



**PROFESSIONAL YOUTH SERVICE:
POLICY, CAREER PATH, TRAINING
AND DEVELOPMENT,
ACCREDITATION AND RECOGNITION**

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Defining the Youth Worker

Youth work is a sector that has long been perceived as a voluntary field, and has hardly been seen as a career. However, with the increasing international realisation of the need to have concrete programmes in place to cater for youth, who are the majority of the population in any nation, more emphasis is being placed on youth development programmes at governmental and civil society levels.

To define a youth worker calls for initially defining “youth”. There is no universally-accepted definition, but the United Nations definition is 16-25, and there are a number of other country variations from 16 to 40 years of age. Irrespective of the age factor, youth is defined as that sector of the population that has come out of childhood and adolescence but is still settling down in life and making the transition to stable adulthood. A youth may also be an adult, but the differentiating factor is that the youth may not have a stable career, and leads a dynamic lifestyle.

The youth is posed with many challenges such as unemployment, HIV/ AIDS, intercultural understanding, participation in decision-making processes, environmental preservation and many others.

With youth being such a unique sector of society, it is therefore imperative to have a category of social workers addressing their needs. This is where the youth worker comes in.

Role of the Youth Worker

The youth worker is a professional social worker addressing the specific needs of the youth sector. There are a wide variety of social workers, including those addressing the needs of children, adolescents, women, the elderly, the disabled, the mentally challenged, prisoners and other segments of society. Youth is one of the largest segments of society.

The youth worker aims to empower youth to face the challenges that they face, be they social, health, career or family. The youth worker aims to ensure that youth are coherent members of society, who will also be capable leaders of the future.

According to Graduate Prospects Ltd (2006), a United Kingdom-based careers organisation, these are some of the roles that a youth worker plays in society:

- managing and administrating youth and community projects and resources;
- assessing the needs of the young people in question and planning and delivering relevant programmes of personal and social education (such as health, fitness, smoking, drugs, relationships, bullying);
- delivering programmes via discussions, arts-based activities, community/environmental projects, residential activities, outdoor education, and sports activities;

- using interpersonal skills to befriend/support individual young people in different settings;
- mentoring and counselling individuals to encourage social inclusion;
- acting as a member or leader of a staff team;
- recruiting and training staff, including volunteers;
- dealing with any admin that needs doing, checking e-mails, verifying information and responding to queries;
- meeting, liaising and networking with police, schools, social services and other agencies to address issues and promote opportunities for young people;
- working with parents and other community groups to win support for improved provision and acting as an advocate for young people's interests generally;
- identifying and pursuing sources of funding for projects and administering buildings and budgets; and
- drawing up business plans, writing reports and making formal presentations to funding bodies.

In addition, the Job Guide 2006 also states that youth workers may perform functions such as to:

- provide information about community services and resources available for young people
- plan, conduct and evaluate programs for young people, such as employment and training, education, self-development, accommodation, welfare and counselling
- plan and organise activities including sports, handicrafts, dancing, drama, hiking, bushwalking and holiday camps
- attend meetings, conferences and training sessions
- evaluate data and write reports and submissions requesting funding for continuing programs and new projects
- assist in developing policy affecting young people
- establish and supervise youth clubs in the local community
- plan and organise small neighbourhood support groups
- act as advocates (representatives) for young people who have a grievance with government departments or other organisations
- interview young people to discuss and identify problems
- provide support and advice to young people experiencing difficulties, such as family problems, unemployment, illness, drug abuse and homelessness
- arrange and provide counselling and/or food, shelter or clothing
- arrange for, and evaluate the effectiveness of, community support services
- assess risks and provide intensive short-term crisis counselling for victims of domestic violence or child abuse
- arrange for the referral of clients to appropriate specialists or community agencies
- work closely with teachers, social and welfare workers, local authorities, health professionals, refuge workers, parents and, in some instances, the police.

It is clear that the youth worker is an important part of society and plays a crucial role in the upbringing of future generations.

Career in Youth Work

There are two main types of youth work: governmental and civil society. At a governmental level, the youth worker may be employed by a government agency, and form part of the public service. In civil society organisations, the youth worker works for a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO). In both cases there are paid workers, part-time workers as well as volunteers.

In terms of a career in youth work, the individual needs to decide whether to perform youth work through a government post, or through an NGO. The main advantage of doing youth work at a governmental level is that funds are normally provided through the national budget, and the entire machinery of the state is available to aid programmes and activities. The disadvantage of youth work in government is the lack of flexibility as all programmes and activities must follow government policies and procedures. The level of exposure and responsibility in government could be limited. The advantage of youth work within an NGO is that there is a lot of flexibility in programmes and activities, and there is scope for rapid career progression. The main disadvantage is that most youth NGOs have difficulties raising funds to sustain their operations. Many youth NGOs lack long-term sources of funding.

There is a need to distinguish a youth worker from a youth leader. A youth worker functions as an employee of a youth organisation. A youth leader is normally an elected official. For example, the president of a youth organisation is a youth leader, whilst the secretary general or executive secretary is a youth worker. However, in many instances these two are inter-changeable.

A youth worker is a professional, with a career focusing on youth work. We have often heard of terms like peer-to-peer counselling. These are initiatives where a young person becomes an advocate to spread messages to other young people. Peer educators are therefore also professional youth workers.

Within government, a youth worker typically begins as a programme officer dealing with specific issues and youth projects. As the career progresses, one can become a director with much larger responsibilities. At the apex of the career, the youth worker would be a senior government official in the ministry responsible for youth. In the NGO environment, the youth worker may also follow the same path and ultimately become a chief executive or secretary general of the organisation.

Career progression in government is normally much slower than in civil society. Government promotions are hard to come by, whilst in civil society upward movement is guaranteed if performance is satisfactory. There is, however, a high turnover of staff in civil society organisations due to youth workers seeking greener pastures elsewhere. This creates a lot of vacuums which allow upward movement of youth workers, but they too may not remain in the organisation for long.

Government is able to retain staff for longer periods of time due to consistent payment of salaries, benefits and prospects of promotion. There is better job security in government. A significant proportion of NGO employees suffer from job insecurity, and are constantly looking for more secure career paths..

Cheung (1996), said:

“While the NGO staff are mostly motivated in their work, their working conditions are generally not as favourable as those in the private sector. High labour turnover is a problem that has to be continually addressed. Burnout is another problem that is endemic among the staff in NGOs serving the elderly, especially among those caring for the frail and the sick. Raising the salary to a competitive level or to compensate fully for the hard work may not be possible as funding is always limited.”

This highlights the need for NGOs to improve working conditions in order to retain staff. Youth NGOs are probably amongst the worst affected by the inability to provide conducive working environments.

Professionalising Youth Work

There is a need for professionalisation of the Youth Work sector. We have sectors such as accounting, medicine, architecture, legal and others. These are established professional occupations which are widely recognised. It is normal for a child to aspire to become an accountant, doctor, architect or lawyer, and quite unusual for the child to wish to become a youth worker.

I was pleased to learn last month that the National Youth Development Council of Zambia has formed a Youth Workers Association, with a Code of Conduct to professionalise the youth work sector. This is an important step towards creating national and global youth work professionals.

The professionalisation of youth work in the world can be traced back to the Albemarle Report which was published in the United Kingdom in 1960.

The British government was pressured by various campaigns in the media calling for action to tackle an emerging “youth problem” after the Second World War. This is suggested by Smith and Smith (2002):

“With what appeared to be a significant growth in adolescent and teenage delinquency; the emergence of a more obviously 'teenage' culture linked to fashion and music; and the growing significance of 'teenage consumption' questions were being raised as to what should be done. The Albemarle Committee, for example, was worried about 'a kind of selfishness which will not yield itself to any demand outside its own immediately felt needs.’”

The Albemarle Report resulted in firm government action to address the challenges of youth and to professionalise youth work. The report “is sometimes presented as heralding a golden age of youth work, where workers and trainers were confident in their actions, where resources flowed into buildings and staffing, and where there was some intellectual debate about theory and practice,” (Smith & Smith).

The report was a central lever in the shift from volunteers to paid youth workers and managers; from untrained 'lay-person' to trained professional; and 'most importantly, from charitable to state sponsorship.' (Davies in Smith & Smith).

Davies argues that the following things happened directly as a result of the Albemarle Report:

- The number of full-time workers more than doubled in the ten years that followed publication of the Report.
- About half these workers received their training at the National College for the Training of Youth Leaders, the emergency college set up as a result of the Albemarle Report.
- Central and local government expenditure on the youth service increased substantially.
- £28 million was spent between 1960 and 1968 on 3000 building projects.
- The Experimental Projects Fund was set up to encourage innovation in the voluntary sector.
- The Joint Negotiations Committee was established to set terms and conditions for youth workers at the national level.

It is clear that this example from Britain illustrates that for youth work to be professionalised, there is a need for government support to enhance the status of the occupation. There is a need for sufficient funding and training institutions that will train youth workers. Globally, there are established professional bodies and training institutions in fields such as accounting, nursing and secretarial practice, so we should also have established professional bodies and institutions for youth workers.

Training Requirements

Training refers to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies as a result of the teaching of vocational or practical skills and knowledge that relates to specific useful skills.

As youth work is largely a form of social work, the best form of training is in the social sciences such as sociology, psychology and community development. However, due to the diversity of challenges facing youth, there is a role for every time of professional including doctors, nurses, teachers, economists, accountants and others.

Ultimately, it is the passion for serving the youth that is the most important pre-requisite for youth work.

Once in the profession, there is the need for training in areas such as communication skills, social skills, dealing with disadvantaged groups, counselling and leadership skills. Skills development is a constant imperative in youth work as the characteristics of youth change according to trends, and it is important for youth workers to keep abreast of the needs of youth, and the best way to communicate with them.

Youth work also offers good prospects for on-the-job training, because much of the work involves dealing with young people, who are dynamic and have constantly-changing needs.

Professional Development

The world of youth work is most accurately reflected by Lawson (2001) when he suggests:

“It’s a different work world now. Individuals entering the workforce for the first time can typically expect to work in at least two or three different fields before they reach retirement age. And, within those fields, individuals can typically expect to work in ten to 15 different jobs, or more, before they retire. In fact, retirement itself is becoming an obsolete idea. Many people will continue working in some capacity throughout the course of their entire lives.”

Youth work involves a number of changes in terms of one’s organisation, focus, thrust, responsibilities and other career aspects. It is rare for a youth worker to remain in the same organisation or station for more than 5 years. At the same time, there is an adage that says “once a youth worker, always a youth worker.” This implies that one who has worked with young people will always have young people at heart. The career of a youth worker should therefore be a life-long career where the spirit of serving the youth will always exist. We have numerous cases where youth workers who have obtained better jobs in the public and private sectors continue to serve the youth for the rest of their lives.

Throughout the youth worker’s life, there is a need for professional development. This calls for the following processes:

a) *Identifying personal principles*

During this stage, a youth worker identifies the personal principles that form the foundation of their contribution to youth work. Motivations for being a youth worker may differ, some may do it out of compassion for youth, others just enjoy working with youth, some like to travel, and yet others could find it an intellectually stimulating profession. Identifying one’s principles is important to focus one’s efforts towards the contribution that one wants to make towards the youth sector.

b) *Determining goal and priorities*

The youth worker should determine his or her goals and priorities in terms of the career in youth work. The ultimate goal could be to travel around the world, or to meet as many young people as possible, or to help as many young people in need. These goals need to be prioritised. In any career, goals are essential guides for career direction, and to evaluate personal progression.

c) *Developing a career plan*

Due to the dynamism in the youth sector, a career plan is an important guideline to the youth worker. This is a plan which could indicate how long the youth worker wants to work in a particular position or organisation, and what the youth worker expects to achieve. The ultimate career goal needs to be made clear, as well as the route leading to that goal.

d) *Developing job skills*

There are a number of skills unique to youth work, in the spheres of communication, social interaction, language and leadership. These skills need to be developed consciously over time to ensure their continued relevance to the sector. Any form of professional development in the youth sector requires constant development and enhancement of job skills

e) *Undergoing continual education*

A basic social science degree is a good entry point to a career in youth work, but there is a need for continual education, depending on one's sphere of interest. For example, the youth worker with an interest in counselling should pursue higher qualifications in the area of counselling, whilst those with interest in youth participation in global politics can pursue studies in international relations. Besides formal education, the youth worker should constantly read publications relating to youth issues and keep abreast of developments in the community and at the national and international levels.

f) *Achieving self-actualisation*

The youth worker should ultimately achieve self actualisation upon realisation of a significant contribution towards the youth sector. Self-actualisation is basically the feeling of self-satisfaction in one's career. This is an important barometer which also shows that the youth worker should now look for other opportunities and challenges in life.

Accreditation and Recognition of Youth Service

Youth service is more often perceived as a voluntary field, especially in the NGO sector. It therefore has not usually been given the accreditation and recognition that is should be accorded.

The question of accreditation and recognition was also raised in the Albemarle Report which said:

“Leaders feel unsupported and unappreciated: they look for some sign that their work is nationally recognised as important, but find it neither in official expressions of policy nor in the rewards of a salary scale for those who are full-time which would put the work on a level with cognate professions. They seem to themselves to be in danger of becoming cut off from the march of social and educational advance. And there is a considerable volume of evidence that full-time posts fail to attract good applicants.”

Youth workers should be appreciated, and their role in society should be commensurate with the remuneration that they get, as well as recognition by government, media and society in general.

A positive development in this regard has been the establishment of National Youth Service in a number of countries. In many instances it is compulsory, and in most instances it is necessary for youth to undergo National Youth Service to get places in Universities and to get preferential consideration for government jobs. National Youth Service, however, should not merely attract youth who are seeing it as a stepping stone to a better career or job, but it should attract youth who are keen to serve as youth workers. National Youth Service needs to be modified to serve as a training ground of youth workers and community development advocates of the future.

More needs to be done to improve the conditions of service of youth workers. There is a need for more training centres, more academic qualifications in the field, better working conditions and more resources deployed to service the youth sector.

WAY's Role in Professionalising Youth Work

The World Assembly of Youth has initiated various programmes aimed at professionalising youth work. As a culmination of all the initiatives, WAY launched the World Youth Institute this year. This is to be a training institute offering academic and vocational training for youth workers. The World Youth Institute is open for youth from all over the world to undergo these training programmes.

Conclusion

The importance of youth work can never be understated. Youth workers are leading advocates for the younger generation to overcome challenges that it faces, and to be more responsible current and future leaders. It is important for youth workers to get adequate recognition of the work that they do, and for their occupation to be recognised as a professional field.

The onus lies both with governments and with civil society. Governments should avail more resources towards youth development, and towards development of the youth worker and attracting more people into the field of youth work. Civil society

organisations should also professionalise their operations and establish codes of conduct and other foundations necessary for ensuring the quality of the youth worker. Every youth worker is an ambassador of the profession; hence it is important for all youth workers to carry out their duties in a manner that will increase the dignity and integrity of youth work.

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