

Youth work that is of value

Towards a model of best practice

Making informed decisions about funding allocations for youth work programs and services is a challenge faced by community funding providers. To inform one such community funding provider in Christchurch, New Zealand, this research explored the question 'What is youth work of value?' and then developed a model of best practice. The paper presents the findings of this research and explores the implications for both youth work practitioners and funding providers.

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The youth work sector within New Zealand depends largely on community funding providers for financial support to maintain and develop programs and services. The Wayne Francis Charitable Trust (WFCT) is one such provider in the city of Christchurch. In an effort to improve the process of allocating funding, the trust's board recently appointed a youth advisory group to identify the strengths, needs and gaps within the youth sector (ages 10 to 19) in Christchurch. The trust board agreed that it would consider recommendations made by the youth advisory group when allocating funding. The trust also asked the group to critique the funding processes and to consider and report on related issues influencing the youth work sector. More specifically, the trust asked the advisory group to address these questions:

- What is youth work that is of value? That is, what is a model of best practice in youth work?
- What are the gaps and needs in service provision (including funding processes and related issues) for the youth sector (i.e. 10- to 19-year-olds) in Christchurch?
- Of the identified gaps and needs, which areas require direct funding, capacity building and/or systemic change for this particular demographic in order that best practice may be realised?

This article focuses on the first question, "What is youth work that is of value?". In endeavouring to answer it, the youth advisory group identified key practices that enhance work in the youth

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sector; these are discussed here as a proposed model of best practice for youth work.

Current literature relating to the above question is emergent, reflecting the fact that the field of youth studies and youth development is a relatively recent one. This is especially the case in New Zealand, where the embryonic nature of this discipline is similar to the situation in the United States. Edginton, Kowalski and Randall (2005), for example, in their critique of the youth work sector in the United States, noted that, “as a professional area, youth services is very fragmented, lacking coherence in terms of accepted definitions, concepts, and strategies of intervention” (p.289). Barwick (2006), in a review of youth work in New Zealand, similarly described the sector as one that has lacked development including, “a distinct and cohesive identity” and “quality, accessible training” (p.4). However, recent developments, such as the release of the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (YDSA) (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002) and the establishment of the National Youth Workers Network, have sought to provide direction, clarification and development in the sector, including an exploration of valuable youth work practice.

When considering good youth work practice, Martin (2006), in a nationwide New Zealand study of youth work, challenged youth workers to clarify what it was that they were aiming to achieve. He cautioned that an inability to articulate a clear vision backed by a strong theoretical framework would most likely lead to ineffectual funding and inadequate development (Edginton & Randall 2005; Flowers 1998). Seeking to develop this concept further, Martin (2006) advocated the promotion of standards of good practice. Preliminary data were collected during the study that identified key factors present in good youth work practice and these included community engagement, involvement of young people, quality staff and sound organisational processes, and safe and meaningful practice.

Given the developing nature of the youth work sector in New Zealand, the youth advisory group decided to undertake the research described in this article with the aim of extending knowledge of the sector in the Christchurch region specifically. The findings

of this study enabled the group to propose a model of best practice for youth work that could provide direction for the Wayne Francis Charitable Trust in regard to funding allocation. The model of best practice was aligned to the principles within the YDSA (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002). The purpose, then, of this article is to present the findings of the investigation through an overview of the proposed model of best practice for youth work. Implications and recommendations for further development are also discussed.

Method

The project was part of a wider community-based participatory action research project (Minkler & Wallerstein 2003). A number of youth work practitioners and professionals engaged in the youth sector in Christchurch, New Zealand, worked collaboratively with the aim of better understanding effective youth work practice and informing future practice and funding processes (Stringer 1996).

The six youth advisors to the WFCT were participant-researchers in this study. The advisors were selected by the WFCT because they had significant and varied experiences as youth workers and were also involved at management and governance levels in the youth sector. As participant-researchers in this study, the youth advisors facilitated the research process that included determining validity and relevance (Hall 1981; Khanlou & Peter 2005).

Additionally, a further 12 representatives from a range of youth groups and services participated in this study. The youth advisors purposively selected these representatives to ensure the capture of a wide range of views and backgrounds. Participants included high school principals, local city council community development advisors, and representatives from refugee and migrant groups, the disabilities sector and the regional sports trust. Standard ethical practices were adhered to including the use of participant-researcher agreements that covered roles and responsibilities that are unique to participatory action projects (Khanlou & Peter 2005).

Six focus-group discussions, varying in length from one to two hours, took place with

the youth advisors who provided observations and experiences. The key findings from these focus groups were synthesised by the members with the assistance of a facilitator. Additionally, each youth advisor carried out semi-structured interviews with two other participants as representatives of the youth work sector. Key notes were written by the interviewer during and after the interview. The same four questions provided the basis for each interview:

1. Regarding the youth service that you are involved with for the age group 10 to 19 years, what would you consider to be the strengths of that service? In other words, what is going well?
2. In your opinion, what areas require development?
3. What would you consider to be gaps in provision of services?
4. Are you aware of any research available in this area?

These questions also served as the basis of the six focus group discussions that were carried out with the youth advisors.

Data were analysed by the youth advisors as participant-researchers in the project. During a series of meetings, a facilitator coordinated a collaborative process with the youth advisors to collapse data from focus group discussions and interviews into categories. This analysis enabled the advisory group to determine, first, the benchmark of best practice and, second, areas of need that the trust could assist with. As a model of best practice emerged, the advisors sought to determine how such practice could be further strengthened through the application of the trust's funding framework (see Box 1).

Findings and discussion

The findings of this research indicate that best practice in youth work is likely to be associated with the presence of four components in the service being offered: connectivity, strengths-based approaches, capacity building, and contextual and systemic considerations. These components, which are briefly outlined and then described and discussed in detail, find resonance in the components of the existing WFCT funding framework, thereby suggesting that the trust's allocation of funds is made

BOX 1 The Wayne Francis Charitable Trust Funding Framework

The Wayne Francis Charitable Trust Funding Framework (see <http://www.wfct.org.nz/philosophy>) seeks to determine the impact that any funding or resource support may have on a youth agency at three levels: direct influence funding (portfolio, high engagement and scholarship), capacity building, and advocacy. Traditionally, community funding providers have tended to favour the direct influence level where outcomes are easily measured. At this level, funding is provided for specific projects or programs, whereas funding at a capacity-building level aims to strengthen organisational management and operational practices that will contribute to the sustainable, efficient provision of services. The third level of resourcing – advocacy – includes advocacy for regulatory and policy-level change and the modelling of innovative practice as a way of demonstrating how such change can work within the community.

according to best practice considerations.

The advisory group considered that connectivity was present in programs and services that were deemed long-term, sustainable and relationship based. Strengths-based approaches were present when young people's strengths, passions and resiliency factors were valued and edified. The levels of funding that may be applied to these components are primarily direct influence and capacity building. Capacity building as a component of best practice in youth work was thus present when organisational capacity was sustainable and leadership had been developed to an extent that allowed for safe and meaningful youth work practice. This third component aligns particularly well with the capacity-building level of funding of the WFCT funding framework. The fourth component – contextual and systemic considerations – in many instances includes advocacy for social change, which echoes the WFCT framework's third level of resourcing – advocacy. These components are discussed in greater detail below.

Connectivity

Findings from this study indicated that youth work of value included programs and services that were long-term, sustainable and relationship-based; factors that together form a principle that the advisory group termed “connectivity”. The long-term, sustainable programs and services tended to be community based, birthed and sourced from within that community, and were also ones that had worked with young people over several years. It was apparent from the data that this longevity emerged from community connectedness and enabled the establishment and development of meaningful relationships. Programs and services that were relationship based held the relationships between the youth workers and young people as central, even though the context within which the service functioned may have changed over time. In his study of youth work in a New Zealand context, Martin (2006, p.66) supported this concept, noting that “youth workers build relationships with young people in their own context, and the relationship (rather than the delivery of a particular service or program) is what distinguishes their work”.

In addition to the centrality of the relationship between the young person and the youth worker, the present study found that relationship-based youth work also tended to focus on creating community connectivity. Work in which connectivity was present was characterised by healthy relationships and the existence of collaborative practices between schools, youth work services and wider communities, and also, where appropriate, between young people and their families.

A number of youth service respondents within this study emphasised their aim to connect young people to their four worlds – their respective geographical communities; cultural communities (e.g. sport); school/work situations; and peer and family relationships (adapted from Bronfenbrenner 1986). The rationale behind these workers’ socio-ecological perspectives aligns with the YDSA, which holds that,

... healthy development is shaped by young people having positive connections with many social environments. Positive youth development doesn’t take place in one social

environment at one given time. Typically, the more settings where young people feel welcomed, valued and understood, the better” (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002, p.17).

Another key tenet of connectivity is that of embracing inclusiveness. The data consistently found that those working within the sector believed that youth work of value is inclusive of all young people. While respondents acknowledged that not every service was designed to meet the needs of all young people within the Christchurch region, stakeholders were clear that the needs of all young people should be addressed through a variety of programs and services. However, they took care to point out that their notion of inclusiveness was built on the belief that meaningful engagement and connection is a right and not a privilege.

An additional facet of centrality indicated by this study was the extent to which diverse groups of young people received support from and felt included by those providing youth services. Although the Christchurch region provides numerous and comprehensive services for the diverse needs of young people, the data from this present study and other supporting literature indicate that there were two groups of young people for whom exclusion rather than inclusion was often a reality (Bhugra 1999; Cleland & Rickerby 2004; Walker 2005). First, young people with disabilities transitioning from school receive very little support from youth agencies. According to Cleland and Rickerby (2004), this form of “oversight” often results in this group of young people feeling disengaged and disillusioned, and lacking a sense of direction for the future.

The second group of young people experiencing difficulties with integration are refugees and migrants. Barriers to integration are multi-systemic and include trauma, day-to-day racism, cultural differences and language difficulties (Bhugra 1999; Walker 2005). Interview respondents and participants in the youth group advisory discussions all observed that consequential provision of resourcing is required at both direct and capacity-building levels if youth work programs are to realise long-term, sustainable provision for these two groups.

Strengths-based approach

Integral to the notion of connectivity is the understanding that youth work of value is positioned within a strengths-based approach, as expressed in Principle 3 of the YDSA, which aims to shift “collective thinking about young people from a problem-based to a strengths-based approach” (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002, p.25). Approximately two-thirds of those interviewed were aware of the need to adopt a strengths-based approach to youth work.

An example of this approach was narrated by members of a youth service in Christchurch who worked primarily with young Indigenous people. They had been using the Circle of Courage Model developed by Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (2002) to help them mentor young Indigenous people, with the aim of assisting them to: develop a sense of belonging within the community, acquire skills, gain independence/autonomy, and develop a spirit of generosity. The mentoring involved a variety of relevant and meaningful practices and contexts. Essentially, the Circle provided the youth workers with a consensually understood philosophical and practice-based framework for positive youth development grounded in a strength-based approach.

Historically, youth work within New Zealand has been relationally based, with young people developing knowledge, skills and attitudes often implicitly rather than explicitly (Martin 2006). More recently, however, youth work has started to become, as a result of a developing philosophical framework within the sector, increasingly sophisticated in terms of its understanding of what youth work involves, its purpose and intent. However, as the data highlighted, what is required within the youth sector to further develop a strengths-based approach that is intentional about youth development is a greater knowledge and understanding of key documents and models of youth development, and a clarity of direction and purpose.

The data also emphasised the need for this information to be collectively and consensually understood by funders, policymakers and decision-makers in the field so that they will make informed and progressive decisions

and not ones that are reactionary or celebrity, media and/or incident driven.

Adopting a strengths-based approach also means embracing the notion of independence and autonomy integral to the Circle of Courage (Brendtro et al. 2002). Many of the youth workers interviewed believed best practice involves empowering young people through the provision of decision-making, problem-solving and leadership opportunities. Principle 5 of the YDSA refers to this (in part) as youth participation, where opportunities are created for young people to “actively participate and engage” (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002, p.8). However, while youth workers in this study were able to articulate this as a desirable outcome, their comments suggested that very few of them felt they were implementing this approach successfully.

This finding is consistent with other literature that has found disparity between youth worker rhetoric and actual practice, particularly in relation to the complexities of youth participation and empowerment (see, for example, Cargo et al. 2003; Flowers 1998). This reluctance, to use the term expressed in the literature, to shift practices towards empowering young people is also evident in other adult–youth dynamics, including teacher–student, coach–athlete and parent–child relationships where it is more commonplace for the adult to establish and maintain power and control (Shor 1996).

The participants in the youth advisory group focus group discussions recommended the need for intervention at a capacity-building level, specifically in providing youth-sector educators with training in successful youth-centred pedagogical approaches. The participants agreed that such specific and practical training would allow youth workers to develop the skills necessary to establish meaningful and actual youth participation and autonomy. The next section expands on this notion of capacity building in more detail.

Capacity building

The findings of this study indicated that youth work of value is likely to be characteristic of services committed to capacity building, particularly in terms of the profes-

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sional development of their staff. This concept is reflected in Principle 6 of the YDSA, which notes that "effective research, evaluation, and information gathering and sharing is crucial" (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002, p.24).

The data revealed that the ability to build capacity within the Christchurch youth sector had been realised in many instances through the support of local government and the work of the Canterbury Youth Workers Collective (CYWC). It was apparent from the interview and discussion group commentary that local networking and the development of youth services is largely due to the commitment of a local government that places a high value on social development and the ongoing provision of related services by CYWC.

It was also apparent that capacity building is often characteristic of agencies that access the services provided by CYWC. Drawing on the assistance provided by local government and other funding providers, CYWC focuses on professional development of youth workers, paying particular attention to such matters as ethical practice, supervision, leadership development, and multiculturalism and biculturalism. It is likely that training within the sector will be further strengthened by the recent establishment of the National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa, which aims to establish training opportunities for youth workers.

The data further revealed that youth services with a long history of quality service provision within the Christchurch region tended also to have strong leadership, including in the area of governance and management. It was apparent from the interview participants' comments that strong leadership facilitated staff stability, and that long tenure, in turn, increased the advantages of longer-term experience and knowledge. This stability was further fostered by ongoing access for staff to quality professional development, often provided locally by CYWC.

The interview and focus group participants agreed that capacity building within the sector could be further enhanced by addressing two key issues – mainstream funding practices and the recruitment and training of youth workers. Youth workers expressed concern that funding tended to be program based rather than given

as a blanket sum to each provider organisation. They argued that although this "tagging" advantaged the funder by providing a means of accountability, the restrictive application of funds could actually hinder the autonomy of agencies and their ability to develop their services in ways they considered would best meet the needs of the young people accessing their services.

One solution proposed by interview participants, and agreed upon during the focus group discussions, was that global contributions rather than tagged funding should be considered. Participants acknowledged the need for accountability, but proposed that the effectiveness of funding could be tracked through other accountability systems, such as requiring evidence of organisational outcomes met.

Another funding matter that emerged as a concern related to the short-term, "cap in hand" nature of funding. As one agency noted, "We're always six months from bankruptcy". This cap-in-hand approach can also, as several participants observed, be reactionary, and influenced by trends that are often media driven. In regard to this issue, participants recommended that funders, local and central government leaders and others in positions of power and influence need to gain a solid understanding of youth development models, strategies and issues as well as an understanding of youth work as a profession and how it differs from social work.

The second capacity-building-related issue – the need to pay significant attention to the recruitment and training of youth workers – was probably a product of the participants' widely held view that workers are the sector's most important asset. Both the interview and focus group discussion participants argued that the health and wellbeing of the sector relied primarily on the health and wellbeing of its workers and other professionals working within the sector. They observed, in particular, that if youth work leaders are valued, mentored and extended in terms of their own skills and knowledge, then this will have a significant positive impact on the youth workers who are a part of each leader's team. There is also a need, participants argued, to develop the volunteer sector because it is here that youth work is validated as a career option. Potential

should be identified early among volunteers and harnessed through effective professional development programs and training opportunities. Interestingly, a number of youth workers interviewed for this study reported that young volunteers who experienced connectivity in the youth work sector in which they served were more likely to stay in it because their needs for belonging were being met within this context.

When asked to elaborate on their ideas relating to training within the youth sector, participants generally agreed that national qualification providers need to recognise that “training on the job” is not only a valid form of training, but also vital to the wellbeing of the youth services sector. Participants additionally proposed that distance learning options needed to be more widely available and to include assessments in the workplace. Their recommendation that greater professional development opportunities should be made available to all youth workers in general, and to leaders within the sector in particular, is consistent with the findings and recommendations of Martin’s (2006) nationwide study of youth workers and Barwick’s (2006) review of issues and challenges in New Zealand’s youth sector.

Contextual and systemic considerations

Macro-contexts include economic, political, social and cultural factors, among others. As a result, considerations relating to macro-system/systemic concerns tend to be multifaceted and highly complex. Nonetheless, participants in this study identified four main contexts requiring attention. These were:

- the often negative media portrayal of young people;
- inadequate mental health service provision;
- the poor design of many public spaces (including malls) and the lack of socially responsible management practices for these spaces; and
- the lack of appropriate schooling approaches, in particular alternative education practices for young people excluded from mainstream schooling.

There is insufficient space to expand on these issues here, but what is obvious from the participants’ concerns and recommendations is

that systemic-level advocacy at a regulatory and policy level is a must.

Youth work that is of value is youth work that considers and critiques macro-contexts to ensure that youth-related practice is both relevant and meaningful. As Principle 1 of the YDSA states,

... youth development is shaped by the big picture ... the values and belief systems; the social, cultural, economic contexts and trends; the Treaty of Waitangi and international obligations such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002, p.16).

Although the YDSA observes that youth development is shaped by the “big picture”, it is also fair to say that youth development shapes this picture. An example of this is the social justice approach to youth development proposed by Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) and further explored in a text by Ginwright, Noguera and Cammarota (2006). A social justice approach seeks to raise critical consciousness with the view to taking socio-critical action. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002, p.82) suggest that this approach is necessary, as the “limits of current youth development models are bound by an inability to examine the complex social, economic, and political forces that bear on the lives of urban youth”.

Conclusion

The proposed model of best practice developed through this research project suggests that four main factors underpin youth work that is of value. These are connectivity; strengths-based approaches, including youth participation; capacity building; and “big picture” contextual and systemic matters. Each of these components is highly complex and multi-faceted, and determining how all four can best be considered within youth sector policy and practice requires more analysis than is possible in this initial study. However, it has been possible to use the findings of this research to develop the following questions, which together incorporate the four identified factors. These could be used as a guide to determine the extent to which youth work programs and services reflect the

proposed model of best practice. They can also be used to assist funding decisions. However, a necessary caution is that these questions are not an absolute list and not all questions will apply to all situations:

1. Is the youth service community based, birthed and sourced?
2. Is the youth service one that has worked with young people for a significant period of time and which has, during that time, sought to develop strong relationships with young people and other youth sector stakeholders?
3. Are there signs of community life, connectivity and collaboration?
4. Does the youth service have a strengths-based approach to working with young people in terms of helping young people develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will benefit them?
5. Does the youth service seek to develop independence/autonomy within young people through empowerment and youth participation?
6. Does the youth service foster acts of generosity and social responsibility?
7. Is the youth service inclusive of all young people entitled to access the service?
8. Does the youth service place high value on the training of youth workers, leaders, etc.?
9. Is the youth service committed to capacity building?

Another implication of this study is that funding and resourcing decisions can be sifted through the three levels of impact – direct influence, capacity building and/or advocacy, as proposed by the WFCT funding framework. For example, if the youth advisory group identified the need to provide specific services for young people with disabilities transitioning from school, it could determine which area of impact would most benefit from resourcing. In this instance, it is likely that impact is required at two levels: advocacy through a forum and brokering process that advocates for policy change at a local or governmental level; and capacity building for organisations to provide effective service delivery so that a meaningful service is provided.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that while many organisations within the youth

work sector are making significant progress in implementing best practice that aligns with the principles of the YDSA (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2002), specific areas require development. In particular, there is a need to provide greater support for marginalised groups of young people, to implement meaningful youth participation practices, to enhance capacity building within the sector, and to facilitate systemic-level change relating to government policy, media portrayal of young people, and philanthropic funding policies and practices.

The recent establishment of the National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa and the ongoing and dedicated commitment of youth workers in the sector hold good promise for significant gains in the near future. However, increased professional development, including information sharing and rigorous debate, is required so that youth work practice within this region continues to evolve in ways that are meaningful, evidence-based and innovative.

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