Think About It: An Exploration of Values, Principles and Ethics of Youth Work
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It is my belief that values, principles and ethics are the foundational pieces of how youth work is practiced and how a philosophical approach is developed. While participating in the Walkabout Fellowship over the past year, I have enjoyed the informal conversations with colleagues about the meaning or implications of the values, principles and ethics of our work. I also formally interviewed five local professionals who were either doing direct service youth work or were managers overseeing youth services programming.

For the purpose of this paper I will look at youth work practice among youth services. Youth Services is outside the work being done within education, park and recreation, and out-of-school time. Youth Services is an arena where services are voluntary and can include residential programming, group work, individual counseling, life skill development, community engagement and case management services. It is important to identify the role of youth services because it indicates the purpose of the relationship. Young people often show up to youth services looking to get their basic needs of safety, food and shelter met first. From there youth services provide opportunities for family work and/or independent living. There is a concentrated effort for young people to explore their strengths and set their own goals.

VALUES

In exploring what values, principles and ethics look like within youth services, it is vital to understand how youth workers define their role in a young person's life. First, most often the youth worker is being paid to have a relationship with this young person. The connection between the youth and youth worker is through an organization or agency. It must be recognized that this relationship is one of a professional nature. The youth worker has a two-fold sense of power: he or she is an adult and holds control of whatever services the young person is receiving. The youth workers get to make decisions that affect the young person's programming experience.

Society often sees youth as individuals or groups to fear. It is the youth workers' experience to challenge this idea. They must see youth differently than the rest of society. Youth workers create a safe place by seeing young people with a lens that reflects their strengths; respects their ideas, stories, relationships and experiences; and views them as individuals who have something to offer. Mark Krueger (2005) described four themes of youth work practice that reflect these values in how a youth worker should approach youth work:

- Presence—The ability to bring self (youth worker) to the moment. "I am here, I will go with you."

- Rhythmic Interaction— The human connection; movement toward resolution, moment of connection, discovery, empowerment.

- Meaning Making—An understanding of youth contextual reality; construct and deconstruct; moving-talking- and being together.

- Atmosphere—The tone, mood, space, and place.

This lens also changes how youth workers should talk about young people, especially when they are not in the room. The youth worker becomes the advocate, is conscious of the young person's voice and cautious to impose his or her own ideas on what needs to or should happen in the life of a young person.

The common themes discovered in identifying youth work values included:

- Believe in young people.
- Consider diversity.
- Be consistent.
- Find ways to stay creative.
- Utilize a strength-based philosophy.

Think about it: To sit in a room with a young person. Maybe you have met this person before, maybe not. To share a space that has been purposefully and intentionally entered into. To sit silently in quiet and stillness leaving room for the young person to decide when it is time to speak, to decide where to begin, to decide the words to choose. The story (and there is never just one) may be told all at once maybe even without breath or it may be told slowly and carefully. It is a privilege to be in that kind of space with a young person. It is vital, once this relationship-oriented kind of interaction begins, that the youth worker hears, sees and feels what is being given to them. This is how we begin to truly believe in young people.

PRINCIPLES

The most common language utilized among Youth Services is in talking about positive youth development. In the *Positive Youth Development Toolkit*, Ansell et al. (2008) describe four principal areas of concentration: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. Belonging is a result of having "a positive relationship with a trustworthy adult, being in an inclusive program and having a safe environment" p. 13). Mastery includes "developing knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes then being given the opportunity to demonstrate them in a proficient manner" (p. 14). Independence is about "self-reliance, self-determination, and capturing one's own hope and optimism and believing that one has some impact or control over life's events" (p.15). Generosity means "providing youth with opportunity to participate in something larger than themselves" (p. 15).

Let's not forget these principles have been in the making for over 40 years. This does not make them irrelevant, but a solid cornerstone on which to build a common understanding of youth work principles. In 1973, Gisela Konopka worked with colleagues to develop a framework of basic need requirements for work with adolescents. Konopka's, *Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth* has influenced and shaped the positive youth development approach. These basic needs are: feel a sense of safety; experience active participation; develop self-worth through contribution; experiment to discover self and gain independence; develop significant quality relationships particularly with at least one caring adult; discuss conflicting values to develop own personal values; feel pride of competence and mastery; and expand capacity to enjoy life and know success is possible.

Think about it: It only takes 24 hours. Within the first 24 hours of being on the street a young person is approached to participate in some sort of sexual exploitation. It doesn't matter why this young person has found his or her way to this situation. For some running away seems easier than the fight. For others the doors are locked and they are not wanted at home.

It takes a significant amount of courage for this young person to walk in the door of your agency. They are welcomed without judgment. There are caring adults and peers with similar stories. There is safety. There is listening. There are conversations that explore where they have been, what's important to them, and where they want to go. There is a relentless curiosity. Everything is intentional and purposeful. This young person is given the freedom to explore, wrestle with new ideas, and encounter new experiences.

ETHICS

Youth work in the United States at this point in time does not have a code of ethical conduct. It relies more on a philosophical approach for dealing with human conduct or the

right/wrongness of behavior. In the chapter *Ethics and Values in Work with Young People* (Banks, 2009), there are two questions to ask when considering an ethical situation. One side asks, "How should we act?" while the other side asks, "What sorts of people we should be?" (p. 48). Both are vital questions, yet in exploring professional ethics the *how should we act* is what usually develops into a professional code of conduct.

One youth worker I interviewed stated "Ethics is common sense," yet ethical dilemmas are a constant area of conversation, consultation, and training among youth-serving agencies. A youth work professional manager was very clear when she stated, "Most mistakes in youth work are in ethics or boundaries."

The philosophical conduct behind youth work ethics has been influenced by social work and psychology ethical codes of conduct. These codes of conduct include: boundaries between the youth worker and young person; safety and well-being of young people; respect or valuing the young person as an individual with experiences, ideas and relationships that are meaningful; and accountability for the adults in young people's lives.

Think about it: When there is a discussion about ethics it is advised to ask one's self a question: "Whose needs are being met by the interaction?" Or "What purpose is this specific course of interaction, conversation, or activity serving?" In an age of social media there is greater and more constant exposure to images, photos, intimate thoughts or expression that is immediately public with world wide access. Individually there is no issue. People can choose how they publically present their person, personality, ideas and experiences. There becomes an ethical dilemma when a youth-serving organization puts out into the world, for the purpose and gain of the organization (fundraising), the image, identifiable story, idea, or experience of a young person who is currently receiving services. This action serves the needs and interest of the organization. The dilemma arises when the justification argues that the young people

are benefiting because fundraising keeps the doors of the organization open therefore helping young people. Or another justification can argue that young people are "empowered" by sharing their image, identifiable story-idea-experiences.

It is our responsibility as a community of youth service providers to make some decisions regarding the ethics of fundraising using our young people's intimate life stories. These are their real lives and using their stories for the benefit of the organizations has unseen consequences on the healing, personal growth development and self-image of our young people over time.

Most youth workers begin their careers as an entry level job some with college education some with life experience. Youth workers are not "youth workers" when they start the first day. These "professional" skills are developed through the agency in which they work. There is teaching, training and mentoring from supervisors and peers. Throughout the learning process consultation and debriefing are vital. Consultation and debriefing provide opportunities to process challenging situations, explore bias, discover opportunities to try different tools or skills, and ensure ethical conduct. This experience can be challenging and leads the youth worker to self-reflection. Self-reflection is an essential learning model in youth work. Learning to understand *what* we bring to this work influences the way in which we can be purposeful and intentional in *how* we do this work.

Youth Work is at the center of people work. It is influenced by the professional worlds of social work, education, justice, and even medicine by looking to those fields for professionalization. Maybe even more importantly, those professions are influenced by youth work as many young adults move from their first jobs as youth workers into those career arenas. They bring with them the foundational philosophies—the values, principles and ethics—learned from youth work practice which is their professional identity.

"No educational courses, training, programs, or

text books can give you what you need in order to be with, understand, and guide a young person through fear, pain, chaos, and anger once those demons are at work…being in relationship means that we have what it takes to remain open and responsive in conditions where most mortals and professionals quickly distance themselves, become 'objective' and look for the external fix" (Fewster, 2004).

Think about it: A thriving community that provides a continuum of services for our young people: prevention–to crisis interventions–shelter–housing–life skills– leadership–and connections to community. We can be with youth without fearing them. We can honor the relationships and identities they define. We can do what we say we are going to do. We can look for the exceptions, focus on the possibilities and remind young people of their hope. We can be creative and enjoy this work. We can celebrate moments of success.

Our programs can provide a safe place to tell a story or connect with an adult. We can provide opportunities that expose young people to new ideas and new experiences. Our programs can give young people a chance to determine their own path. We can provide community context where young people can find ways to participate, lead and give of themselves. As youth workers we can hold one another to a standard that respects a young person's voice that goes beyond setting goals or having a youth advisory panel. The youth's voice can be respected with every interaction. We can pause and check our own bias, our adult need to control, or enforce a rule. We can be purposeful and intentional as we welcome young people into our organizations.

We, as providers of services to young people, can ask ourselves why and how are we doing this work? We must consult, debrief, challenge one another and support each other. There are vital questions to consider: how should we act and what kind of agencies do we want to be?

Youth work is often done in isolation, yet there has been considerable effort among Youth Services to be more collaborative and share resources. As conversations unfold and new initiatives are pursued, it is my hope that the values, principles and ethics of youth work be the solid driving force of any decisions regarding why and how young people are served in our community. The why and how is truly what is important about working with young people.

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