



youth affairs network qld

WHAT IS YOUTH WORK?

A DISCUSSION PAPER

What is Youth Work?: A Discussion Paper

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CONTEXT – YOUTH SECTOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

In early 2009 YANQ began a major youth sector workforce development project. This project is designed to develop a sustainable and vibrant youth sector workforce in Queensland, which protects and promotes young people's rights. Phase 1 of the project identified a systematic workforce development process - the Youth Sector Development Plan (YSDP) - which is documented in the 2010 Youth Sector in Queensland report.

YANQ has established 2 groups to advise on implementation of this Plan. The Youth Sector Leadership Group (YSLG) is made up of youth sector managers with detailed knowledge and experience of the youth sector. The Industry Reference Group (IRG) comprises a wider group of industry stakeholders to provide strategic advice.

Following advice from both groups, YANQ has identified the Youth Work Partnership Project as one of 3 priority areas for 2011. The Youth Sector in Queensland report found that youth work is being diluted and merging into other professions; it lacks clear articulation and professional boundaries. Recommendation 4 proposed that the youth services sector should be defined and promoted.

Before we can promote the sector, it is essential to know what we are promoting – that is, to have a clear definition of youth work and its place in the youth (services) sector:

1. This deliberately controversial paper is the first step in the process. It is designed to stimulate discussion amongst a broad spectrum of stakeholders.
2. YANQ will engage with education and training providers, and encourage them to contribute papers, and review articles from sector workers,¹ which critically explore the issues. These will be produced as a limited hard copy issue of *New Transitions*, the YANQ online youth work journal.

Together, this process will enable and enrich 12 months of sector-wide discussion and debate – leading to creation of a working definition of what youth work is and who the youth sector represents.

In order to have a sound basis for future promotion, mapping and development of the youth sector workforce, it is essential that the definitions of youth work and the youth sector are sophisticated. These definitions must be informed by learning from the historic context; understanding available national and international data; and a detailed analysis of their implications.

¹ Challenged by this paper? Do you agree? disagree? have further ideas? Why not contribute your thoughts through an article for the forthcoming special edition of *New Transitions*?

INTRODUCTION

- Social Workers are particularly trained to provide individual support, such as case management and welfare assistance.
- Community Workers are particularly trained to provide community development and group activities.
- Recreation Officers and Occupational Therapists are particularly trained to provide sporting and developmental activities.
- Psychologists and Doctors are particularly trained to provide intensive support in areas such as mental health and substance abuse.
- Adult Educators and Teachers are particularly trained to provide education and training.
- Correctional Officers are particularly trained to supervise prisoners.

What's left? Could the youth sector simply function as an amalgam of people with training in different specialist areas, who collectively provide services to young people?

Is there the need for a distinct occupational group called Youth Workers? Looking superficially at the needs of young people from a purely functional perspective, it would appear that there is little justification for a discrete occupation targeted at work with young people.

The central questions which underly this paper are:

- **Is youth work a unique activity which requires specific, specialist competencies?**
- **Is the youth sector something more than an amalgam of various existing occupations applied to young people?**

If youth work is to be a discrete occupation into the future, it is essential that the youth sector proactively identify its core and unique characteristics. We must articulate what distinguishes youth work from other occupational activities with people who happen to be young. This will ensure that youth work does not simply merge into other occupational groups. It will protect against a reactive, default or gap-based definition of youth work:

A Default Definition of Youth Work

A Youth Worker = someone who undertakes activities considered important by funding bodies that other occupational groups don't want to do.

Or a reductionist, Jill of all trades definition of youth work, which sees youth workers as a lower-skilled sub-set of real professions – someone with limited skills in a range of areas:

A Junior Definition of Youth Work

A Youth Worker = someone with the ability to undertake basic work in all areas of social support required by young people.

If you don't like these definitions, read on ...

The youth sector in its current form has largely evolved over the past 30 years – since government began allocating significant funding to employ paid staff to work directly with young people outside formal institutions (e.g. schools, youth prisons): that is, to undertake non-statutory work with willing young people. Over this same period, a number of new occupations have formalised at a tertiary level (e.g. recreation officers, community workers, and in some states, youth workers). As a result of this evolutionary process, a variety of interest groups and individuals have participated in the sector for many different reasons and in many different ways.

Given the variety of interest groups in the sector, it is unreasonable to expect that a definition of the youth sector, and of youth work in particular, can be developed which is agreed to by everyone. One aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide a shared basis for developing informed definitions which key stakeholders can live with.

***Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.*²**

This paper goes back to basics – drawing on the history of youth, youth work and the youth sector to provide a common basis for considering our future development.

THE YOUTH IN YOUTH WORK

Is there such a thing as young people?

This may sound like an absurd question. Work with young people is predicated on the assumption that there is a separate stage that everyone goes through, called youth or adolescence. Most of us have grown up believing that this is a fact. The truth is that these concepts are very recent, western ideas, which continue to be the subject of robust academic debate – particularly amongst psychologists, biologists, sociologists and anthropologists.³

Between about age 10 and 20-25 years people go through bodily changes: puberty is a biological fact which occurs in every known culture. However, the idea that these biological changes are naturally accompanied by particular social and behavioural characteristics is a relatively recent theory. The idea of young people or adolescents as a universal group with particular needs is essentially only 50 years old.

The concepts of *infancy*, *childhood*, *youth*, *adolescence* and *adulthood* have changed a lot over the past millenium in western societies. The western concept of *youth* does not exist in most cultures – including Aboriginal cultures.⁴ Some social scientists believe that this indicates there is no such thing as *youth* - that this is merely a construction developed to meet social needs. Others believe that there is a stage called *youth*, but behaviour during this stage will vary enormously according to the expectations of each particular culture. *Adolescence* is a psychological theory which proposes that there are *normal* stages of development (reflected through changes in emotional, social, sexual and intellectual behaviour) which individuals undergo in the process of attaining *adulthood*.

2 This saying appears in many different forms. The earliest version is probably that of the poet and philosopher George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." (Life of Reason, Reason in Common Sense, Scribner's, 1905, p 284.) cited at <http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview/id/495329.html#answer>

3 For a more detailed account of theories of youth and adolescence and the history of youth work see Quixley 2009.

4 A particularly accessible starting point to understanding the differences in concepts of childhood and adulthood between some Aboriginal communities and western culture is the 2008 ABC Message Stick program Finding Place. This program looks at the transition from childhood to manhood across several groups. Participation in bush camp (initiation) means that 13 year olds often make the transition directly from childhood to adulthood, and take on all the responsibilities of adulthood (including respect for elders and looking after their family). This is in contrast with the more gradual transition, and focus on economic independence, in western culture.

11th to 19th Century

In western cultures during the Middle Ages there was no concept of childhood (let alone, youth) – people were considered infants until age 5 to 7; they were then adults, with all the responsibilities of adulthood. Even the rich lived in interdependent settings with extended family and servants. Development of the concept of childhood paralleled changes in living conditions and an increased capacity for families to live as discrete units.

During the 16th & 17th centuries the children of wealthy families were seen as dependent for the first time. By the end of the 17th century, this concept had spread to lower income families. Theologians and academics began to argue that boys needed a chance to develop during childhood – however many girls continued to marry and run whole households by age 10. (The concept of childhood took about 200 years longer to be applied to girls than boys.)

Over the 18th and 19th centuries, all children were progressively seen as needing special care and attention, and remained children into their teenage years. Schools began to focus on children; treating students differently from adults for the first time and becoming preoccupied with discipline.⁵ New child labour laws were intended to protect children from exploitation, but also served to create the first street kids (children whose parents could not afford to keep them, but who were not allowed to work to support themselves). This process occurred in parallel with industrialisation, increasing access to individual income and greater independence of more family units. As the middle class grew, the individual became increasingly important and the idea of a link between adulthood and independence became progressively more popular. Children started to be seen as the most important part of families. However, the length of childhood experienced by each person continued to depend largely on family income/class. People still went straight from being a child to an adult - although the age at which this was seen to occur had extended.

20th Century

The 20th century was characterised by children's (later young people's) lives, whether they were at school or working, becoming more formal and structured. The language used to describe this group gradually changed. Between 1900 and 1920, they were generally called children. From the 1920's to the 1940's, the word juvenile was commonly used, especially in relation to criminalised young people. By the 1940's the word youth began to appear for the first time. During the 1980's, the youth sector chose to use young people, rather than youth, in recognition of the association of the latter with young men.

From early in the 20th century, governments in Australia began to intervene directly in the lives of children – particularly those on the streets. By the middle of the century, achieving independence was seen as the key criteria for adulthood in western cultures – and those without the financial means of independence were seen as not-yet-adult for longer than those with financial means. Most laws treated children as adults once they turned 17. But, just as in earlier centuries, access to adulthood depended on class, background and sex. If they were considered neglected, children could be placed under State control until they were older. For example, in Queensland boys could be under the control of the State until they were 18; girls until they were 21. Indigenous young people were controlled even more strictly, under Aboriginal protection laws.

⁵ Schools had existed for several centuries, but were not seen as age-related and were exclusively focused on teaching and learning. Someone in their 30's might be sitting next to a 10 year old, doing the same lessons.

During the 1950's youth became truth. After World War 2 jobs were very readily available, and children/youth had more discretionary income than earlier generations. For the first time, special products were made for sale to young people (e.g. coke, clothes, records and cars). For the first time, young people with money had a lifestyle which was very different from others in the society - a youth culture. Not all young people were part of this culture. Indigenous young people and the children of newly arrived migrants (mainly from Europe), were generally excluded by a mixture of laws, racism, poverty and cultural expectations. Many young women were excluded by family pressure or marriage. Young women who were part of the 1950's youth culture were often portrayed as mad or bad.

The youth movement (or, revolt) of the 1960's was mainly amongst middle class university students. But it did impact on other groups, since the civil rights component of the movement was concerned with the rights of disenfranchised social groups within Australian society, including Indigenous Australians and women. This served to extend the concept of youth to everyone of a certain (still ill-defined) age.

In the early 1970's, this younger generation became a social force with wide implications. Young people played a key role in voting the Whitlam Government into power - driven, at least in part, by the Labor promise to end Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Since then, the concept of youth has been institutionalised into mainstream Australian culture – to the extent that we now treat the existence of this group as a matter of fact. But debate continues about the age at which people are considered young – Should it be extended downwards to include the newly emerging *tweenagers*? Is a 22 year old self-made millionaire a young person? Is a 24 year old married parent of 3 children a young person? Is an unemployed 25 year old worthy of receiving independent adult income support? And, how is it that a 17 (or 20) year old who has committed a criminal offence is treated as an adult?

Exactly who are the youth in youth work? Is youth work based on a social construction – the ultimate purpose of which is to manage marginalised or non-conforming social groups? Or, is adolescence a universal stage of development which has only recently been discovered – and which requires special guidance and care? Our beliefs about young people directly impact on every aspect of youth work practice. They are particularly pertinent when working with young people from non-western cultures. As Howard Sercombe says:

This is not a process of finding out what youth 'really' is. ... The point is to look critically at the dominant frameworks that are out there, to be clear about the concepts we use, and to take responsibility for them, for the way that they shape our dealings with young people, and what we try to create as outcomes for and with them.

(Sercombe 2010:16)

ORIGINS OF YOUTH WORK

An understanding of the history of youth work is critical to developing an informed, evidence-based definition of youth work within the current social and cultural context. It allows us to examine approaches that have already been tried – and to discard ineffective strategies and build on past successes.

The origins of youth work were in the 19th century, when laws were first passed to stop children being allowed to work. This led to a discrete group of disenfranchised children who were firmly located outside family and social structures. Whilst these laws protected children from working long hours in dangerous jobs, poorer families often had many children, and could not afford to care for them. Many of these children, particularly boys, were sent out to survive on their own. Given that they were not allowed to work, they often had to steal in order to survive. These

vagrants or delinquents were seen in one of two ways. Either they were lazy and irresponsible, or, they were violent and dangerous. Governments tried to control these street children by making schooling compulsory. But this did not address the problem, since all schools were private and the families of street kids could not afford to send their children to school.

Early, largely voluntary, youth workers fell into 2 groups:

1. Middle class philanthropists explained the problem by arguing that poor families provided a 'bad' environment for children. These *child savers* aimed to get children out of these family situations into good environments - either strict, middle class families or institutions.
2. Others believed that these children had too much spare time. They aimed to fill that time with formally structured, patriotic, single-sex, recreational activities. Activities were designed to teach the children 'good', middle class values - the boys being taught to lead, obey and think; the girls being taught to be good wives and mothers.

During the first half of the 20th century, governments in Australia began to acknowledge that the problem of children on the streets was not being solved. For the first time, active social control measures were put in place to manage this group. Governments began to provide services directly, instead of relying on the largely voluntary efforts of churches and others. State Governments set up schools to provide free education and formalised off-the-job training for apprentices. The Australian Government made cadet training compulsory for 12-18 year olds in 1911, became more involved with education and training for young people during the Great Depression, funded higher education for the first time in the 1940's and formally recognised the role of non government organisations. NGO's (mainly churches and church-driven organisations) continued to play an important role in the lives of young people. They provided recreation and welfare services, including establishment of adult-led youth organisations which exist today (e.g. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides). By the mid 20th century laws had been made about behaviour such as underage smoking. Governments took an increasingly active role in saying what was good and bad behaviour for young people, and established institutions for juvenile delinquents.

Governments were very concerned about the emerging youth cultures of the 1950's and 1960's. Many committees were established to try to find a solution to the youth problem - and largely concluded that young people should be subject to greater social control. They encouraged existing youth organisations to be more active. An even greater emphasis was placed on trying to ensure that young people attended school. These measures did little to undermine the existence of youth cultures. However, the nature of those cultures did change - largely as a result of other factors.

The Modern Youth Work Era

The impetus for activism reduced with the end of conscription in the 1970's, and the mass appeal of the youth movement faded quickly. However, governments did realise that young people were a potentially powerful force and they needed to be seen to be listening to young people. The voting age was dropped to age 18 and organisations (particularly youth sector peak bodies) were funded to enable young people to formally contribute their ideas to government. During the late 1970's, State and Australian governments began developing secular youth work programs; and funding paid positions in existing mainstream youth organisations and newly emerging community organisations. The paid youth sector was born. This marked the beginning of the modern youth work era.

Toward the end of the 1970's, the job market started to shrink and youth unemployment affected large numbers of young people. Just when young people had begun to have a little political power, they had less economic power. Young people had become used to being economically independent during the 1950's and 1960's, when there were plenty of jobs. Suddenly, many young people were forced to become economically dependent again. Governments dealt with this problem by taking more control over young people's lives – young people were encouraged to stay at school for longer, and the comparative value of youth wages progressively reduced.

Funding of government and community-based service delivery continued to grow into the 1980's. Some of these programs were driven by student activists of the 1970's, who took a new approach to youth work - addressing social justice issues, advocating for young people's rights and engaging with community activism. However the majority of services, within both the government and non government sectors, continued to be driven by the same commitment to deal with the youth problem as had characterised work with young people (whether called youth, adolescents or children) over the previous 200 years.

Over the past 30 years, society's approach to young people and the youth sector has continued to conservatise. The age at which people are seen to reach adulthood has extended - again, as in the past, along economic lines. Young people who conform to social expectations (e.g. have a secure job or marry) are seen as adult at a relatively young age. Young people who fail to achieve economic security (e.g. are unemployed or students) are forced into an extended childhood until they are at least 26 years old. Social control mechanisms, such as imprisonment, are increasingly being used to manage those young people unwilling to adhere to social expectations.

Sherington and Irving (1989:18) propose that western societies hold 3 main perceptions of young people:

- 1. Citizens of Tomorrow: These people believe that the next generation need to be taught how to be good adults so they can run Australia well in the future. People who see young people this way are likely to focus on encouraging young people to participate in education/training and become involved in responsible youth activities.*
- 2. Social Problem: These people are particularly concerned about problem youth and often see groups such as Indigenous young people, street kids or unemployed young people as important to work with. They want to teach these young people to be good adults.*
- 3. Social Movement: These people believe that young people have unique expertise that they can contribute to society, and argue that young people can have valuable ideas about how society should be. They think it's a good idea for young people to be outspoken.*

Government services targeted at young people are increasingly focused on seeing young people as citizens of tomorrow and/or a social problem – both of which require that they be trained to meet social expectations. The main options available to street kids, homeless youth or young offenders are broadly similar to those of the 19th century - with fostering arrangements or institutionalisation still playing a central role. Many people in western societies continue to see young people as a problem - in need of discipline, or good values to address their behaviours. These young people are seen as having special needs which require intervention in every aspect of their lives - housing, income, education, training, recreation, health, employment, etc. Youth workers, and other workers with young people, are employed to help young people in all these areas.

Funding to the non government sector has progressively shifted from small (often secular) community organisations to larger (mainly church-based) organisations. The focus of work with young people has largely moved away from

the perception of young people as a social movement, and re-engaged with the child saving approach of the 19th century, with its emphasis on controlling young people through labour market, education and recreation programs.

THE CHANGING QUEENSLAND CONTEXT

The context in which the Queensland youth sector operates has changed considerably over the past 30 years. Similar changes have occurred elsewhere in Australia, and in other sectors within the community services and health industries. This has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish work with young people (a broader category) from youth work. Many different occupational groups work with young people – teachers, employers, social workers, prison officers, etc.

- Sometimes people who call themselves youth workers fall outside these occupational groups.
- Sometimes people who are members of these occupations call themselves youth workers.
- Sometimes people whose job was previously seen as youth work, prefer to be described according to their occupational group (e.g. psychologist, recreation officer).
- Some government positions have interchangeably used the title youth worker and other job titles (e.g. in the youth justice and sport/recreation areas).

How has this confusion occurred?

The relationship between government funding bodies and NGO's has changed substantially during the modern youth work era. Government expectations of the level and type of (so-called) accountability required of funded NGO's has played a key role in blurring the distinction between the government and non-government sectors. The resulting corporatisation and culture of managerialism within the non government sector, in turn, has contributed to increased uniformity of services and reduced clarity in the common understanding of what a youth worker is:

In the 1970's and 1980's ...	Over the past 20 years ...
Most youth workers were employed by NGO's on the basis of criteria such as passion, demonstrated competencies, personalised experience and values. The term youth worker was widely used.	NGO's have been increasingly encouraged to employ staff on the basis of formal qualifications. Youth worker as a job title is less common, and practitioners often choose an alternate descriptor.
Most youth work functioned in an informal environment, and focused on meeting young people's perception of their own priorities and needs. Young people's participation was fully voluntary, and confidentiality was treated as a central ethical right.	Youth workers are increasingly required to provide formal, structured services with predetermined outcomes. Many young people's participation is involuntary, and NGO's are increasingly required to undertake statutory reporting responsibility.
Government often funded small NGO's, located in their community of interest (e.g. a geographical area or specific interest group).	Government has increasingly funded large, mainly church-based, mega-NGO's.

NGO's were generally required to ensure community ownership and relevance of programs. Community-based management committees involved ordinary community members driven by personal and community interests.	NGO's have increasingly been required to establish Boards to fulfil financial, administrative, legal and industrial roles. Board member competencies in these areas are seen as more important than community connection.
Accountability for organisational meaning and direction; local relevance and community connection was located with NGO's. Organisations developed locally appropriate models of service and sought funding to provide the services they considered important. (Governments then decided whether, or not, to provide funding.)	Organisational direction and day-to-day practice (e.g. model of service and service outcomes) are increasingly located with government. Organisations effectively sub-contract to provide the predetermined services government considers important (as reflected in funding guidelines and service agreements).
NGO's were required to demonstrate their local community credentials. Government took primarily responsibility for developing staff and committee members, financial/ functional accountability and any risks associated with service delivery.	NGO's are increasingly required to work from a corporate model, and report to governments on management of internal operational matters (e.g. industrial relations, finances, governance, legal requirements, evaluation and risk.)
Funding was more flexible. Resources for organisational infrastructure and development were often included in funding packages.	Funding is increasingly focused on specific projects and outcomes. Ongoing infrastructural funding is difficult to access, particularly for small NGO's.

It is fair to argue that, in the 1970's power tended to be located with the community and responsibility with government. Now, responsibility tends to be located with NGO's and power with government.

These changes have directly impacted on the general modern understanding of youth work, established during the 1970's and 1980's. Whilst few workers now undertake the type of voluntary, informal, responsive, community-based youth work of the past, this role has not been replaced with a clear, alternate definition of youth work.

NATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF YOUTH WORK

There is no agreed definition of youth work in Australia.

The only national definition of youth work, the Jasper Declaration, was adopted at the 1st National Youth Workers Conference in 1977. After the conference, it swiftly disappeared into oblivion! Whilst this definition was never integrated within the sector, it does provide a starting point for discussion. The Declaration reflects the social movement view of young people, proposed by Sherington & Irving (1989). In part it reads:

We seek a commitment to a new direction in the philosophy of youth work. We will no longer be content to offer programs which merely gratify immediate wants. We are concerned for the fulfilment of individuals over a total life span. We recognise that our commitment to this philosophy will operate within a local context. This legalised process will involve facilitating:

- *people to become aware of themselves and others in the community;*
- *people to engage in human transactions with others;*
- *people to think through issues (consciousness raising);*
- *people to conceive contradictions, the level of manipulation and limitations of their local area, and the scope of their power and the possibility for change.*

The implications of this are:

- *that the changing of attitudes is more important than exclusively providing leisure pursuits;*
- *that the process of 'bandaid-ing' will be challenged because it is perpetuating the present system and aiding its preservation;*
- *that such a model will bring us into conflict with the existing structure of society and often the underlying philosophies of many of the youth organisations/agencies to which we belong;*
- *that such conflict will involve risks and we must be prepared for the type of commitment that may involve costs in terms of economics, position, reputation, time, relationships, etc;*
- *that there will be for us disturbing confrontation with many ethical problems and questions; this confrontation will be particularly great in terms of our degree of compromise and participation in the operation of the system. (Cited in Quixley & Doostkhah 2007:42⁶)*

Over the past few years, a variety of different definitions have been explored by individual states and interest groups.

Youth sector peak bodies in WA, ACT and NSW have adopted very similar codes of ethics (with minor variations) which define youth work as:

The core of youth work practice lies in the relationship with the young person as the primary client, expressed through a commitment to advocacy and healing in their (sic) work with the young person and the wider society. www.yapa.org.au/youthwork/ethics/codetext.php.

The only professional association for youth workers in Australia, the Western Australian Association of Youth Workers (WAAYW) has also adopted this definition. Whilst aiming to provide clarity about the role of youth workers, the association does not currently have a more comprehensive definition. The WAAYW implies that the term youth worker should only be used by someone who qualifies for ongoing membership of the association – which most commonly requires having an approved degree.⁷ The lowest category of membership allows access to those with a Certificate 4 in Youth Work and the equivalent of 2 years' full time paid experience.⁸

Youth workers in the Hunter/CentralCoast/Mid-North Coast of NSW have drafted a code of ethics with a different definition:

The primary purpose of Youth Work is the provision of assistance that will enable young people to navigate their life choices in the wider context of community, family and other services.

⁶ The full text is reproduced in Quixley & Doostkhah 2007:42.

⁷ These include youth work, social work, psychology and community work/development; they exclude degrees in nursing, education or sport/recreation. The fact that qualifications in a number of occupations are seen to equally qualify someone to be a youth worker in Western Australia, raises interesting questions about whether youth work has unique, defining characteristics.

⁸ See www.waayw.org for further details.

In order to do this Youth Workers: Listen to young people. Support their choices. Involve young people in decisions about their lives. Advocate for young people's access to resources and facilities. Educate young people both formally and informally. Promote the positive contributions of young people to the wider community. www.yapa.org.au/youthwork/rydon/index.php

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria has developed the following Youth Work Principles:

Youth workers will work towards enabling and ensuring:

- 1. the empowerment of all young people*
- 2. young people's participation*
- 3. social justice for young people*
- 4. the safety of young people*
- 5. respect for young people's human dignity and worth*
- 6. young people's connectedness to important people in their lives, such as family and community*
- 7. positive health and wellbeing outcomes for young people*
- 8. the positive transitions and healthy development of young people.*

<http://www.yacvic.org.au/policy/items/2009/01/256701-upload-00001.pdf>

Other states and territories have not formally adopted a definition.

INTERNATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF YOUTH WORK

Youth work, as an identifiable occupation, mainly exists in 1st World Commonwealth countries. Most attempts to define youth work internationally have focused on the *functions* youth workers fulfil.

The USA

It is particularly noteworthy that in the USA, whilst there are many youth organisations and services, workers commonly identify according to the type of service they offer. They are more likely to describe themselves as an advocate, or social worker, or health worker, than a youth worker.

Nonetheless, youth development has been on the agenda in the USA over the past 30 years, and at the centre of a problem-oriented approach to work with young people. For example, the National Youth Development Center defines youth development as:

A process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. (Cited in Smith 2003)

Or the Youth Transition Funders Group outlines their vision:

Although their paths may vary greatly, all young people need to arrive at the same place: ready to work or take advantage of college–level education with the skills they need to participate fully in the workplace, become parents or assume family responsibilities, and participate in the civic life of their communities. Further, they need opportunities and support systems in place. Unfortunately, our society has no coherent social or public policy approach to support young people as they negotiate these transitions – and many vulnerable youth are not given the chance to do so successfully. Our vision is of a society dedicated to providing young people with the skills, supports, and opportunities to transition into meaningful and productive adult lives. (Youth Transition Funders Group et al 2007)

Britain

In England, youth work is defined as:

Youth work helps young people learn about themselves, others and society, through informal educational activities which combine enjoyment, challenge and learning. Youth workers work primarily with young people aged between 13 and 19, but may in some cases extend this to those aged 11 to 13 and 20 to 25. Their work seeks to promote young people’s personal and social development and enable them to have a voice, influence and place in their communities and society as a whole. (Cited in National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa 2008a:7)

In Scotland, the purpose of youth work is to:

- *Build self esteem and self confidence.*
- *Develop the ability to manage personal and social relationships.*
- *Create learning and develop new skills.*
- *Encourage positive group atmospheres.*
- *Build the capacity of young people to consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control.*
- *Develop a world view which widens horizons and invites social commitment.*

(Cited in National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa 2008a:7)

The *Irish Youth Work Act 2001* defines youth work as:

... a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is:

(a) Complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and

(b) Provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations. (Irish Statute Book 2001)

Whilst these definitions vary significantly, they tend to emphasise personal and social development, often through activities and programs. All appear predicated on the assumption of a deficit in experience or skills amongst young people, and the need for them to go through certain stages of development before achieving *adulthood*.

This overall values stance is not universally supported throughout Britain. There has been substantial ongoing debate about the need for a more social justice oriented approach to youth work which focuses on real participation, liberation and empowerment of young people. For example, referring to the Irish definition, Jenkinson has argued:

This definition sees youth work primarily in terms of the development of the young person. However some would argue that this is a limited view and that central to a definition of youth work is the notion that youth work should aim to engage with society and bring about social change in an unequal society. (Jenkinson 2000)

Mark Smith has written prolifically about trends in youth work in Britain. He is particularly concerned about movement toward the US *youth development* approach and the commoditisation of youth work through:

- Targeting *at risk* young people (including particular individuals);
- Moving away from *voluntary participation to more coercive forms; association to individualised activity; from education to case management; from informal to formal and bureaucratic relationships;*
- Focusing on accredited service provision (particularly training) to young people, prioritising service delivery over relationship development; and
- Increasing bureaucratisation and professionalism within the sector.
- In short, following a public health model which *identifies, isolates, and then treats the subject in order to restore him or her to good health, meaning adjustment to the dominant culture.* (Lane 1996 cited in Smith 2003:52)

A number of British authors have raised concerns about emerging directions in youth work (most recently, Brent 2009 & Sercombe 2010). Smith (2003) mourns the risk that:

more open-ended forms of youth work within state youth services, and within agencies heavily dependent upon the state for funding, will be further curtailed ... and the fact that a growing proportion of many youth workers' time has been eaten up by increased paperwork, the management of staff and in 'co-ordinating' activity ... and that direct youth work will be such a small part of many state workers' practice ... that it will be difficult to describe their overall role as youth work anymore.

As some agencies have begun to recognise, *Youth Development Workers* may be a more accurate description.

Aotearoa (New Zealand)

Over the past few years, the National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa, has progressively undertaken a substantial process to articulate the role of youth work in Aotearoa. The current working definition includes:

Youth workers enter the worlds of young people aged 10-24 and contribute to their development by:

Providing services and meeting needs

Youth workers find entry points into the worlds of young people through running activities, providing services or simply being present in those worlds. Therefore youth work is not defined by any particular activity ...

Building relationships

It is the place of relationships that distinguishes youth work from other professions which also include young people in their scope. Most other professions build relationships in order to deliver a service (e.g. social work or education). Youth workers provide a service in order to build a relationship ...

Building connection to and participation in communities

... A key role of youth work is helping young people, and especially those that have become alienated or isolated, to discover healthy communities, build connections and develop skills for participation in them as an adult. (National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa 2008b:xv⁹)

The work in Aotearoa has been characterised by a focus on identifying the values underpinning youth work. Some of these core values are:

Young Person Centred

- *identifies the cultural connections that young people have*
- *recognises that young people do not exist in isolation from others*
- *tips the balance of power in young people's favour*
- *works with young people from a strengths-based approach so they can achieve their full potential*
- *works holistically taking into account all of the obligations, opportunities, potential and limitations that exist for young people*
- *fosters young people's identity development, social skills, emotional learning and cultural development*
- *maintains unconditional positive regard for young people even if they are exhibiting challenging behaviours*

Relationship Focused

- *works to strengthen positive relationships between young people and their whānau/family, their communities/hapū, peer groups and institutions (i.e. education, health and justice systems)*
- *nurtures quality relationships between young people and Youth Workers*
- *nurtures respect and non-judgmental attitudes*
- *promotes fun, dynamism and creativity*
- *values the worth in all young people*
- *promotes inclusive approaches that recognise all young people have different strengths and needs*
- *allows young people to develop their unique identity*
- *assists young people in adjusting to change and harnessing opportunities*

⁹ This is not a nationally recognised definition. Consultation occurred throughout 2008, and a final definition is expected shortly.

Culture and Context

- *upholds the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and seeks to support Māori leadership over Māori communities and taonga*
- *recognises the cultural, historical, economic, social and political contexts that young people live in*
- *seeks to understand and respect young people within their cultural context*
- *affirms the diversity of young people and other groups within society*
- *actively confronts discrimination*
- *acknowledges the value and diversity of spirituality*
- *encourages service to others and unconditional giving*
- *respects the environments (including natural ecology) we live in*

Community Contributors

- *encourages young people to be agents of change - both relational and systemic*
- *values young people as contributors to society*
- *advocates active participation of young people in their communities*
- *encourages and supports young people to take responsibility as active members of whānau, hapū, iwi, places of learning and work and peer groups*
- *encourages and supports young people to take responsibility as active global, national and local citizens*

(National Youth Workers Network Aotearoa Inc. 2008b:xiii-xiv)

International Trends

Very broadly speaking:

- In the USA, the focus has been on seeing young people as a *social problem* (and to a lesser extent *citizens of tomorrow*) requiring high levels of intervention to attain adulthood. (This is the *Social Inclusion* model, detailed in the next section.)
- British youth workers have taken a more liberal approach, with less emphasis on young people as a *social problem* and more on young people as *citizens of tomorrow*. A greater emphasis is placed on the voluntary participation of individual young people in informal activities customised to respond to their issues and needs. (This combines the *Social Inclusion* and *Social Justice* models, detailed in the next section.) Many British stakeholders are concerned that youth work is moving away from this role and toward the USA's *youth development* approach.

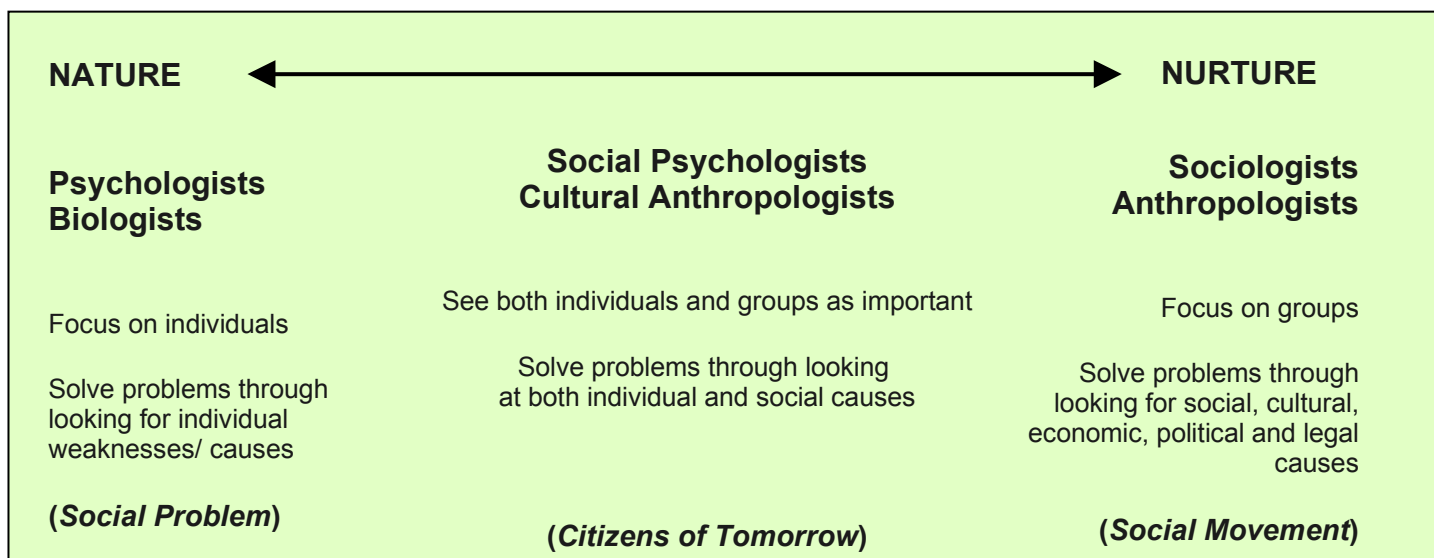
- Aotearoa is seeking to establish a definition which combines seeing young people and *citizens of tomorrow* and a *social movement*. The draft definition places more emphasis on young people as a social group and greater importance on the social and cultural context in which young people live, than the British or USA definitions. (This is closest to the *Social Justice* model, detailed in the next section.)

MODELS OF YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

There are many ways to conceptualise different approaches to youth work. The following outlines 3 broad frameworks, and explores the relationships between each.

Concept 1: A Discipline-based View of Youth Work Approaches

This first view links youth work practice with the concepts of youth and adolescence outlined earlier. It begins with different disciplines and how they see the place of young people in the world:



Concept 1: A Discipline-based View of Youth Work

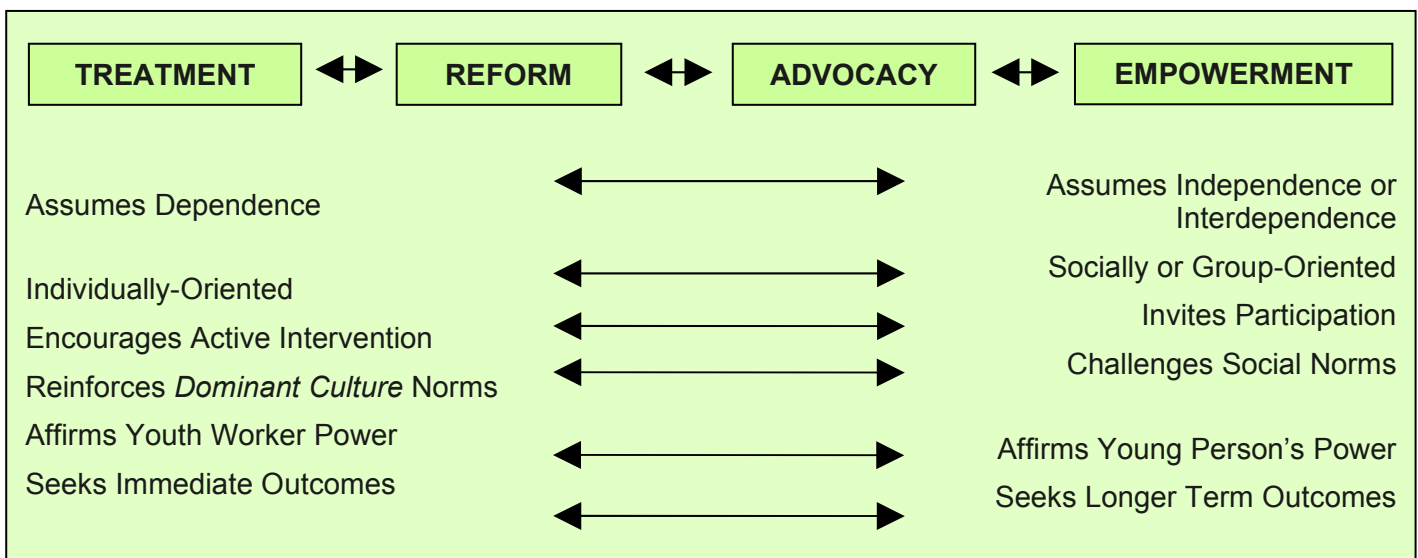
Psychologists and biologists see *adolescence* as a natural stage of human development; whereas the social sciences tend to see youth as socially-constructed. Therefore:

- Youth work driven by psychological and biological theories focuses on individual young people. It sees young people’s development as *normal* or *abnormal*. If a young person has a problem, then it probably derives from a personal weakness – failure to develop appropriately, or lack of training, or poor social skills. Youth workers seeks to enable young people to address any behaviour which limits their ability to mature into a well-adjusted adult and thrive within society. (This approach is particularly evident in the USA definitions of *youth development*.)
- Youth work driven by social sciences theories see young people in the context of the groups of which they are a part – youth sub-cultures, young people, family, community, culture and society. Young people’s context provides the clues to understanding their problems and needs. Youth workers seek to address the social causes of issues such as homelessness, unemployment or mental health issues. If working with individual young people, they educate young people about these social causes to minimise the risk of self-blaming. (This approach is evident in many of the Aotearoa youth work values.)

Over time, a number of academics have emerged who seek to blend theories from their respective disciplines – Social Psychologists and Cultural Anthropologists. Whilst individual theorists vary as to whether they see youth as natural or socially/culturally constructed, they see the problems faced by young people as driven by both individual and social factors. (This mix is reflected in the English and Scottish definitions of *youth work*.)

Concept 2: A Practice-based View of Youth Work Approaches

The following is a broad outline of 4 approaches to youth work practice,¹⁰ driven by different values about the place of young people in the world. The Treatment and Reform models tend to align with the psychological approaches outlined above; the Advocacy and Empowerment models are informed by the social sciences. Some features of the two extremes are:



Concept 2: A Practice-based View of Youth Work

Treatment Approaches focus on teaching (or requiring) individual young people to conform to social expectations. Within this model, youth workers take power over individual young people, until such time as they behave in a *socially acceptable* way. Obvious examples of the treatment approach are systems targeted at criminalised young people and case management (e.g. employment/training programs where receipt of income depends on meeting certain requirements). This approach is also sometimes used in drop in and recreational programs (with lots of rules), uniform youth groups and youth accommodation services. The competencies (attitudes, values, knowledge and skills) required to implement these approaches are exclusively drawn from the discipline of psychology. These approaches are most evident in the USA, and are also reflected in emerging directions in British youth work.

The treatment model is particularly popular with government, since it provides speedy, measurable outcomes. The main weaknesses of this approach are that it generally fails to address causal/underlying issues, tends to stifle initiative/self-management/resilience and often leaves young people blaming themselves for problems outside their control.

¹⁰ This diagram draws heavily on Brown 1989. For a more detailed account of these approaches see Quixley 2008.

At the other extreme, **Empowerment Approaches** focus on young people as a collective group, and look at the way society fails to meet their rights and needs. Within this model, youth workers encourage young people who are affected by the same social limitation, to act as a group, to improve their situation and community. It seeks to build young people's capacity to act independently and/or interdependently, and often focuses on preventative work. Young people's involvement with youth services is fully voluntary, and individual intervention is only justified if it is needed to give young people the means to improve their social situation/status. Examples of this approach are some youth action groups, many community arts projects, some youth networks/councils/round-tables and some young women's programs. The competencies (attitudes, values, knowledge and skills) required to implement these approaches are exclusively drawn from the social sciences. Principles of collective empowerment underpin the Jasper Declaration, and are partly evident in the Aotearoa material.

The empowerment model was particularly popular with small NGO's in the 1970's and 1980's. Its popularity has waned alongside the growth of mega-NGO's. This model has the advantage of engaging and informing young people, addressing the issues of importance to them, and developing life competencies (such as dealing with differences and personal planning).

The Reform and Advocacy models fall between these extremes. Like Social Psychology or Cultural Anthropology, the competencies (attitudes, values, knowledge and skills) required to implement these approaches can be drawn from both psychological and social sciences disciplines.

Reform Approaches don't see the communities and society as *perfect*. However, they believe that our social systems are fundamentally sound and only need minor adjustment to better address the needs of young people. Like the treatment approaches, they tend to focus on work with individual young people. Examples of this approach include most community development work, non-directive counselling/support and many youth legal/health/accommodation services. On balance, the WA/ACT/NSW definition of youth work sits most comfortably within these approaches.

This is currently the most common model in local youth services in Queensland. It has the capacity to provide the short term measurable outcomes most commonly required by government, whilst at the same time being more accepting of young people's perceptions than the treatment approach. However, these models have many of the same disadvantages as the treatment approach – including a short term solution focus which fails to produce substantial, sustained improvements for young people.

Advocacy Approaches see the problems facing young people as mainly caused by social systems and, like empowerment approaches, focuses on young people's human rights (rather than simply their perceived or most urgent needs). However, they place more emphasis upon meeting the immediate needs of particularly powerless groups of young people. The key difference is that within this model, youth workers advocate on behalf of young people, rather than enabling young people to act for themselves. The Regional NSW definition is consistent with a collective advocacy approach.

This approach is typical of some youth sector peak bodies and legal services, and most youth advocacy services. Advocacy approaches are often more efficient in achieving improvements for young people and the wider community than empowerment approaches. However a commitment to this approach can stereotype young people and their issues and needs.

It is important to distinguish between *individual* and *collective* advocacy or empowerment. During the 1990's the language of *advocacy* and *empowerment* was applied loosely to almost any activity which acknowledged, listened to or valued individual young people's opinions. This type of consultation is more consistent with a reform approach, since advocacy and empowerment are both concerned with the collective needs of disenfranchised groups of young people. The Victorian and British definitions are consistent with an individual advocacy approach.

Concept 3: A Purpose-based View of Youth Work Approaches

Another way to conceptualise youth work is in relation to social justice. The term social justice has accumulated a variety of meanings over the past few years. The following model draws on the original understanding of the term, and shows the relationship between social justice and Concepts 1 and 2 (above):



Concept 3: A Purpose-based View of Youth Work

Applying the Concepts

Over the past 30 years, programs using all four models of intervention have been considered part of the youth sector in Queensland. In some cases, a mix of services based on different models, exist within the same organisation.

It is impossible to address the question *What is Youth Work?* without addressing values questions. Workers holding many different values co-exist in the youth sector. They provide different types of services from

different values-bases. Some are driven by psychologically-based values, and work from the assumption that young people should change so they can better fit into (be *included* in) society: they see the role of youth workers as assisting this individual change process. Some workers share values with human rights advocacy groups, working from the assumption that society should change to better accommodate the interests of the full range of its members, including young people. Some hold strong religious or secular values. Many are unclear about their values and may work from different values or beliefs at different times.

Whether or not workers and agencies are aware of it, youth work practice is driven by values. A failure to identify these simply leads to functioning from a *default* set of values – that is, accepting the values currently seen as *commonsense* or *fact*. The most obvious of these, is the theory that a group called *young people* unquestioningly exist and have certain attributes and needs.

WORKING DEFINITION OF YOUTH WORK

Both nationally and internationally *youth workers* are doing very different jobs, with very different groups of young people, driven by very different values. Different countries and Australian states have adopted definitions of youth work which reflect the full spectrum of possible approaches. In fact, you could say that the only common characteristic of *youth work* is that it involves work with young people!

The [Youth Sector in Queensland](#) report found that youth work is being diluted and merging into other occupations; it lacks clear articulation and occupational boundaries. Nowhere is this fading identity better demonstrated than in the 2007 review of the National Community Services Training Package, where the idea of merging Youth Work, Child Protection and Juvenile Justice qualifications was considered (Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council 2007:49). If youth work is to be a distinct occupation into the future, it is essential that we answer the following questions, in order to clearly identify the unique characteristics of youth work.

Why do youth work?

The focus of a working definition of Youth Work depends entirely on the purpose of youth work:

- Should youth work aim to teach young people how to better fit into the existing society?
- Should youth work aim to change society so it better addresses the rights of young people?
- Or, should the youth sector draw together workers with taking different approaches to work with young people? (That is, continue the current situation.)

In international terms, the question is: *Does youth work in Queensland want to lean toward British/USA trends, or the New Zealand approach?* In the USA and Britain, formal structured interactions (such as training and case management) are now the primary functions of youth work. Aotearoa is placing a much greater emphasis on addressing the rights and needs of young people in their cultural and social context.

In national terms, the question is: *Does youth work in Queensland want to lean toward the reformist values implied in the WA and ACT definitions, the more progressive values reflected in Victoria and regional NSW ... or go further, and carve out a unique niche focused on social justice?*

What distinguishes youth workers from other workers with young people?

There are already a myriad of workers with young people driven by social inclusion principles (employers, teachers, child protection workers, etc.). Apart from the obvious values questions, it is unlikely that youth work can carve out a secure niche if using this approach. On the other hand, few other occupations are focused on human rights advocacy, and none prioritise the collective empowerment of young people.

The modern youth work era has been characterised by increasing levels of involuntary intervention in the lives of young people. If youth work is to have a clear identity, we must choose between being part of involuntary/statutory systems with power over young people, and providing alternate voluntary support systems which work alongside young people.

Being a generalist occupation and providing government-prescribed services to young people, would inevitably lead to youth workers becoming a *junior partner* in service provision to young people. We would be competing with established, more specialist, occupations who can claim higher competency levels in each of their specialist areas (e.g. social workers in case management; recreation officers in leisure activities; adult educators and teachers in formal structured training provision).

However, if youth work focused on providing a wider safety net, outside government, we could articulate a unique role and competency set which would clearly distinguish youth workers from other workers with young people. Whilst other workers could leverage on youth work's body of knowledge, they would be clearly distinguished from youth workers.

Which young people do youth workers engage with?

Historically, work with young people has involved 2 levels of engagement:

- Some organisations/services have provided services to all young people (e.g. uniform groups, drop in centres, church groups).
- Some organisations/services have focused on at risk or marginalised young people (e.g. youth housing services, advocacy services).

Youth workers need to decide whether we specialise in work with marginalised young people, or all young people. All young people have fundamental human rights. Some have access to these rights already. Some face breaches of these rights on a daily basis. In practice, a social justice approach would require that youth workers prioritise services to those young people who experience breaches of their human rights.

Draft definition of youth work

The *Youth Sector in Queensland* report identified 2 features which are fundamental to effective youth sector development. The definition of *youth work* must:

- 1. Contribute to building a sustainable, vibrant youth sector workforce, and,**

2. Protect and promote young people's rights.

If youth work is to survive as a separate occupation, it must do something differently which clearly distinguishes it from other practitioners with young people. The *sustainability* of youth work as a discrete occupation depends on our capacity to articulate a discrete, socially-valuable role for youth workers. Similarly, the *vibrancy* of youth work depends on the level of innovation and uniqueness of our role. *Protection and promotion of young people's rights* can only happen if youth workers specialise in taking a social justice approach to youth work – being *on the side* of young people, particularly those living an extended childhood.

The following draft definition of youth work is designed to meet these criteria, and provide a starting point for substantial consultation over the next 12 months.

A Working Definition of Youth Work (for wide consultation)

A Youth Worker = someone working in a non-government organisation whose primary goal is to protect and promote the individual and collective human rights of young people.

A young person = someone who has commenced puberty, but has not yet been accorded the full rights of adulthood.

The primary purpose of youth work is to resource and support young people who want help to access, navigate and optimise their life choices. Youth workers do this through:

- Providing flexible support for young people outside formal, statutory systems.
- Working alongside young people in a friendly, informal manner.
- Building young people's belief in the possibility for change and their capacity to contribute to positive social and individual change.
- Helping young people to adjust to change and harness opportunities.
- Recognising the worth of all young people, and building on their assets and strengths.
- Recognising the diversity amongst young people, and listening to and valuing individual young people's needs, ideas, preferences and choices.
- Enabling young people to become more aware of themselves and their place in the wider community.
- Recognising the integral relationship between young people and their family, community and society.
- Recognising that young people cannot be seen in isolation from their social, cultural, historical, economic and political contexts.
- Particularly recognising the cultural context of marginalised young people and taking responsibility for learning to work in a culturally appropriate way.
- Advocating young people's right to actively participate in community life and access their fair share of community resources.
- Being conscious of youth workers' structural power, and not taking power over young people.

- Helping young people to understand their rights, and resourcing young people to address breaches of their human rights.
- Prioritising empowerment of marginalised groups of young people whose human rights are being breached, and seeking to tip the balance of power in young people's favour.
- Actively confronting discrimination against young people and breaches of their human rights.
- Encouraging and supporting young people to be agents of change – both individually and collectively; at both a personal and social level.
- Promoting the actual and potential contributions of young people to the wider community.
- Encouraging and supporting young people to take responsibility as active members of their family, community and society.
- Encouraging and supporting young people to take responsibility as active global, national and local citizens.

Youth workers recognise that working to genuinely empower young people, will inevitably require a higher than usual level of commitment, self-examination and a willingness to grapple with social issues affecting marginalised young people. It will require clear articulation of the multiple social advantages of enabling active civic participation by young people and undertaking community development – in particular, the social value of contributing toward a vibrant, genuinely inclusive democracy in Queensland.

This definition is consistent with The Queensland Compact (2008), a document designed to guide the relationship between the non-profit community services sector and the Queensland government. As stated in the Statement of Commitment, signed by the Premier, Anna Bligh and others:

The Queensland Compact is founded on principles of universal human rights and values declared in international covenants, the laws of Queensland and the Commonwealth, common law, and the hopes and values of a just society. (Queensland Government & Community Services Futures Forum 2008:2)

DEFINING THE YOUTH SECTOR

According to the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (2010:814) the youth sector includes: young people, youth workers, government services, non government services, youth sector peaks and funding bodies.

- Does the youth sector also include workers with young people? Policy makers?
- Is the youth sector the same as the youth *services* sector? Is there any value in distinguishing service provision parts of the sector, from the youth sector as a whole?

The recent emergence of the phrase youth *services* sector raises important questions. Is this new descriptor designed to limit youth work practice by suggesting that the only purpose of the sector is to provide functional services? It seems likely that use of this term increases the risk that youth workers will be subsumed into a single vague group covering anyone who provides services to young people. It certainly includes the *prima facie* implication that any work which does not include direct, measurable service delivery, is of less value than developmental work which is more difficult to measure (e.g. *protecting and promoting young people's rights*; providing an informal environment which provides a safety net for young people).

And ... how is the youth sector positioned within the wider community services and health industries? The Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council has noted the difficulty in defining the community services workforce more widely. The recently released Community Services Training Package identifies a variety of ways in which the community services work can be classified:

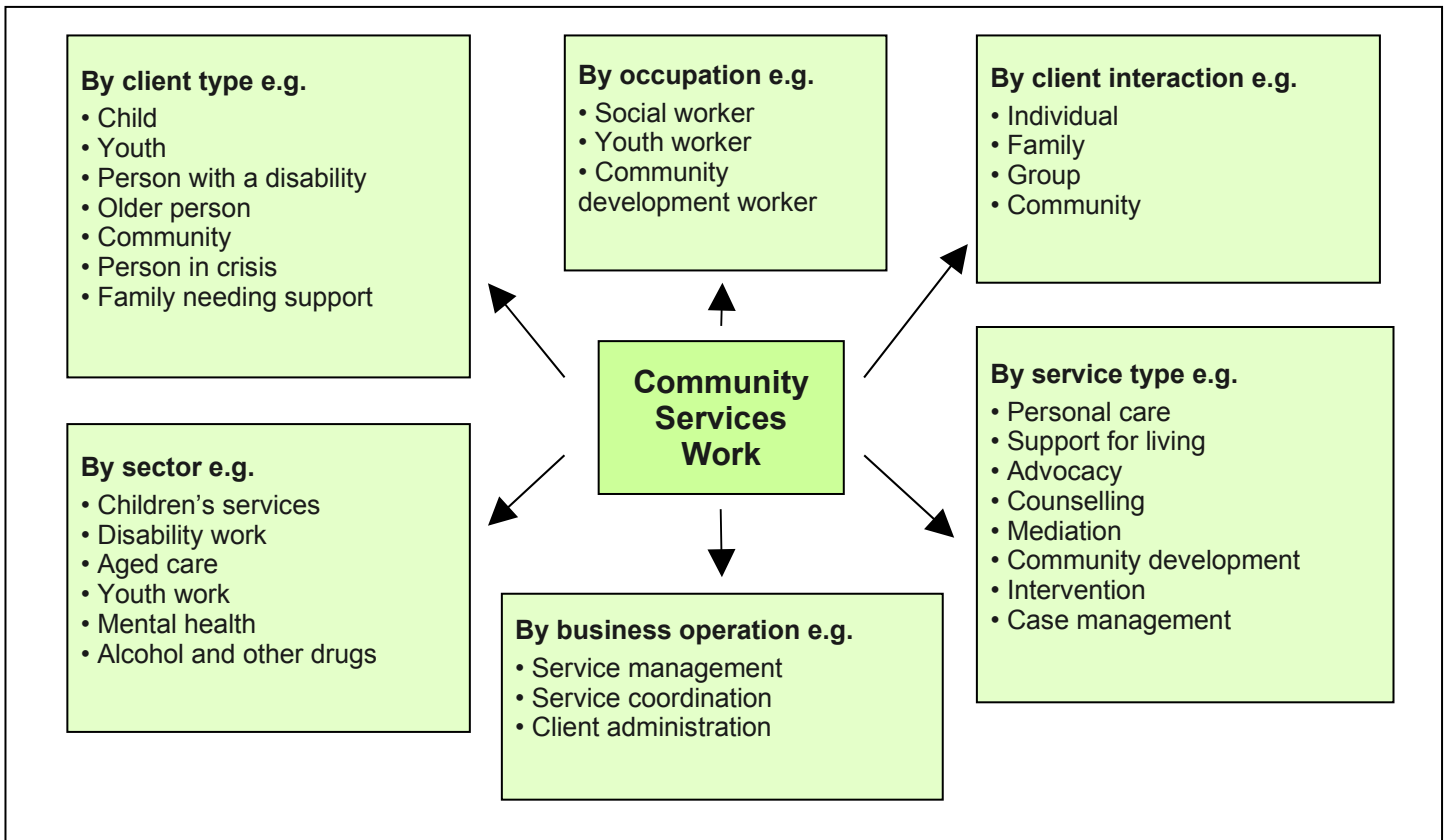


Diagram: Classifications of Community Services Work
(Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council 2010:76)

Reduction of the youth sector to those components of the sector which provide direct, measurable services would undermine a distinctive, innovative approach to youth work. It is therefore proposed that the concept of a Youth Services Sector be put aside in favour of more inclusive definitions of the Youth Sector:

A Working Definition of Youth Sector (for wide consultation)

The Youth Sector describes the combination of stakeholders working with and for young people. This includes: young people, youth workers, other workers with young people, government services, non government services, youth sector peaks, other policy makers and funding bodies.

The Not For Profit (or Non-Government) Youth Sector describes the combination of stakeholders working with and for young people outside government, including: young people, youth workers, other workers with young people, non government services, youth sector peaks and non-government funding bodies.

The Government Youth Sector describes the combination of stakeholders working with and for young people within government, including: youth workers, other workers with young people, government services, government policy makers and government funding bodies.

EARLY THINKING ON YOUTH WORK COMPETENCIES

The YANQ Workforce Development Project aims to develop a sustainable and vibrant youth sector workforce in Queensland, which protects and promotes young people's rights. This requires articulation of a set of competencies, distinguished by the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills required of workers.

When defining the core competencies needed to be an effective, ethical youth worker, it is important to look beyond function to meaning:

Competency = the attitudes, values, knowledge and skills required to do a job.

This definition provided the basis of early versions of the national youth work competencies.¹¹ The values component quickly disappeared from the national documentation. Whilst the national definition of competency still recognises attitudes essential to competent practice (Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council 2010:113), attitudes are no longer assessed. Individual units require assessment of skills and knowledge only, and skills recognition is granted based on evidence about the learner's skills and knowledge only (ibid:93). That is, someone can qualify as a youth worker under the national standards without having demonstrated an understanding of the role of values and attitudes in youth work. Similarly, youth work values and attitudes play a limited role in tertiary youth work programs throughout Australia.

Often, youth worker training programs appear to be values-neutral – that is, skills and knowledge based. This belies the fact that someone must select particular skills and knowledge to teach – and that this selection process is values-driven. For example, the youth work competencies in the current (CHCo8) Community Services Training Package appear to value both Social Inclusion and Social Justice approaches to youth work. At first glance, they seem to acknowledge different approaches to youth work in a balanced way. The models and frameworks cited often include language such as rights based; empowerment; community development and education; and client self-determined.¹² When examined more closely, however, the Required Skills and Knowledge is almost exclusively based on a Social Inclusion approach. The vast majority of modules focus on work with individual young people. The two units of competency most likely to include Social Justice competencies fail to include any knowledge or skills associated with community education or change.¹³ Similarly, the unit concerned with ethical decision making does not require students to understand the impact of values or beliefs on practice.¹⁴

Youth workers can never be as comprehensively trained in every competency area already central to other occupations which work with young people. If youth workers have the same competency sets as other occupations, then it is inevitable that youth workers will function at a lower level. It is not possible to develop the same level of competencies in multiple areas, as in a single area, in the same period of (training) time. If youth work opts to accept a subordinate role to other occupations, it is unlikely that the youth sector will retain workers. Youth work, as a discrete occupation, will not be sustained into the long term.

11 This was the definition of competencies originally adopted (in recognition of the differences between the community services and trade training) by the National Community Services Industry Training Steering Group in 1991 – the body which established the community services training body (now the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council).

12 See for example CHCYTH301D Work effectively with young people (p 798), CHCYTH402A Work effectively with young people in the youth work context (p 814) or CHCYTH502A Work with young people to establish support networks (p 852).

13 Specifically:

- CHCYTH503A Undertake youth work in specific communities focuses on interventions functioning within community protocols.
- CHCYTH504A Support young people to take collective action focuses almost exclusively on youth participation.

14 In CHCYTH401A Engaging Respectfully with Young People, principles of ethical decision making include:

- Recognise the impact of values and beliefs upon practice, and,
- Identify the organisation (sic) culture and ideology (p 806).

BUT nowhere in the national competencies is an understanding of values, beliefs and ideology included as Essential Knowledge.

What does it take to be an effective youth worker? It depends upon the youth work approach. But regardless of the approach, worker values, attitudes, skills and knowledge are all central to effective practice; they are interdependent - none can function in isolation.

Core Social Inclusion Competencies	Competencies Relevant to Both Approaches (albeit with a different emphasis)	Core Social Justice Competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human/adolescent development • Youth needs • Treatment – theory and practice • Reform – theory and practice • Behaviour management • Program management • Statutory requirements and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of youth work • The youth sector • Youth work models, values and ethics • Critical thinking • Communication, helping, referral and crisis management • Group work, facilitation and conflict processing • Issues affecting young people • Funding and accountability • Office/administration skills • Youth worker self care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human/youth rights • Marginalisation and inequity • Understanding youth (sub) cultures • Cross cultural communication • Collective advocacy – theory and practice • Collective empowerment – theory and practice • Community activism and development

If the youth sector opts to accept a Social Justice driven definition of youth work, the competencies required to become a youth work would necessarily include:

1. Substantial, in-depth education in the Core Social Justice Competencies.
2. Delivery of training in the Competencies Relevant to Both Approaches, oriented toward those theories, models and approaches which are consistent with a Social Justice approach.
3. Basic understanding of Social Inclusion theories and approaches, to the extent required for youth workers to be able to understand the approaches of other workers with young people, and the distinguishing features of youth work.

PARTICIPATING IN THE PROCESS

Where to from here? These issues are complex. Participation in consultations and discussions will be most effective, if workers have already thought through some of the ideas included in this paper, and drawn some conclusions. Start talking with your co-workers and networks now!!! Perhaps you could host a breakfast catch-up or politics in the pub one Friday night in your region, to encourage informal discussion amongst workers? Or, if you've developed some concrete thoughts – submit an article for the forthcoming special edition of [New Transitions](#).

Watch out for opportunities to contribute your ideas through forums and events – at a local, regional and state level – throughout 2011.

YANQ will also engage with youth sector managers, universities, TAFEs, government and other key stakeholders and explore the best way to respond to youth sector development needs with course designers. Academics will be encouraged to play a key role in the debate over the next 12 months – both in terms of contributing their own research and ideas, and providing peer review of workers' articles.

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