

universities) to increase their youth-related research activities and to develop or expand postgraduate options.

8 Professionalisation would raise the formal education level of youth workers. An extensive transitional period would be needed to permit practitioners who do not qualify for membership plenty of time to do so. Care would need to be taken, for example, to ensure youth workers without credentials were not penalised or lost, if formal education were to be mandatory, and that those workers had plenty of opportunity to “upgrade”. (Fear that uncredentialed workers might lose their job or come up against barriers to new positions may also be an argument against the establishment of a professional body that mandates minimum education requirements (Sercombe 2000).)

AGAINST a professional body

1 A professional body gives priority to its members – above the interests of the public and young people.

2 Professional associations have what Illich (1975a) called an “iatronic effect”. This means that, paradoxically, “helping professions” like youth work can cause and exacerbate pain, death, suffering and increase the number and severity of youth problems. This is due to the disabling effect of professionals who undermine respective communities’ capacity to care for their own young.

3 Professionals generate and exacerbate problems that members claim they have the exclusive capacity to remedy. This leads to rationales for responses to youth problems that were not problems until the relevant experts described them as such (Illich 1975a; Lasch 1977).

4 Professional bodies monopolise power, expand their territory and claims to expertise (Perkin 1990).

5 Professionals destabilise and undercut “alternative” knowledge forms, skills, confidence and competence for self-help.

6 A professional body can push for accepted standards of practice that eliminate styles that are effective but idiosyncratic and unorthodox (Sercombe 2000, p.2).

7 Professionals promote the overuse of services (including the multiplication of generalist and specialist youth services), and increases in defective treatments and fraud (Illich 1975a, 1975b; Lasch 1977; Donzelot 1979).

8 A professional association is not needed because trade unions already serve the interests of, and represent, youth workers.

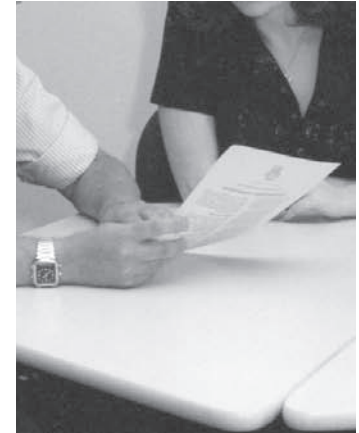
2 Establishing a code of ethics

Most professional associations have a code intended to guide the conduct of members (e.g. Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia 2003). For some professionals, like lawyers, a serious breach of the code of ethics can result in penalties, including the removal of a practitioner’s licence to practice.

The issue of ethics raises a related question about whether an ethical rationale exists for professionalising youth work, and whether such a rationale ought to be the primary reason for professionalisation. Indeed, would professionalisation add anything by helping to produce a more ethically defensible form of youth work? While I am constrained by the limited space in this paper to explore this issue, it is nonetheless a critical task for any project that is serious about youth work professionalisation.

This also involves thinking about how, or whether, a youth work profession can become a moral realm and how that might connect to the lives of individual practitioners. The answers to these questions are important because they inform how the professional organisation is structured and what strategies make members amenable to particular moral values.

It requires being clear about how that organisation might inculcate deliberate habits of self-management. This also



A code of conduct can help identify and prevent corrupt practices.

raises tricky questions about how individuals and collectives can be governed, while also respecting their rights to freedom, professional autonomy and judgment. This involves asking how youth workers can be governed in ways that do not subjugate individual conscience.

Implicit in most arguments for a code of conduct is the idea that a consensus does or ought to exist about core values among youth workers. There is also the question of whether a consensus is necessary for ethical practice and a code of ethics (Sercombe 1998).

FOR a code of ethics

1 A code of ethics or conduct helps clarify and articulate core values, acceptable practice and professional boundaries.

2 It can help provide guidelines for dealing with conflicting principles (Banks 2004, pp.218-26).

3 A code of conduct can help identify and prevent corrupt practices.

4 It articulates a duty of care and helps prevent the abuse of power, and protect the well-being of young people in care. This is important given the power differentials that typically exist between young people (many of whom are in vulnerable situations) and

the power of youth workers. It also has pertinence in a context of revelations of a history of systemic abuse of young people at the hands of carers.

5 It will help secure and restore public trust in those who work with young people because “the public” can observe internal regulatory processes operating that are directed towards preventing abuse.

6 The existence of a code of ethics means ignorance cannot be used to defend activities that harm young people (Sercombe 2000, p.4).

7 Beyond formal legal avenues, there currently are no official processes for dealing with unethical conduct. A code of ethics, especially if it had a disciplinary capacity, would go some way towards filling this gap.

AGAINST a code of ethics

1 Imposing a code of practice is itself unethical because it imposes moral requirements and in so doing overrides the individual’s right and need to act according to their conscience.

2 It removes the worker’s “rightful” entitlements to exercise professional judgment.

3 It is very difficult, if not impossible, to identify an agreed on set of values in the context of a multicultural, pluralistic society.

4 A code of ethics will not stop unethical conduct.

5 It sets up a watchdog or policing mechanism that can become cumbersome and/or oppressive.

3 Accreditation to educate or train youth workers

Accreditation is a public statement that a certain threshold of quality has been realised or surpassed by an education or training organisation. Ideally judgments about the requirements that need to be met to pass that threshold are based on transparent, agreed upon and predefined standards (Harvey 2004, pp.209-20).

In most cases, accreditation focuses on inputs of, and processes or outputs of, education or training programs. It can also focus on matters such as teaching, research, level of student support, and library resources (Harvey 2004, pp.209-20). This official endorsement requires a professional association to assume the authority to judge whether or not a program adequately prepares a student for entry into the profession. In other words, it can act as a gatekeeper by determining who has access to the field.

Accreditation is a powerful governing technique available to an association, and it is through this authorisation process that a professional body can exercise considerable political clout within education institutions.

FOR accreditation

1 Accreditation will help produce graduates with professional competence to practice. This involves the youth work professional body assuming an overseer role and ensuring that education and training institutions continue to fulfill certain expectations.

2 Currently, education institutions, like universities, can virtually do as they please when establishing youth work/studies programs, in developing curriculum, in specifying the qualifications and other credentials of teaching staff, in resourcing the library and in determining staff/student ratios. In a context where managers in many institutions are constantly looking for ways to economise, typically it is the smaller, or what are euphemistically called “boutique programs”, which are targeted. These programs also tend to be unprotected by a professional association. Indeed the proximity of a strong professional association, like the Australian Psychological Society or the AMA, can be seen as a good reason for leaving a program alone. “Savings” are made by “rationalising” subjects, which often results in the disappearance of youth-specific areas of study in favour of more generic studies. “Economies” are also

made through the imposition of rulings like the regulation that high minimal enrolments are required before a subject is offered. The imperative to economise can also result in unqualified staff from other areas teaching youth work subjects to “fill-up their workloads”, rather than the employment of specialist teachers. It can mean, for example, that social workers, psychologists or even nurses teach youth work subjects, or staff with no youth work studies qualification or knowledge teach other core units or coordinating programs.

3 Accreditation can positively influence important decisions about matters like staff/student ratios, the development of a relevant and up-to-date curriculum as well as the establishment of active higher degree and research programs. When youth work programs are under threat, a professional association can be called on to exercise its authority in ways that secure the program.

4 In the prevailing tight fiscal context, accreditation and a professional body can help build and secure quality youth work education.

5 Accreditation can increase the status, and marketability of the program.

6 Accreditation can attract “better” students.

7 Accreditation can lead to the standardisation of the curriculum. (This has advantages and disadvantages, which include the reduced likelihood of programs being able to cater for local needs or reflect local cultures.)

8 Accreditation processes can be used by academics to argue within their institutions for increased resources for the youth work programs.

9 Accreditation can help ensure that what is taught within education organisations is relevant to “the field” and up-to-date with required practices and issues.