was heaps better. I don’t miss the organisation, that was the killer.

Participant 5: It is so tiring to try and get anything done. Bureaucracy, too many layers, just to get permission to do anything, the number of memos and reports and presentations. It’s down to the politics and what agenda they are driving, all very risk averse.

Participant 5: After fighting the bureaucracy for years, I was exhausted, I had to go into battle and shelter my team from that, I was just exhausted by the end of it. I don’t ever get burnt out from the youth work side, I get complete joy and get re-energised, it’s the bureaucracy and the slowness of it that frustrates me.
The barrier of unsupportive organisations and teams presented a conflicting perspective to the prevalent theme of supportive connections. Participants who had experienced unsupportive organisations and teams described feeling undervalued, exploited at times and dissatisfied in the workplace:

Participant 3: The team is the most important asset to an organisation … I’ve worked in organisations where that’s not been appreciated and it really is challenging, you know, and in a small organisation it’s amazing what you can achieve but when you come into a bigger organisation it’s a massive obstacle to overcome.

Participant 5: I did not believe in the organisation and it was a toxic environment for me, and therefore for my own health I needed to find somewhere else. I was craving some good solid leadership again.

Participant 10: There was conflict between the staff and management, and I was in the firing line. It created a really hostile work environment … I don’t know if I would say I was burnt out, I felt more like I’d been taken advantage of a bit, I felt too inexperienced to do the job I was being asked to do and was unsupported. I was happy to leave that service.

Participant 10: We were a very dysfunctional team … The whole dynamics at the office turned really awful.

Funding issues presented a barrier within the youth work career, with participants often reporting experiences of service closure due to short-term funding and general funding instability. These experiences were more common in early career experiences through the 1990s and early 2000s, which may be indicative of changes in the field in relation to professionalisation, or alternatively may be due to the more senior roles participants progressed into in the later stages of their careers:

Participant 7: I worked there for a year, then unfortunately it went under because we lost our funding.

Participant 10: I worked there for a period of time until the funding got pulled and the service got shut down.
Participant 1: Then we got funding for a program which went on for a couple of years, but we couldn’t get ongoing funding around that.

Participant 2: That was before they took all the funding from youth and young people and they put it into big organisations … homelessness is still the one that doesn’t grow enough because of funding and it really should be the one that is growing because they can’t meet their needs, but the funding is just not there.

Similarly, various positions fulfilled by participants were short-term finite contracts and ongoing contracts without permanency. These precarious work situations did present somewhat as barriers; however, no participants described them as significant factors in their overall career experience:

Participant 6: It was only a three-month position and I was acting in the role, so we couldn’t move because it was still only temporary.

Participant 8: I ended up working at ___ for a little while, I grabbed a small part-time contract for a while … I worked another grant-funded position that had funding for two years.

Participant 1: I accepted that opportunity, I think it was only like a six-month contract.

Participant 4: You could just go from contract to contract … I was on contracts for ages.

While a barrier in its own right, the issue of salary and remuneration could be viewed as a flow-on from funding issues. The findings do present a dichotomy on this issue, however, with some participants having positive experiences of remuneration throughout their youth work careers and others experiencing poor salaries.

The following are positive comments from participants:

Participant 3: Even rates of pay now are much better, we’re not always the lowest paid workers anymore, we can actually go in and fight for decent wages because we do a lot of amazing things that other professions don’t do.
Participant 4: I get paid well for what I do, particularly being there so long, so I’m really lucky in terms of pay.

Participant 7: The money is really good here, it’s quite outstanding, sometimes I even pinch myself.

Participant 5: I mean the pay depends if, you know, with your salary sacrifice, I think there are opportunities to earn a fairly decent wage now.

Participant 2: It’s a really worthwhile career, there are lots of opportunities, it’s not low paid.

While negative participant comments were as follows:

Participant 10: The pay was not good at _____, whereas I had always found the pay to be very reasonable for youth work at _____. It’s definitely not the money that has given me longevity, more support at work and in my personal life.

Participant 4: I’ve had jobs that have paid a lot of money, and I’ve also had jobs that don’t pay much, so youth work actually gives you both.

Consistent with much of the literature, lack of professional respect was a barrier experienced by some participants. Responses regarding this issue were reflective of the long-standing hierarchy of professions that work with young people, including psychologists, social workers and teachers:

Participant 5: Would I say we’ve progressed? No. Certainly not fast enough. Unfortunately, I don’t think we’ve progressed in terms of getting youth work any further recognised … I don’t see momentum there now.

Participant 10: I think, also, there’s a lack of understanding about exactly what it is we do. My profession would be seen as less than theirs (psychologists and social workers) and that’s what’s frustrating, and it does come back to that pay scale you know—those professions are paying far more.

Table 4.2 below presents the major themes in a clear visual format, along with subsequent sub-themes and significant statements.
### Table 4.2: Major Themes from the Findings

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<th>Major Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme 1: Qualifications and Training</strong></td>
<td>• Degree • Opening eyes/mind; enlightenment • Placement • Retrospective learning</td>
<td>• Without my degree, I would never have got into the field • Definitely the practical element. I mean, the fact I’ve got most employment out of those prac’s was a huge thing. And I guess that’s what you learn most, being out and about in that field. • The best thing about the degree was that it just, I guess, opened your mind to the complexities of the world • I can only now sometimes go, that’s what they were talking about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme 2: Supportive Connections</strong></td>
<td>• The mentor • Building networks • Supportive organisations and teams • Professional supervision</td>
<td>• He was pivotal in my development in youth work for sure • The people that I’ve worked with has been what made or broke it • If I didn’t have good supports around me personally and professionally, I would never have survived • Working for a good organisation has given me longevity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme 3: Values</strong></td>
<td>• Intrinsic values • Relationship with young people • Constant employment</td>
<td>• You need to remain connected in some way to what’s happening for young people • From a young age I would always be making sure things were fair • I haven’t ever had to actually look for work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme 4: Youth Work as a Distinct Profession</strong></td>
<td>• Standards and ethical practice • Professional identity • Professional respect</td>
<td>• In terms of professionalism, youth work is so much higher standard now • It brings credit and credibility to the role … this is who I am, this is what I stand for, these are the ethics I abide by • I really strongly identified with my career. That’s me. That’s who I am • That whole empowerment model, I don’t actually see it in its true form as much as I do in youth work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme 5: Leadership</strong></td>
<td>• Mentoring new youth workers • Leadership roles • Responsiveness and service design • Strategic advocacy</td>
<td>• I do a lot of development with youth workers as well, which I really enjoy • We are driven by what the young people need. I think organisations in youth work are allowed to be a little bit more creative • What my role has emerged to is advocacy at a systems level … that was fantastic. It was the first time that young people were included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme 6: Diversity</strong></td>
<td>• Variety • Flexibility • Opportunities</td>
<td>• It’s never the same job. It’s never the same day • I couldn’t stay in the industry for 40 years still doing the same sort of job. I’ve had so much variety • I never set out to achieve anything and yet that ended up in very substantial and very highly regarded roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Theme 7: Barriers</strong></td>
<td>• Bureaucracy • Unsupportive organisations • Funding issues and salary • Lack of professional respect</td>
<td>• After fighting the bureaucracy for years, I was exhausted • There was conflict between the staff and management, and I was in the firing line • I worked there for a year, then unfortunately it went under because we lost our funding • I don’t think we’ve progressed in terms of getting youth work any further recognised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Minor Themes

Four minor themes emerged from the data, those themes being genesis and wisdom, ongoing learning (professional development and further study), recognition, and tertiary/higher education teaching roles. Professional development was expected to be prevalent among the data as a major theme; however, this was not the case since participants discussed more influence pertaining to the aforementioned major themes on their careers. Recognition was an unexpected minor theme to emerge, as was the tertiary and higher education roles as part of participant’s careers in youth work. These themes are considered minor in this study because they were not described by participants as having affected their career decisions and experiences to the same degree as the major themes.

Minor Theme 1: Genesis and Wisdom

An interesting minor theme to emerge from the data analysis was genesis and wisdom. While engaging in the timeline activity, participants discussed their lives prior to studying the youth work degree. Most participants described their upbringing and family dynamic as relatively mainstream and typical of middle-class Australian society:

Participant 6: My childhood was completely unremarkable.

Participant 7: I grew up in the country, we were really a middle income, middle class socio-economic family.

Participant 4: I had a pretty standard childhood. Both of my parents were together.

Participant 2: I didn’t have a particularly difficult childhood or anything like that.

Participant 1: I was quite a stable young person.

Participant 5: I guess I did have quite a traditional childhood.

Conversely, two participants discussed a more turbulent upbringing resulting in homelessness:
Participant 3: We were the first kids in our school to have our parents separate. I went a little bit wayward for a while, I got expelled from school and I was actually a street present young person for a little while.

Participant 9: I was kicked out of home, and at that stage there were no youth services, no accommodation services.

This insight presented a somewhat unexpected result from the study. Many participants experienced that friends and acquaintances in their lives assumed they had been drawn to youth work as a result of experiencing difficult childhoods and upbringings themselves. This was found to be true in a small number of participants but was not the norm for the majority of participants. Informing the genesis element of this theme were common experiences of family members working in what could loosely be termed ‘helping’ professions or being community minded. Interestingly, this element was common among those participants who reported a more stable and unremarkable upbringing:

Participant 7: I guess Dad being a teacher was probably why I was interested in that area.

Participant 5: I came from two people that were community service people. I was heavily influenced by them having, you know, an approach that was about wanting to make a change for the better. That certainly carried through … I always loved the idea of youth work alongside education.

Participant 3: As a child, I was always “taking in the strays”, there were always people staying at our house.

Participants discussed their reflections of school, again with mixed experiences. Six participants attended public schools, while the other four participants attended private Catholic schools. School experiences were not explicitly referred to by participants in terms of leading them towards a career in youth work, more so family and social experiences. These experiences were mixed and diverse, with some participants reflecting on a distinct moment as a catalyst, and others describing ‘falling into’ studying youth work:
Participant 10: I worked at the rec centre and really enjoyed my work there, so my love of working with young people probably came from my rec centre experience, but it wasn’t like a light bulb moment.

Participant 1: One night a friend knocked on my door and said her mum and dad have asked me to leave, I’ve got nowhere to go, can I stay here, and my parents said yes … That was really pivotal, I thought, that’s really unfair that someone could be in that position.

Participant 6: I looked through the ECU catalogue and saw youth work … I really chose something out of the blue.

Participant 7: I literally grabbed the ECU handbook and eventually got to Y and found youth work and I went, bang. That’s it. I had no idea that it even existed until I grabbed this handbook and went, that’s it.

Participant 1: I started working at a café and I asked someone what they are studying, and they said youth work, and it was just like, boom, what is youth work. So, this person described the youth work degree to me, and I applied and got accepted.

These experiences presented more diversity than similarity. If there is anything to be drawn out as common experience it would be a desire to help others, along with not setting out to (or even being aware of the option to) become a youth worker specifically.

On the other end of the spectrum is the concept of wisdom: the resultant knowledge and understanding gained throughout a long-term career in youth work. Participants were asked what they might say to a new youth worker, or to someone considering studying youth work. Responses provided insight into how youth workers progress from meeting their mentor early in their careers to becoming the mentor for others at later stages of their career. Central themes of participant responses concerning wisdom were reflective of the major themes presented earlier in this chapter, with wisdom having a clear overlap with the leadership theme. Participant responses were strongly grounded in concepts that supported career longevity, including the values of social justice, career opportunities and supportive connections:
Participant 6: I would ask a new youth worker questions around what they want to do in their life and what they want their legacy to be. If you’re wanting to make a difference in the world, if you’re wanting to understand people and why people do what they do and leave a legacy that you have changed people’s lives, then youth work is the job for you.

Participant 1: If you are passionate and are in a good space yourself to give to the profession, then opportunities are available to have a long career in youth work.

Participant 7: Do well at your prac and be prepared to work hard at the start. Every prac placement can get you employment and you can start from there, that’s where you start to build those connections, it’s about those relationships.

Speaking more to the role of youth work itself, other participant responses reflected professional and ethical practice, enjoyment of youth work and the experiences of genuine relationships throughout their careers. Professional and ethical practice centred on the particulars of self-care, boundaries and transparency in regard to genuine relationships with young people. These offerings of wisdom from long-term youth workers are insightful and provide baseline data for ethical practice and professional ethical codes:

Participant 10: I’d want to tell them about being professional and making sure that you have boundaries. I’d want to tell them about making sure you’ve got good supports around you because it can be really challenging.

Participant 3: It’s a great industry to work in. It’s creative. It’s fun. You get to meet all sorts of weird and wonderful people, and it’s about having those conversations and being genuine with people.

Participant 10: You’re going to be in the most privileged position to be in so many people’s lives. And it is about being true to yourself, you can’t fake it, it’s about being genuine.

While considered part of a minor theme, wisdom gained through long-term career experiences is rich in meaning when seeking to understand the essence of youth work as a career. Genesis presented varied segues into youth work, whereas wisdom was more consistent in terms of
shared experiences. These shared experiences were particularly focused on longevity indicators such as social justice values, career opportunities and supportive connections. Professional and ethical practice were also key points in the minor theme of genesis and wisdom, providing insight into the importance of professionalism as a driver of the long-term youth work career.

**Minor Theme 2: Ongoing Learning**

Professional development and further study were two areas discussed by participants. Professional development was often referred to towards the end of interviews, when participants were asked if they had anything they would like to add. Specialist workshops and brief training courses were mentioned most frequently, with participants commenting on the effectiveness of training on self-harm and suicide, sexual diversity and cultural competency:

Participant 1: I’ve done a lot of professional development around attempts on life, self-injury, I’ve done a lot of cultural learning and training … and I’ve done a lot around LGBTIQ+ inclusion, which I find really important.

Participant 2: There’s so much more training opportunities now for people to explore and do really good things and help young people, and I think it’s growing.

Participant 8: I really enjoy learning. I think that’s good practice as well to be growing and learning and developing rather than just doing.

Participants engaged in a range of further study options. Some explained how they engaged in further study at a time they were considering moving away from youth work for further career opportunities. Other participants described pursuing further study to expand their own knowledge in areas of interest, with the remaining participants completing management qualifications to enhance the leadership roles they had progressed to. Table 4.3 below outlines the further study engaged in by participants, with supplementary comments following.
Table 4.3: Further Study Undertaken by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Diploma of Management</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Masters Qualification</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Postgraduate Certificate of Management</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bachelor of Criminology</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bachelor of Law</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma of Psychology</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma of Counselling</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Postgraduate Diploma of Teaching</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Masters Qualification</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant 10: The thought of going back to study just, like, makes me cringe. There’s lots of reasons why I wouldn’t. Money would be the only reason to do it really.
Participant 4: I’d love to go and do further study now but that’s just not practical.

Participant 9: I didn’t finish studying _____, but I didn’t want the piece of paper. I studied because it was important to what I was doing.

Participant 7: I went back to my postgraduate in _____ at _____, because they are on a good wicket, really high amount of money but I thought is that the direction I want to go? I did one unit, passed that and went, now that I’ve got that and that’s enough. If anything, I’ll probably go back to teaching and go into a student services or student support role.

Some participants spoke of pursuing further study to expand their employment opportunities outside of youth work; however, they did not feel that that area of study matched their values or the kind of role they would like to move into. Those participants expressing this experience had commenced further study in criminology, psychology, counselling and teaching. Participants who completed management qualifications discussed the benefits of this study, for example, enhancing their roles in coordinating services and program management. One participant completed a research master’s qualification and explained that this was pursued more for personal interest and knowledge enhancement than to complement the skills and expectations of employment.

**Minor Theme 3: Recognition**

A small number of participants mentioned recognition through youth sector awards as being an additional positive experience in their careers:

Participant 1: Youth Work WA and the award recognition for quality youth work and professional youth work has really shifted. I did win an award for youth work. Yeah, things, like, are meaningful, your peers nominating you for something you do every day to say, hey, you do this well, and that keeps longevity as well. Yeah, little things like that makes it worthwhile.

Participant 2: With youth work week and a few other things I have celebrated publicly my youth work career.
Participant 4: I was nominated for a youth work award and someone at the awards night said to me that I was one of the people that motivated them to keep going with youth work, so that was really nice.

This minor theme of being recognised for achievements and contributions to the field was not discussed as a central driver to longevity but rather as an enjoyable experience. For this reason, recognition does share some overlap with the major themes of motivators and supportive connections; however, this is minimal.

**Minor Theme 4: Tertiary/Higher Education Teaching Roles**

Three participants experienced working in tertiary and/or higher education roles lecturing and tutoring in youth work. Participants described enjoying the challenge of these roles, with some feeling it was quite a high-pressure role. All three participants commented that the opportunity to educate youth workers through these roles was a worthwhile experience:

Participant 4: It was a lot easier the second time around. I did enjoy that, in particular the in-class stuff.

Participant 10: It was a fantastic opportunity that was really challenging, and it was enjoyable. I liked being in the classroom and kind of having those discussions and conversations, but for some reason I didn’t feel confident in my own ability to do the job properly.

This minor theme has some overlap with the theme of variety and opportunities but was not significant or prevalent enough as a shared experience among participants to form part of a major theme.

**Conclusion of Findings**

The findings of this study revealed a range of major and minor themes, with a high degree of consensus experienced by participants throughout the major themes. While the literature review established a negative image of the youth work career (see Figure 2.1), the findings resulted in a far more constructive image that supports youth work as a long-term career option (see Figure 4.2). These findings certainly provide stark differences when juxtaposed with those of the
existing literature. In conclusion, this study found youth work to be a highly viable long-term career for the participants involved.

Figure 4.2: Constructive Image of the Youth Work Career Emerging from the Findings
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The central purpose of this research was to explore what it means to have a long-term career in youth work. This chapter is organised according to the two research questions developed from the central research question. The first three sections focus on the phenomenological inquiry driving the first research question: What is the shared experience of a long-term career in youth work? The first three discussion sections explore the specifics of changes in the youth work field, factors of career longevity, and the positive and negative experiences of the youth work career. These three discussion points link the research findings and literature review together. A synthesised essence statement is developed from the discussion of these three areas and the major themes from the findings. The fourth section of this discussion focuses on the grounded theory methods behind the second research question: To what extent is the self-concept theory of career development useful in understanding the long-term youth work career? The three sub-questions form the foundations of the discussion pertaining to the interrelation between career and life experiences, the extent to which life roles influence career and the extent to which career stages inform understandings of the long-term youth work career. An appraisal of the self-concept theory of career development is provided in conclusion and a provisional model of the long-term youth work career offered.

Section 1—Changes in the Youth Work Field

Throughout the findings it was evident that there has been significant change in the youth work field revolving around youth work developing into a more distinct profession. Key aspects of these changes included greater professional identity and respect, enhanced standards and ethical practice, and experiences of formal supervision. Increased bureaucracy was also identified as having changed in the work field, which is discussed in section 3 of this chapter. Section 1 will focus on youth work professionalisation and youth work developing as a more distinct profession from the 1990s to 2020 using the research data and existing literature for comparative discussion.
The findings presented strong examples of satisfaction and pride among participants self-identifying as youth workers. Furthermore, participants in the study described youth work as a distinct profession and practice, particularly in comparison with related roles, including social work and psychology. This contests existing studies that describe youth work as lacking in clarity and identity, resulting in reluctance to self-identify as youth workers (Borden et al., 2004; Huebner et al., 2003; Savicki, 1993, 2002). The existing literature also pointed towards youth work blurring the lines of distinction between other roles rather than being its own identifiable sector (Bessant & Webber, 1999; Maunders & Broadbent, 1995). The shift towards positive self-identification with the youth work profession is an important contribution from this study that is not represented in the existing literature. However, external respect for youth work and youth workers provided mixed results and is discussed in section 3 of this chapter.

The findings reflected a strong move towards professionalisation of the youth work field, characterised by improved organisational standards and ethical practice. While professionalisation of youth work continues to be debated, the findings from this research support professionalisation of the youth work field. Professionalisation of youth work was largely celebrated in the findings, with the consensus being that the positives of professionalisation far outweigh the negatives. The most impactful changes appear to be threefold: the increase of degree-qualified youth workers in the field, the development and revision of the YACWA Code of Ethics, and the founding of Youth Work WA. The existing literature was mostly reflective of pre-professionalised youth work being characterised by deficits in these areas and called on youth workers to drive professional standards from within (Bessant, 2004a; Maunders & Broadbent, 1995; Sercombe, 1998). This literature was consistent with many participant experiences of youth work in the 1990s being characterised by poor professional standards, which improved dramatically through the middle and later stages of their careers. These findings provide a foundation for addressing a significant gap in the existing literature—the experiences of youth workers in professionalised youth work contexts.

Professionalisation of the youth work field was also congruent with the importance of degree-qualified youth workers. The findings supported the need for knowledge-based youth work, built on theoretical frameworks and models, as opposed to competency-based training. These findings were consistent throughout the data and were reflective of more contemporary literature that has argued for the importance of higher education level qualifications as the youth work standard (Bessant, 2007; Bessant & Emslie, 2014; Borden et al., 2004; Emslie, 2012).
This congruence was also reflective of literature pertaining to the praxis approach of professions (Kornhauser, 1982; Wilensky, 1964), which highlights the conceptual understanding of a profession through the relationship between knowledge, action and continual reflection. This finding is important in understanding the shared experience of the youth work career as a distinct knowledge-based profession, as opposed to a skills-driven competency-based occupation.

The importance of youth work as a knowledge-based discipline links strongly to theory, ethics and practice. The socio-political theory and frameworks drive understandings of young people within broad and diverse societal contexts, with the models of reform, radical empowerment, and radical and non-radical advocacy providing frameworks of youth work that participants referred to most frequently in their interviews (Cooper & White, 1994). These models of youth work were dominant throughout the career experiences of the participants and reflect the Youth Work Code of Ethics, which upholds knowledge as a priority (YACWA, 2014). Theoretical knowledge pertaining to applied sociology fosters working holistically with young people within their contexts rather than as a homogenous group, as well as understanding the historical and continued exclusion and marginalisation of young people in society. Central to the Youth Work Code of Ethics are aligned values of context, cooperation and promoting equality for young people (YACWA, 2014), which are all driven by these specific knowledge paradigms.

Section 2—Key Factors of Career Longevity

The topic of career longevity emerged strongly in the findings, with participants experiencing continuous employment and diverse opportunities throughout long-term careers in youth work. In one sense, the entire findings, bar the barriers, are synonymous with longevity given the sample group and their long-term career experiences. Section 2 of this chapter aims to identify and explore the more pertinent factors of longevity as described by participants in the study, with particular attention given to sub-themes within the major findings of leadership, diversity, and supportive connections. The final segment of this discussion piece will examine the concept of youth work as a calling to vocation, expanding upon this concept that emerged from the participant responses data.

Leadership emerged as a significant finding in relation to the shared experience of the long-term youth work career and was described as an important factor pertaining to longevity. This
correlates strongly with the finding that all participants experienced ongoing employment throughout their careers. Most participants described progressing into high-level leadership roles, including program coordination, senior management and roles that oversee and direct entire regions and manage multiple community portfolios. This element was absent in the existing literature; moreover, what was documented presented youth work as a low status and often temporary occupation that led to other more substantial career paths outside youth work (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Hartje, et al., 2008; Maunders & Broadbent, 1995; Thomas, 2002). A recent article published after this research was conducted found similar themes regarding youth work employment and career paths throughout Europe, with participants reporting on a significant lack of professional identity and subsequent difficulties in pursuing career pathways (O’Donovan et al, 2020). The findings from this research strongly contest the literature from the pre-professionalisation era; for example, participants in this study described the multitude of opportunities presented to them in leadership and management within the youth work field owing to their specific qualifications and experience in youth work. In terms of longevity, leadership and long-term career opportunities were found to be a key driving factors, and they contribute towards filling an important gap in the literature. Further study could be expanded from these findings and would be beneficial in this particular area because of the lack of existing academic literature on youth work leadership.

Strategic advocacy and service design were two emergent sub-themes within the major finding of leadership. Participants who experienced advocating for young people at a strategic level and were involved in service design described these as important factors of longevity in the youth work career. Advocating for young people by designing services in direct response to the needs of young people in the immediate community was the primary focus of participant comments. Examples of service design experiences from participants included new homelessness service models, youth leadership programs and educational engagement services. No literature currently exists that captures these experiences, and some literature points towards an overall lack of career paths for youth workers entirely (Borden et al., 2004; Krueger, 2007). The importance of this practice is integral to youth work theory, as represented by the radical advocacy model of youth work developed by Cooper and White (1994), which was reflective of many participant experiences and a significant finding. The union of leadership roles and the ability to undertake strategic advocacy and responsive service design provide a strong case for youth work as a long-term career prospect, as experienced by the participants in this study.
Within the major finding theme of leadership was also the opportunity to mentor new youth workers. Interestingly this element was experienced not only by participants in formal leadership roles but also by participants in ‘frontline’ youth work roles. Participants described a full-circle experience, whereby they became the mentor to new youth workers, having been the new worker being mentored early in their career. Intersecting with the minor theme of wisdom along with the major theme of supportive connections, the experience of ‘becoming the mentor’ was important for participant longevity and meaning within the long-term youth work career. This finding was not represented in the existing literature and may be useful for further exploration as either a small focus of research or as part of a broader inquiry.

Diversity was found to be a key factor in career longevity among participants, particularly the elements of variety and flexibility. Enjoyment of the youth work career appeared to correlate with experiencing variety both within roles and between roles throughout the career span. Daily variety was described as key to longevity, with many experiences indicating interesting roles that involved a range of activities along with the expectation of unforeseen events adding to the spontaneity of ‘a day in the life’ of a youth worker. Diversity also featured in the differing contexts in which participants experienced working, such as local government, not-for-profit organisations and educational settings. This was also explicit by role type within organisational contexts, with participants experiencing roles as diverse as recreation, housing, outreach, holiday programs, activity-based programs and management. The availability of options throughout the youth work career was significant in promoting longevity and mitigating areas of burnout. What little is written in the literature regarding this topic is supported by this finding, with youth work being described as a diverse occupation (Bessant & Webber, 1999). What has seemingly progressed since this literature was written are the added options in leadership roles, as evidenced in this discussion.

Flexibility expanded the theme of diversity, and participants expressed positive shared experiences, such as flexible work hours, full-time equivalency options, non-traditional hours of work by choice such as evenings and weekends, and leave options such as purchasing leave, leave without pay and salary sacrifice arrangements. These multiple layers of flexible work arrangements were commonly experienced by participants and were described as a key factor in career longevity. Little had previously been written regarding flexibility in youth work, particularly within the context of the long-term career, and the related existing literature highlighted the barriers that inhibit longevity. Flexibility emerged as a strong mitigating factor
against such barriers; therefore, this section will be referred to when discussing the positive and negative aspects of the youth work career in section 3 of this chapter.

Longevity was commonly linked with supportive connections such as supportive organisations and teams, personal and professional networks, professional supervision and ‘meeting the mentor’ early in the youth work career. Participants constantly identified the need for a range of supports throughout their careers to mitigate burnout and dissatisfaction. Supportive organisations and teams were a key experience for participants, with some commenting that this was the defining reason behind longevity in their career. Conversely, some participants described how a lack of organisational support and team cohesion led to movement between organisations and job roles. Much of the literature is supportive of this, with an alignment of stated values and organisational practice being paramount for staff retention and staff investment (Bowie, 2008; Robertson, 1997; Thompson & Shockley, 2013; Weng & McElroy, 2012). Specific supports identified by participants were formal supervision (including external options) and cohesive teams. The literature is supportive of organisational supervision and support as a key driver in staff retention (Hartje, 2008; Herman, 2012; Jenkinson, 2010). Congruence was found between the existing literature and shared experience from this study, which points towards an integrated approach to self-care. The practice of self-care is often understood as an individual responsibility; however, these findings demonstrate a strong case for fostering self-care as a shared responsibility of individuals, the organisation and teams within youth work settings.

Supportive connections as a key to longevity also included ‘meeting the mentor’ as a crucial element for all participants in the study. Usually encountered through work practicums, and always early in the youth work career, the mentor played a pivotal role in support and guidance for youth workers entering the field. The findings indicated that the mentor was often a galvanising link between studying the degree and participants establishing themselves in the field of youth work. While workplace learning was not a focus of the existing literature, some studies indicated the importance of youth workers learning their craft both ‘on the job’ and in formal education settings, with the preference being to learn from those who had worked specifically in the youth work field as youth workers and not in related fields (Hartje et al., 2008; Walker, 2003; Windon, 2018). The importance of the role of the mentor was significant and could be a focus for future research; for example, there is a potential for mentor systems to
be built into organisations more proactively. Of particular interest would be to ascertain whether the lack of a mentor led to attrition for youth workers, and this would require further study.

A strong characteristic of the findings were the intrinsic values of participants, which included fairness and equality and are best synthesised into the value of social justice. It was found that the intrinsic value of social justice was the genesis of the youth work career—wanting to help others, usually the ‘underdog’, and make a positive difference in the lives of others. Participants described how the youth work career allowed them to ‘live out’ these intrinsic values in their work, which was explained as an overwhelmingly positive experience. Much has been written on this, with youth work often described in the literature as rewarding and meaningful, and as an opportunity to live out one’s humanistic values through goodwill (Bessant, 2004a; Bouffard & Little, 2004; Homan, 1986; Light, 2003; Taylor et al., 1991). The work of Dik and Duffy (2009) confirmed the alignment of intrinsic values and humanistic work, describing such individuals as meaning seekers for whom social justice plays a crucial role in “career choice, job satisfaction, work commitment, and life meaning” (p. 444). This position was echoed by Treadgold (1999), who discussed transcendent vocational choices as providing meaning and purpose to individuals. How then can this be understood in the arena of youth work where the literature is so clearly deficit-based in terms of youth work career retention?

While these findings are congruent with the literature, many studies also discussed burnout due to the emotional and personal toll that this commitment to altruism entails. The negative image of the youth work career (see Figure 2.1) developed from the literature review of this research certainly depicts this conundrum. The existing literature paints a clear tension between exercising goodwill based on social justice values, and the common realities of stress, turnover and ultimately burnout (Savicki, 1993, 2002; Taylor et al., 1991; Thompson & Shockley, 2013). Interestingly, the existing literature also states how there is limited research available to measure these undesirable outcomes (Barford & Whelton, 2010; Keller, 2007). Anderson-Nathe (2008) explored this issue, concluding that while intrinsic values often act as a ‘calling’ to the vocation of youth work, reliance on this calling to sustain a long career is problematic and often leads to attrition and feelings of personal failure.

What can be drawn from the findings of this study is that intrinsic values alone are not enough to mitigate the barriers encountered in the youth work career. This sheds important light on this topic, given the participants all experienced long and sustained youth work careers. As
discussed in this discussion chapter, elements of supportive connections, leadership opportunities and diversity throughout the career were found to be key factors of longevity. Coincidentally, these factors are lacking in the existing literature, which certainly points to them as ‘safeguards’ against experiences of stress, turnover and burnout that were so prevalent in the literature review. This is a significant finding from this research; moreover, the key factors for longevity also link strongly to other themes, such as youth work as a distinct profession and the importance of higher education, as described by participants. The findings from this research present a strong case for youth work as a career requiring these factors to scaffold intrinsic values; vocation alone is not an accurate or realistic foundation on which to build the long-term youth work career. This is an important contribution to knowledge in and of itself, which could be further tested by exploring the experiences of those who have left the youth work field in a future study.

Section 3—Positives and Negatives of the Youth Work Career

This section discusses the positive and negative aspects of the youth work career as they emerged from the findings. Interestingly, the findings overwhelmingly favour the positive elements of the youth work career, whereas much of the literature from the pre-professionalisation era claims the opposite. This is best summarised by Taylor et al. (1991), who stated, “When asked to comment on the positive and negative aspects of their work, the number of negative comments far outweigh the positive comments” (p. 32). As the findings in this research clearly demonstrate, the theme of ‘barriers’ was the seventh major theme, with the other six generally comprising positive elements of the youth work career. This section considers the impact of these barriers, first in terms of bureaucracy; the remaining barriers are discussed in terms of ‘tensions’ to reflect the differing experiences of participants regarding professional respect and funding instability. Therefore, the negative aspects of the youth work career will be the focus of this section given the other discussion sections point more to the positive aspects drawn from the findings.

While not shared unanimously, the challenges of bureaucracy created significant negative experiences for a number of the research participants. The impacts of bureaucracy were mainly experienced in government roles, particularly in leadership and management. Stress was often a result of ‘buffering’ or ‘protecting’ frontline youth workers from bureaucratic processes,
along with the direct impacts of time-consuming processes driven by high levels of risk aversion. These experiences are reflective of the double-edged sword of professionalisation explored in the literature review, whereby the benefits gained must be taken along with increased bureaucratic impediments (Grogan, 2004; Quixley & Doostkhah, 2007; Sercombe, 2004). However, perhaps more influential than active professionalisation is the broader spectre of neoliberalism and new public management processes. These factors have indeed shaped youth work towards output accountability, resulting in higher levels of bureaucracy and red tape (de St Croix, 2018; Taylor et al., 2018). This contrast was evident since some participants applauded the increased bureaucracy, highlighting how youth workers and young people are safer and more protected as a result of more stringent risk management procedures and occupational health and safety policies.

Within the findings two significant tensions emerged that are important to discuss because they represented differing experiences of participants. The first is the topic of professional respect, and the second, funding instability and poor remuneration. On the topic of professional respect, many participants experienced an increased respect and recognition for youth work; however, some did not. The findings present a case that youth work is understood and respected within its own profession; nonetheless, misunderstanding and hierarchal superiority external to the youth work field appear to persist. These findings are consistent with those of some studies (Barford & Whelton, 2010; Bessant & Webber, 1999; Cooper, 2018) and support the case for the professionalisation of youth work on the grounds of professional credibility and respect (Bessant, 2004a; Cooper, 2013; Maunders & Broadbent, 1995; Sercombe, 2004).

These findings also support the importance of youth work in higher education, whereby the practice of youth work is regarded as a knowledge-driven profession. Existing studies highlight concerns regarding a decline in youth work-specific content in higher education qualifications, citing an urgent need to increase youth work degree content for fear of losing this important and distinct profession to more generic training packages (Bessant, 2007; Bessant & Emslie, 2014; Cooper, 2013; Corney et al., 2014; Curry et al., 2010; White et al., 1991b). Interestingly, participants discussed the importance of workplace practicums within their youth work degree, which has been recently studied in Australia, for example Windon (2018), as well as North America albeit in the context of youth work internship, see Silliman et al (2020). While not explicit in the findings, this discussion does also point to support for combined degrees, a qualification that has become more attainable in universities and desirable in the field.
Participants in this study were overwhelmingly supportive of the youth work degree; however, when they had completed their own degree, options for double majors in particular were limited. The existing literature outlines this approach (Bessant & Webber, 1999; Borden et al., 2004) and could be a beneficial line of inquiry for future research.

Differing experiences regarding funding instability and poor remuneration were evident in the findings. The majority of participants mentioned funding cuts, service closures, short-term and temporary funding, and changing priorities of funding. In turn, participants also discussed short-term and temporary positions as a result of such funding issues. Interestingly, none of the participants explicitly discussed precarious employment as major negative experiences in their careers. The majority of commentary pointed more towards constant job opportunities and continuous employment. Funding instability was nevertheless a theme emerging from the findings, with the existing literature representing this as a problematic issue (Borden et al., 2004; Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Thompson & Shockley, 2013).

The issue of remuneration mirrored the experiences of funding instability, again with the majority of findings presenting a positive experience in terms of adequate and even high levels of remuneration. Some participants did explicitly state that poor salary was a negative factor in their career and pointed to the link between pay scale and external professional respect for the youth work role and the resultant hierarchy of professions. Like the issue of funding instability, the literature that describes youth work as characterised by poor salaries and conditions is representative of the 1980s and 1990s youth work field (Maunders & Broadbent, 1995; Quixley & Westhorp, 1985; Taylor et al., 1991; White et al., 1991b). The current research findings differ from those in the literature since participants in this study did not highlight funding instability as central to the youth work career experience, whereas the existing literature describes this as explicitly characteristic of the youth work field. These findings are significant contributions to knowledge because they represent genuine shared experiences of the youth work field moving past these barriers. However, it is important always to consider that some experiences are still representative of such negative characteristics and should not be ignored, with poor remuneration being the most consistent reason for participants considering (but not following through with) leaving youth work to pursue a higher paying position.
Essence Statement

Below is the essence statement drawn from the findings and discussion of this research.

The long-term youth work career is a distinct profession cultivated by particular frameworks of socio-political knowledge. Diversity fosters interesting pathways and experiences, with leadership opportunities presenting themselves as often unexpected destinations where systematic change is affected through strategic-level advocacy. Intrinsic values lead youth workers into the profession, and those values are sustained by supportive networks, flexible roles and ethical practice that extends beyond a reliance on individual resilience and goodwill. The long-term youth work career is not without challenges: barriers of bureaucracy and poor external recognition are at times very real experiences. The youth work career is meaningful and worthwhile, and those who have experienced this career describe it as a privilege. A knowledge-based profession, the youth work career continually keeps the ‘why’ in the conversation. For career youth workers, who they are is as important as what they do, and what they do is consider the lives of young people first through applied sociology, empowerment and advocacy.

Section 4—Appraising the Self-concept Theory of Career Development

Analysing the findings through Super’s (1994) model of the life career rainbow involved examining two key concepts from the self-concept theory of career development. The first concept concerns the reflexive nature of the self-concept theory of career development proposed by Super (1980), whereby the individual develops an identity in their career that is reflective of their personal identity, and vice versa. Secondly, the life stages and corresponding roles presented a linear framework for assessing the influence between self-appraised life roles and career identity. The question driving this discussion section is, ‘to what extent do the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model inform an understanding of the youth work career’?

The central concept of reflexivity was highly congruent with the data. As discussed in the findings chapter, the self-concept of participants commonly involved an intrinsic commitment to social justice and making a positive difference in the lives of others. Pursuing a career in youth work provided a suitable fit for these values, both reinforcing the meaningfulness of
participants’ internal values and allowing participants to bring these values into their employment over long careers. Many participants described identifying strongly with their professional identity, which was further reinforced by expressing reluctance to pursue professions outside youth work. This finding takes the concept further, calling for other values to be drawn from the data that match well with the essence of the youth work profession. The core value prevalent in the data was that of genuine relationships with young people—a value reflective of the central axiom of informal education in the youth work profession. This was highly prominent in the data, since participants described a ‘certain type’ of relationship with young people, and how that relationship was distinct to the profession of youth work. In these ways, the self-concept theory of career development was helpful in understanding the youth work career in terms of personal identity and reflexivity, and across a long timeframe.

The second analysis of the usefulness of the self-concept theory of career development was conducted by positioning the findings within the life career rainbow model. The model presents a life stage theory of career development that interconnects with various other life roles. Findings from the data questioned the usefulness of the life career rainbow model since participants described fluidity in both career development and life roles. Experiences of participants were highly varied and reflected non-linear transitions through life and work. Participants represented late ‘establishment’ to ‘maintenance’ life stages according to the life career rainbow model at the time of interviews, and they reflected across the ‘growth’ and ‘exploration’ stages retrospectively.

According to the life career rainbow model, exploration involves a linear experience of preparation and experimentation with vocation before entering early career stages and establishing a family. Some participants had already established families, including marriage, having children and renting or purchasing a house during this stage, which does not fit with the stage expectations in the life career rainbow model. Establishment presented issues of incongruency also, with many participants having moved into senior and leadership roles early on in this stage—roles that are usually expected in late establishment to maintenance stages.

Many participants also discussed having children during the establishment stage, with varied experiences expressed. Several participants described moving from full-time roles to part-time roles during this stage, which is in keeping with the expectations of the life career rainbow model. However, the majority of participants did not feel that having children affected their...
careers greatly, particularly those in leadership roles, and were very motivated to return to full-time positions and continue their careers. For these participants, considerations and negotiations regarding flexible hours were required to organise their career around having children; however, this appeared strongly to represent more pragmatic reasoning as opposed to a significant life stage change and subsequent career progression change. The maintenance stage also represented non-linear experiences. Some participants described experiences that would be expected from the perspective of the life career rainbow model, whereby they were maintaining their established roles in management positions. However, many participants described how they were very satisfied working in roles that fitted around their lifestyle. Some had moved from leadership roles into frontline roles to facilitate a more balanced lifestyle and fulfil needs according to their values, and others expressed feeling free to move on to another challenge if they felt the need rather than feeling ‘tied down’ in their current role. Interestingly, many of these experiences were more representative of features from the exploration and early establishment stages of the life career rainbow model, pointing again to the rigidity of this stage theory model.

Representations drawn from the data point to a range of reasons that the life career rainbow model was not a useful tool for this study. The most pertinent reason evident from the findings is the shift from linear life stage transitions prevalent in the 1970s when studies involving this model were conducted (Sverko, 2001) to the largely non-linear environment of the twenty-first century (Barnett, 2008). Super developed the self-concept theory of career development in white, middle class America in 1963 and formalised the subsequent life career rainbow model in 1980. This positioning is reflective of the linear characteristics of life and career common in Western industrialised societies of this time, particularly regarding narrow and prescribed gender and class roles (Havighurst, 1972, 1976), and it is a core theoretical feature of the life career rainbow model. Twenty-first century critiques of linear stage theory present non-linear transitions as the norm in Western industrialised societies, with traditional linear theories and models becoming largely redundant. The key driving factors for this shift include labour market changes such as casualisation and the emergence of the globalised ‘gig-economy’, changing gender roles and associated opportunities resultant from the feminist movement and the advent of birth control technologies, and the post-industrial knowledge-based labour market (Friedman, 2014; Tanner et al., 2009; Wyn, 2004).
However, the emergent data did tend to fit in clustered patterns more effectively by using the career stages from the life career rainbow model without the associated age ranges and life stages. Removing the age ranges and life roles from the model allowed flexibility in positioning the data in concentrated clusters. This approach was helpful in identifying where the major themes were most likely to appear throughout the long-term youth work career, which was particularly useful regarding the barriers and factors that tended to mitigate them. Figure 5.1 demonstrates when the major themes tended to appear during the youth work career. This could prove helpful for youth work supervision and career discussions pertaining to mitigation against barriers of attrition rather than the traditional linear career-planning approach often used in supervision practices.

Barriers that clustered in the establishment phase were lack of professional respect, funding and salary issues, and unsupportive teams. The key mitigators of these barriers that clustered in the establishment phase also were youth work as a distinct profession and diversity. It can be inferred from this model that those mitigating factors should be a focus for combating the barriers arising in this phase. The maintenance phase saw the barrier of bureaucracy along with the mitigating factor of leadership cluster in this section of the model. Leadership roles and opportunities should therefore be a focus of combatting the negative experiences of bureaucracy to promote retention and job satisfaction for career youth workers.
In conclusion, the findings from this research presented a shared essence of youth work being a distinct profession highly characterised by the attractiveness of diverse and flexible career experiences and opportunities. The central concept of reflexivity within the self-concept theory of career development was found to be congruent with understanding the youth work career, accounting for the continual evolution of participants’ values, personal lives and commitments, and career movements and challenges. The life career rainbow model was not found to be helpful when applied to findings in this study because the linear stage framework of the model is largely at odds with not only the essence of youth work as a profession but also the wider socio-economic impacts within a Western neoliberal context. Life stages and career progression were found to be fluid and non-linear for these reasons. Applying the findings from this study to the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model was insightful and points to the justification of more contemporary refining of the concept of maturity towards adaptability, as discussed in the literature review (Patton & Lokan, 2001; Savickas, 1997; Zacher, 2014). When age limitations and life roles were omitted, the model was helpful in categorising the findings according to career stages only, which may be useful in the area of staff supervision in youth work. Adaptability appears to be a suitable extension
of the self-concept theory of career development, and thoughts on this concept are presented in the conclusion chapter of this paper.

**Drawing it Together: Towards a Youth Work Career Model**

This study has examined the long-term careers of 10 youth workers in Western Australia to seek the shared meaning and essence of this phenomenon. Through phenomenological analysis and grounded theory methods, a range of findings and discussion points have been explored; but how does this all draw together? A synthesis of the core elements of the discussion and the essence statement points toward the development of a four-phase provisional youth work career model that incorporates the essence of the shared participant experiences with the phenomenon. This provisional model is represented visually in Figure 5.2.
First, the long-term youth work career is unequivocally driven by knowledge. Youth work as a long-term career is not a competency-based occupation reliant solely on skills acquisition and execution of those skills according to this study. Youth work is a knowledge-based profession with a foundation in socio-political theory and involves development through praxis and reflective processes. Second, youth work is a distinct practice with its own identity, ethical and professional standards, and it takes a unique approach to working with young people. Third, youth work is a sustainable profession with a range of supports; it is connected through networks, guided by mentors and supported by organisations, teams and professional supervision. Continuous employment bolsters the sustainability of the youth work career, with the commonly shared values of social justice continuing to bring meaning and satisfaction to the profession without being solely relied upon for retention. Finally, youth work is a highly viable long-term career where individuals become wise mentors for others, move into leadership roles, including high order strategic advocacy that brings about significant organisational and societal change. Youth workers experience long-term careers that are diverse, with flexibility, variety and opportunity driving and maintaining retention. The provisional model of the long-term youth work career provides a culmination of the findings and discussion aspects of this research thesis.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This research study has presented a range of findings, and this chapter will emphasise those findings that have the most significant ramifications for contributions to knowledge as well as the implications for the youth work field. Considerations of the research limitations will also be identified and explained, and avenues for future research presented. A final reflective comment will conclude this chapter and thesis.

Contribution to Knowledge

The findings from this research contribute to knowledge by providing an alternative to the negative image of the youth work career found in the existing literature, predominantly from the 1990s. Seeking the essence of the long-term youth work career, the researcher found that the shared experiences of the participants were characterised by retention and career satisfaction rather than deficits. These characteristics were found to be driven by qualifications and training, supportive connections, intrinsic values, youth work as a distinct profession, leadership and diversity. In stark contrast with the existing literature, these findings led to the development of a synthesised provisional model of the long-term youth work career. This is the core contribution to knowledge drawn from the findings—a constructive model of the youth work career that supports retention without sole reliance on intrinsic values and goodwill from individuals.

This study appraised career theory, with a number of findings leading to key recommendations. The strengths and limitations of the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow were discussed, and the core axiom of reflexivity was found useful in understanding the meaning of the long-term youth work career. This provided a contribution to knowledge by adding to the literature on the self-concept theory of career development and the efficacy of reflexivity as a career satisfaction measure, particularly in terms of intrinsic values and the continual interplay between life and career. Evaluating the usefulness of the life career rainbow model presented further complexities and challenges because initially the model was not found to be applicable to the youth work career within a broader contemporary context. Recommendations from this study suggest a revision of the life career rainbow model by removing the linear stringency of both the life stages and age ranges found in the model.
Applying these changes resulted in the life career rainbow model proving useful in its capacity to cluster research findings into broad career phases without the restrictiveness of the aforementioned linear elements. Finally, the findings from this research support a focus on career adaptability rather than stage-based linear theory for future application of the self-concept theory of career development and the life career rainbow model. This finding is consistent with contemporary revisions proposed by a number of career theory writers (Patton & Lokan, 2001; Savickas, 1997; Zacher, 2014).

Implications for Youth Work

This study presents a range of implications for youth work practice, youth work organisations, and education curricula. First, this study has found youth work to be a highly viable long-term career in and of itself. Second, this study presents significant implications for youth work as a profession, contesting much of the deficit-based literature regarding youth work as a sustainable long-term career.

In terms of youth work practice, this study has demonstrated that youth workers do not burn out and move away from youth work, but rather enjoy meaningful careers in this profession. Implications for practice certainly point towards the importance of self-care as not only an individual exercise but also an organisational responsibility. The participants of this study continuously discussed how self-care was crucial to their longevity in the industry and was achieved and maintained through a range of measures. Professional boundaries were also incredibly important to sustaining long-term careers in youth work—again, an individual and organisational responsibility from practice through to policy.

The major theme of diversity points to the need for youth work to remain flexible in its practice and to be able to adapt and respond to young people in very different social and institutional contexts. This study reinforces how youth workers operate in different contexts, supporting the necessity for ongoing discussions about youth work definitions and practices to remain conceptual and broadly inclusive.

Organisational implications for the youth work field include the prioritising of proactive professional supervision, fostering supportive teams and opportunities for leadership roles. Regarding professional supervision, participants highlighted the importance of consistency to
support reflective practice and growth. As highly relational individuals, participants in this study highlighted how trust in their colleagues is crucial for youth workers to be effective professionals. This is relevant for both professional supervision and fostering supportive team culture, two elements that organisations can take as recommendations of priority in order to develop the careers of youth workers in their employ. Finally, leadership roles that promote and develop strategic level advocacy opportunities are integral to fostering the long-term careers of youth workers.

The application of the life career rainbow model as discussed and adapted in this study may provide a useful tool for supervisors and managers of youth work organisations and services. The adapted model (see Figure 5.1) could prove helpful for youth work supervision and career discussions in the interest of mitigating barriers of attrition rather than the traditional linear career-planning approach often used in supervision practices. For example, leadership options could be discussed as mitigators of barriers experienced by a youth worker, such as frustrations with bureaucracy, since these were found to cluster in the maintenance phase of the adapted life career rainbow model.

Youth work education curricula can draw highly useful recommendations from this study. Fundamentally, the youth work career was found to be driven by high levels of theoretical knowledge as well as the praxis approach of embedded workplace practicums experienced by participants in their youth work degrees. This study strongly supports the continued commitment to youth work as a distinct higher education qualification, with complex socio-political theory and critical theory at the core of specialist units. The maintenance of quality workplace practicums is integral to the development of professional youth workers, and experienced and qualified youth workers as work placement supervisors are highly valued.

Limitations

Consideration of the limitations of this study is important in maintaining the validity of the findings. First, the study used a purposive and bounded sample of 10 youth workers from Western Australia who had completed the youth work degree at Edith Cowan University during the 1990s. This sample represents a limitation of this study since participants were geographically and contextually bound to the Western Australian experience, particularly that of urban Perth. While findings from this research will have important meanings for different
locations and context, caution must be exercised regarding total transferability of these research findings because participants from different locations and contexts may well have different experiences of the phenomenon in question.

This study selected youth workers with higher education qualifications, whose experiences may not be entirely transferable to the experiences of long-term career youth workers without this level of education and training. This presents a limitation and is a potential area of caution for transferability. Furthermore, this study purposely sampled youth workers who had experienced long-term youth work careers without moving out of youth work. The experiences of youth workers who had extensive careers in youth work while also moving away from the profession and into others may vary from the shared experiences found in this study. This is an important consideration and will be discussed further in the future research section of this conclusion.

A minor limitation of this study was that the sample group were all women (not by design), with no male participants involved. This is highly indicative of a female dominant industry; nonetheless, this presents a limitation of the study. Given the findings of this study, it is not anticipated that gender played a significant role as a variable of shared experience; however, this cannot be categorically ascertained from this study alone. Furthermore, this study involved only one Aboriginal Australian participant (not by design), thereby limiting the transferability of these findings in many cultural contexts.

The findings from this study are transferable primarily within a Western Australian youth work context, particularly for those qualified with a bachelor of youth work from Edith Cowan University. The transferability of the research findings will be most efficacious in youth work contexts where higher education in youth work is accessible and preferred by industry employers, and where professionalisation of youth work is somewhat comparable to the Western Australian environment. Where these contextual elements differ, the limitations of this study should be considered.

**Future Research**

This thesis has presented insights into the shared experiences of long-term career youth workers. The importance of this research is reflective of the lack of literature on long-term youth work careers, with the findings being important for youth work education, youth work
practice and organisational systems such as professional supervision. This study has opened many potential doors for future research, most notably leadership in youth work and the exploration of individuals who experienced careers in youth work but moved into different professions. The findings from this study also call for potential future research pertaining to career theory. Finally, the literature review revealed the significant lack of written history of youth work in Western Australia.

The provisional model of the long-term youth work career offered through this research could be further developed and appraised with a larger study of youth workers in Australia or internationally. This study was limited to 10 participants in Western Australia who had obtained a higher education degree in youth work from Edith Cowan University. A larger study could open a similar inquiry using a greater sample size, include locations and contexts beyond Western Australia, and explore youth workers who have not undertaken higher education in youth work. Such a study would provide further insights into youth work careers in different contexts and demographics.

This study found that leadership opportunities and roles were significant drivers of retention and career sustainability. Further research could focus on the area of youth work leadership by examining the experiences of those in management positions, supervision processes and practices, and the significance of having youth work-qualified managers in youth organisations. The role of the mentor was also found to play an important role in the careers of participants in this study, which could also be examined further through a study of leadership in youth work. The provisional model of the long-term youth work career developed through this study could be explored through a focused research project on leadership in youth work.

Perhaps the most necessary and insightful future study building on this research would be to explore the experiences of people who left a career in youth work to pursue a different profession. This could be a multi-layered study in which participants are grouped variously into clusters of those who moved in and out of youth work multiple times, those who moved slightly out of youth work, and those who moved completely out of youth work. Such a study could form hypotheses from the findings of this research, which would provide a baseline to confirm or challenge the conclusions of this research as well as develop further knowledge regarding attrition and retention factors.
The appraisal of the self-concept theory of career development was an important element of this research and could be further studied in the youth work context. The findings of this study concluded that the self-concept theory of career development was largely developed and tested to explore the context of early career choices and pathways rather than that of long-term careers. Future research could focus on, or at least incorporate, career theory to expand on the application of theory regarding long-term careers and career development, particularly in the non-linear sense. More contemporary career theories such as McMahon’s (2005) systems theory framework of career development or Pryor and Bright’s (2003) chaos theory of careers may provide frameworks for modern explorations of careers in youth work. Whichever direction is taken, the application of career theory would be an important aspect of any future research of the youth work career, adding depth and knowledge not only to understanding the youth work field but also to career theory and development itself.

Future research into the history and progression of youth work in Western Australia would be a highly beneficial focus for future research. Research into the history of Western Australian youth work would provide more accurate insights into how the field of youth work has progressed and the socio-political influences on youth policy and subsequent programs; moreover, it would provide further context to understand the evolution of youth work as a profession in Western Australia.

**Concluding Comment**

This study highlighted the importance of shared experience and the resultant meaning that emanates from those who have lived and breathed youth work as a long-term career. The voices and stories of those from the field cannot be understated: insightful, interesting and impactful statements provided the foundation for this study and the knowledge found therein. From the power of leadership roles and opportunities, to the importance of supportive connections, to the need for ethical youth work to be practised and upheld as a knowledge-based distinct profession, these findings are incredibly important for the youth work field. The provisional model of the long-term youth work career offered in this study presents a strong synthesis of the research findings and discussion points and can be drawn upon for further study in the area of youth work careers and related topics.
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Appendix 1: Participant Information Letter

SCHOOL OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Information Letter to Youth Work Research Participants

The Youth Work Career: Exploring Long-Term Careers of Professional Youth Workers in Western Australia

Researcher: John Sutcliffe

Course: Master of Social Science

Supervisor: Associate Professor Trudi Cooper

Addressee: 

Date: 

Dear: 

You are invited to participate in the research project ‘The Youth Work Career: Exploring Long-Term Careers of Professional Youth Workers in Western Australia’ conducted by John Sutcliffe from Edith Cowan University. The purpose of the project is to explore the experiences of the youth work career from candidates within the Western Australian youth field. You have been selected due to your experience and insight into professional youth work over your substantial career. Your insights will assist in greatly enhancing the understanding and knowledge pertaining to what it means to have a career in youth work, with benefits for the youth work field being enhanced credibility and understanding of youth work as a distinct long-term career option.

I will be arranging up to two interview times with you to discuss your experiences of your career in youth work. Interviews will be held at a mutually agreed-upon location such as
a private room at your workplace or at Edith Cowan University, whereby we will engage in a one-on-one interview. The interviews will be recorded with your consent, with recorded information being used to more easily access and record data via written notes. The process will be transparent, with any recordings or written notes being available to you should you wish to view or listen to them. An external transcriber may be engaged to notate the recorded data, in which case a confidentiality agreement will be signed by the transcriber.

The interviews will take approximately one hour; however, this may change depending on the amount of information you would like to share. If for any reason you would prefer to convey your information via written form as opposed to partaking in the interview process, you have the right to do so. Involvement in the project is voluntary and you also have the right not to participate at any stage during the interview stage, in which case the data collected from the interview will be destroyed. The interview process is not anticipated to cause distress; however, as I will be asking questions about what has led to your career choices personal information may be disclosed. If the interview process causes distress through discussing personal information, details for support through Centrecare or HelpingMinds will be provided. If the participant has any queries, complaints, or feedback the researcher or supervisor can be contacted for follow up. Furthermore, the participant is welcome to contact the Edith Cowan University Research Ethics team with any enquiries (contact details below).

Participant information will be collated in order to write a final report which will be made available to you. Your individual contribution will be kept confidential, with your name and job title being omitted to ensure anonymity. All data pertaining to this research project will be securely stored on ECU premises and destroyed after seven years as per ECU policy, with data only being accessible by the researcher.

If you would like to be involved in the research project, please read and sign the attached consent form and return to me via email (contact details below). This project has been approved by the ECU Ethics Committee on 14th January 2020.

Yours sincerely,
John Sutcliffe

Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, WA 6027 Australia.

Email: [REDACTED]  Phone: [REDACTED]

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Research Ethics Team

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Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au
Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

SCHOOL OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Consent form for Youth Work Research Participants

The Youth Work Career: Exploring Long-Term Careers of Professional Youth Workers in Western Australia

Researcher: John Sutcliffe

Course: Master of Social Science

Supervisor: Associate Professor Trudi Cooper

Addressee:

Date:

Dear

Participant informed consent details:

- I have been given a copy of, and read, the information letter detailing key components of the study

- I consent to participating in up to two interviews, or to provide written responses as an alternative

- I have been provided with contact details in order to ask questions regarding the information letter and further details of the study

- I am aware of the purpose of the study and my involvement in it

- I am aware that my responses will be used for this research project
• I know my identity will not be disclosed in the research at any stage

• I can withdraw as a participant in this study at any time during the interview stage with no repercussions

• I consent to having my interview recorded (if not, written notes will be taken) with data from my interview being used and quoted for the research project

• I consent to having data from my responses being kept in secure locked storage on ECU premises for seven years

• I agree to participate in this research project

Participant Name:

Participant Signature:

Yours sincerely

John Sutcliffe

Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, WA6027 Australia.

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

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Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au
Appendix 3: Interview Questions

Interview questions

1. Could you tell me about your early life leading up to choosing youth work as a field of study?
2. Can you tell me about your experience of studying the youth work degree including your practical placements?
3. Could you outline your career and the roles you have fulfilled in the youth work field?
4. Can you describe both positive and negative experiences during your career as a youth worker?
5. How would you say the youth work field has changed during your time as a youth worker?
6. What would you say have been the main reasons as to why you have stayed in the youth work field for a long time?
7. What might you say to someone who is considering youth work as a career, or starting out in the youth work field?
8. What has happened in your life outside of work that has impacted on your career as a youth worker?
9. Have any key life events impacted significantly on your youth work career?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add?