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CAN I HAVE THIS DANCE? A PERSPECTIVE ON THE EXPECTATIONS AND DEMANDS OF CURRENT YOUTH WORK PRACTICE IN SCOTLAND

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Abstract:

This research principally discerns what young people want from their youth worker and portrays the significance of that relationship to them. The research illustrates young peoples' thoughts and voice within the current discourse around what constitutes effective youth practice. It also reveals that communication, equity and respect which are at the top of young people's agenda. The young people had reservations about certain types of youth work practice they had experienced in the past but valued and prioritised the personal characteristics of the youth worker.

Key words: Young people, youth work practice, youth worker qualities, relationships

INTRODUCTION

Everyone in power now knows that youth workers contribute significantly to the young people's agenda. Survey after survey has shown that young people want the support of a youth worker...

(Nicholls, 2007 p1)

This research project examined what young people are looking for in their relationship with a youth worker and identified elements of effective youth practice in terms of what young people require from youth workers in voluntary sector settings. Investigation focused on a group of young people from one local authority area in Scotland who had current contacts with various youth workers across a range of settings.

The purpose of this research was to establish if the current understanding of young people's youth work needs could be developed by analysing their perspectives and experiences. There are two main assertions in the current discourse about what young people need and want. The first is that there is acceptance that youth workers contribute significantly to the young person's agenda and secondly that the support they offer is recognised and valued by the young people themselves. These assumptions will be tested by this research which makes it important because the best youth work has never been a stagnant practice as it changes to meet young peoples' needs within a rapidly changing environment of a transient society and in an increasingly invasive globalised world.

One way of ensuring that youth work practice is kept up to date is to adopt creative structures, spaces and modes of thinking which are flexible and appropriate to the given circumstances through which meaningful ways of acting and being are crafted. Krueger, (2004 p1) posits that youth workers are like modern dancers because they “plan (choreograph) their shifts in advance, bring themselves, their skills and abilities to the moment and improvise along the way”. This study was a quest for further understanding of the ‘contemporary dance’ that youth worker practitioners and researchers are engaged in.

UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS, DERIVATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS OF YOUTH WORK

The late nineteenth century was the space and time for the birth of work with young people, due to the increasing concern over the ways in which young people’s increasing leisure time was being utilised. Originally, these efforts were solely voluntary and often linked to faith groups interested in conversion by promoting a better way of life for those who did not know any better. In essence, this was as much about matching up to the religious values of the middle classes who had societal power, money and influence (Foreman, 1987). One of the main focuses was to make good use of young people’s leisure time by prioritising physical activities and promoting healthy activities.

This rationale was maintained as paid youth work emerged and, ‘continued to be a service provided by adults for young people based on adults understanding of what young people needed or required’ (Foreman, 1987 p14). However, the Albemarle Report in 1960 signalled a new beginning for youth work by recognising the expressed needs and desires of young people and factoring these into the practice equation (Crimmens, 2004). A corner was turned as young people’s perspectives, both in principle and in practice, became increasingly central to defining, establishing and confirming effective youth work practice.

Since the catalytic era of the 60’s, effective youth practice has been identified and evaluated in a range of studies and government reports. For example, an HMI report (Dept of Education and Science, 1987) highlighted examples of good practice suggesting that youth work had three primary goals, namely, to increase the ability of young people to:

- (a) Identify and develop their capacities—physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual, social and emotional;
- (b) Identify and accept their responsibilities, as individuals, citizens, group members;
- (c) Evaluate the contexts in which they live and act accordingly.

(Department of Education and Science, 1987, p1)

The National Occupational Standards for Youth Work identifies that the role of a youth worker is to engage with young people in ways that are: Educative,

Participative, Empowering and that promote equality of opportunity and social inclusion (Young, 1999). Thus, it could be held that through alignment to these principles, the youth worker aims develop practices which would lead to the establishment of effective Youth Work.

Explaining effective youth work is a real and continuous issue which frequently exercises the minds and actions of those involved in its practice. Ingram & Harris, (2001) suggest that youth workers use words, such as empowerment and citizenship, that mean very little to the general public, and those they are directly working with. Smith (2002) argues that evaluating youth work is problematic when it is defined as a singular practice as it takes place in various environments, has a wide variety of purposes and is embedded in the real life experiences of both young people and youth workers. In the current practice arena, youth work takes on many forms including detached and outreach settings, youth clubs, award schemes, information and counselling services in addition to targeted work with specific interest or identity groups (Ingram & Harris, 2001).

While giving cognisance to these different forms of, and settings for, youth work, Smith (2002) argues that some core aspects of practice can be traced, at various levels, in the discourses of youth work since the early days of its inception (2002, p 4). These are;

- Focusing on young people.
- Emphasizing voluntary participation and relationship.
- Committing to association.
- Being friendly and informal, and acting with integrity.
- Being concerned with the education and, more broadly, the welfare of young people.

This is useful in recognising the key component practice parts which have stood the test of time. However, it could be argued that defining youth work in such as specific way may be doing more harm than good. This elemental approach to understanding youth work could discourage practitioners from developing practices that refreshingly reflects the actual circumstances that young people face. With too narrow a definition, the aspirations and expectations of the youth work relationships are limited by failing to recognise their unique position and hence ignore the emancipation possibilities in the present moment.

WHAT IT MEANS 'BEING YOUNG' IN SCOTLAND TODAY

'Being young' in Scotland and Britain today has different meanings for all types of young people, depending on their social, cultural, economic and geographical circumstances. One of the challenges for youth practice and policy is to conduct in-depth discussion about the merits of a practice that is based on an age category and to determine whether this is helpful in advancing effective practice. Across the world

there is a variety of youth work definitions and target groups which are the concern of Governmental structures, spaces and policies about young people. Such positions and intentions need to be analysed and deconstructed rather than adopted blindly, complied to slavishly or accepted uncritically.

Contemporary literature notes that their public image is intentionally warped to suit the needs of society. The so-called, ‘...‘youth problem’ is in many cases an ‘adult problem’; a failure of adults to understand the world in which young people live’ (Barber, 2007 p 21). It is argued that the youth construct builds upon thinking that young people are inferior solely due to their age. Within this ill-defined age construction of youth, ‘being young’ under current social, political and economic order, gives rise to a power imbalance with older generations which is evident through oppressive ageist practices. Young (1999) recognizes the struggle of young people to achieve equality as consistent with experiences that are commonly apparent in other forms of ageism. First, the oppression is systematic and structured upon young people by those in power. Second, many opinions which people have about young people are formed around prejudices and stereotypes that lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentation in social and political life.

Given this background, the starting point for effective youth work is the recognition of this structural, deep rooted disadvantage. Young people experience different day to day situations but collectively, they share similar power struggles and barriers within a society which vilifies them. Youth work therefore, needs to be a joint effort as “the effective youth worker needs to combat this unjust situation and engage in a radical practice that is focused on producing new worlds through the joint work of youth and adults together” (Skott- Myhre, 2002 p 17).

IS YOUTH WORK PRACTICE UP TO THE JOB?

One difficulty in understanding what is required in youth work practice, is in finding the balance between matching up young people’s perspectives and aspirations, with the views and intentions of youth work practitioners. There are some difficulties in operating solely on the immediate views of young people or on the understandings of youth workers without recourse to theoretical perspectives (Westergaard, 2005 p107). When relevant theory and robust research is ignored, it results in a practice which functions without strong rudiments and without a clear rationale, justifiable purpose and considered action.

A lack of clarity and agreement around the role of a youth worker is not necessarily a negative position, so long as the discourse on the youth worker role is current and continuous. For example, it is possible to maintain that ‘one on one’ work with young people should be a recognisable part of the work (Nemko, 2006). So too should youth workers take cognisance of their constituents collective experience, and work in a way which changes understanding, increases aspirations and engenders a sense

of solidarity. This thinking is in keeping with the notion of collective self-transformation (Dewey 1959, Freire 1990). Although young people are clearly the focus of youth work, their needs and expectations change over time as they interact in an ever demanding and increasingly changing globalised world. Walker explains that the “support of a youth worker should change as the transition occurs between childhood and adulthood” (Walker, 2003 p 100). So, what may be effective practice to a 12 year old will differ greatly from what a 16 year old regards as valuable. Notwithstanding young people, at every age, need a practice which is current, understood, articulated and valued.

In order to work successfully with complex, competing and changing demands, the youth worker draws on theoretical and multi-disciplinary perspectives. For example, ideas on identity formation can be drawn from anthropology, social theory taken from sociology, an understanding of power based on political theory and interpersonal skills blended from social psychology.

However, the value of such knowledge is not readily recognised and sometimes youth workers distance themselves from professional / academic descriptions of practice, although Westergaard (2005) argues strongly for the merit in identifying core theories which are applicable to youth work. For example he holds that effective practice mirrors the core Rogerian concepts of ‘Person Centred Psychotherapy’:

- empathy (working to understand the clients situation and frame of reference)
- congruence (being genuine and transparent in the relationship)
- Unconditional positive regard (seeking to ensure that pre-conceptions and judgments are not acted upon).

(Cited by Westergaard, 2005 p108)

For youth work to make a sustained, justifiable and continuous impact, it must be based on a “known” practice which draws from a range of disciplines, and theoretical positions, but is articulate in its own distinctiveness. Moreover, it needs to develop practice which is engaging, challenging, and inspiring to both young people and youth workers.

YOUNG PEOPLE’S AND YOUTH WORKERS MOTIVATIONS

Young people engage with youth work for a variety of reasons. Young (1999) argues that the initial reason tends to be based around activities that are of interest to them. This initial encounter leads them to connect and develop relationships with workers that are recognized and increasingly valued over time.

When young people are asked “what they want?” they usually ask for activities (Young, 1999) with no expectation for requesting ‘a listening ear’ or ‘social education’. However, although the initial motivation is often non-relational, young people come

to see value in engaging with adults in informal contexts. People outside youth work practice do not always see the central significance of relationships in effective youth work. From an outsiders point of view they often ask ‘why do you need a relationship to do what you do? Why don’t you just get on with it and set things up for them?’ (Ingram & Harris, 1999 p19). This lack of understanding can cause tensions between policy makers and practitioners when funding is closely tied to pre-determined outcome based demands.

Although the initial agendas of the young person and the youth worker can differ, the youth work relationship is developed, appreciated and articulated over time, in order for it to be significant and different from other interactions in both their lives. At the outset, young people voluntarily participate in a chosen activity, believing the activity to be the sole reason for opting in, the youth worker has, what Adams (2001) calls, a dual focus – the activity and the relationship. However, the reason for establishing the relationship is viewed in different lights. “Building Adults” is very much the priority in the youth workers agenda (Adams, 2001 p 81) whereas for Martin (2002) it is the relationship in itself which is the alpha and omega of youth work practice.

It is claimed that effective youth work offers learning opportunities for young people that enhance their personal and social development to enable them to take their place in society. However, the National Youth Agency, for example, recognizes that it is not just the provision of experiences and opportunities for young people that, ‘help build a capacity for life management in the economy and civil society’ (N.Y.A, 2004 p 20). They also note a requirement to work with young people to explore the issues that affect them, enhance their capacity to make positive life choices, engage with others compassionately and actively make change happen.

However, other writers have different views about the nature and extent of youth work. For example, Whitfield claims that the ‘prime overall social, psychological and practical task of youth work is the transition to adult life’ (Whitfield, 1997 p 31) which is recognised as complex and difficult to negotiate. In response to this, youth work practice needs to be evaluated regularly. Young (1999) advocates an engagement with young people to help them in the process of moral philosophizing, to gain understanding of themselves and their communities. This vocalization of feelings and emotions during the process of transition is viewed as crucial to them developing as people.

No two relationships will be exactly the same, as the approaches, levels of support, timing, depth and longevity of the encounter will differ, depending on the journey of the young person and the particular circumstances in which it takes place. However, it is argued that all professional relationships with young people have a common goal in uncovering abilities and unleashing the energies young people possess which have, ‘lain smothered for so long under the dust of self doubt and compounded failure’ (Porteus, 2001 p89).

ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF THINKING; POWER AND EMPOWERMENT

In a recent article Stuart (2006) examined the impact of a ‘Gandhian’ approach to effective youth practice. Based on the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi, he identified three practice implications. First, is the need for integrity within the work, by creating nurturing non-manipulative environments which are free from exploitation. Second, the realisation that youth work practice goes beyond the individual young person to avoid the danger of the practitioner focusing on the ‘immediate needs of the young people that they have little time or energy for social change’ (Stuart, 2006 p86) and third, is a commitment to ‘power-with’ relationships rather than ‘power-over’.

The latter point is an important deliberation but is perhaps “easier said than done” as Sercombe (1998) argues that the nature of power within youth work is complex and youth workers need to be aware of the power dynamic in the relationship. Stuart reminds us that ‘although youth workers and young people are not equals, working from a position of ‘power-with’ encourages youth workers to recognize the insights of young people and adopt strategies that are empowering and do not rely on force or coercion’ (Stuart, 2006 p86).

This is one significant aspect in which youth work differs from ‘formal work’ with young people. For example, other professionals take young people through a process to achieve goals that are determined by those in power. Conversely, youth work starts where the young people are and not where adults perceive them to be. Identifying the differing needs amongst young people is crucial, as is negotiating different paths and goals that meet their recognized needs (Harris, 2001 p18).

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The aim of the study was to ascertain, from young people’s perspectives, what they wanted from a youth worker. Prior to the commencement of the study both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were evaluated along with a range of research methods to determine the most appropriate approach to answer this question (Neil, 2007, Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2007). The study adopted a mixed methods approach that was mainly qualitative in focus, with specific use quantitative methods. Although the study was primarily qualitative, care was taken to ensure that the methods employed would not result in vague data by developing precise, detailed and complementary information, carefully gathered and rigorously evaluated (Denscombe 2002).

It is generally recognised and accepted that in social research, ‘there is no such thing as perfect research’ (Denscombe, 2002 p3). However, it is important that the researcher’s intention and the aim of the research are genuine in trying to find new ways of ‘seeing things’. The adoption of ethical practices based on robust methods of

conduct, collation, analysis and reporting of data helped to strengthen the findings. However, the study was limited in some ways, for example, the inability of the researcher to gather a full range of information due to having only partial access to young people. It is also argued that the 'data may not endure' and 'may become out of date almost as soon as it is collected' (Wellington, 2000 p32). However, despite its limitations the need for current research on the practice of youth work makes it useful in light of current and ongoing dialogue.

PILOT STUDY

As part of the preparation for this research, a pilot study was carried out with one group of young people to check that the methodology would provide the relevant information required and that all processes and materials were appropriate. This proved useful and enabled the fine tuning of the methods prior to conducting the main study.

PARTICIPANTS

This small scale study engaged a group of young people from a location in the West of Scotland. The area is recognised as being disadvantaged according to the Scottish Government's Multiple Deprivation Index and the area's youth work practice has a focus on social inclusion and regeneration. All participants were of white ethnic background and were between the ages of 11-14 years with written parental consent obtained to take part in the study. The young people were recruited through open invitation by community based practitioners who operate under the auspices of the Community Planning Partnership and who work across a number of localities. The group was made up of three males and five females.

METHODS, MATERIALS AND TOOLS

Participants were reminded of the purpose of the research and given the opportunity to opt in to the process. Following introductions, reminders and recommitment processes, the group was introduced to an ice breaker exercise. The ice breaker involved use of two photographs which were enlarged and cut up into many pieces and provided a task for people to work together in a cooperative manner that helped create an appropriate research atmosphere.

The research was carried out over four distinct stages. Once the ice breaker exercise had been conducted and unpacked, a specifically designed questionnaire was introduced to gather detailed information about the participants which comprised of questions about their personal details their local situation, and their knowledge and experiences. Following this a focus group was conducted using two broad questions which were set for the group and read out audibly. Flipcharts and pens were used to generate record and collate information. For the final research method the participants were encouraged to paste priority badges on a dressed mannequin. Thus, the methods employed in this study drew from both qualitative and

quantitative traditions to gather factual information about the participants and establish the basis for their contribution. In addition, the sequential approach helped in establishing a contributory environment where the young people felt comfortable with their peers and they reported being able to share honestly.

The focus group enabled the researcher to clarify understanding and elicit additional contributions. This was in keeping with Wellington's position that there are clear advantages in group interviews where, "the interviewees may feel safer, more secure and at ease with their peers" (Wellington, 2000 p 81), which may be especially true of teenagers. Again, they are also more likely to relax, 'warm up' and jog each others memories and thoughts'.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH FINDINGS – QUESTIONNAIRE

In addition to factual information about age, gender etc., the Participant Questionnaire provided two aspects of baseline information. First, that the young people had experience of involvement with youth workers across a range of settings and that their comments would be based upon prior experiences of youth work. Second, the participants determined what effective youth work practice was by reflecting on their own personal interaction with youth workers and what they regarded as effective youth practice.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

There were six main findings in this study:

First, the young people expressed a sense of feeling misunderstood by stating that they would like a youth worker to be '*understanding*' and '*fair*' in their list of prime qualities. When given the opportunity to clarify these terms, it was explained that '*some old folk just don't get us*', and this was acknowledged around the room by numerous participants. So young people are looking for youth workers to show understanding, be interested in them and treat them fairly.

Second, the study highlighted a variance in the relevancy of a youth workers' age. It transpired that these young people would work with adults of any age although there was a verifiable position for some that their perfect youth worker would be "*not much older than us*". This desire for age proximity was consolidated by other contributions that suggested that youth workers should "*like our music*" and be "*fashionable*". However, there was consensus that some of the best youth workers were much older than themselves and that their approach as youth workers was more important than how old they were.

Third, the young people prioritised empathy as a significant youth worker characteristic. Four of the young people picked '*caring*' as an important attribute, and when asked to explain what they meant by '*caring*' it was revealed that he "*wanted a youth worker to like... be there for us and really listen to us*". Within the group, there was

an almost palpable feeling that being listened to was not a routine part or expectation of their youth work experience and some participants became quite cynical about this issue. Another participant added that *“sometimes they (youth workers) listen ‘cause they have to, it’s their job”*, as they attempted to work out whether the apparent interest in them was genuine or contrived.

Fourth, the young people wanted help with life issues and recognized the need for supportive adults in their lives. Contributions that illustrate this, include statements that a youth worker should *‘Help us to do things’* and to be *‘helpful’*; coupled with desire for *‘help in difficult situations’*.

Fifth, these young people expected youth workers to have knowledge and experiences that could enhance their daily lives. One participant wanted her youth worker to be *‘smart’*. When asked to explain *‘smart’*, she said that youth workers *“should know stuff we don’t and be like clever...but not like geeky”*. When asked what *‘stuff should they know’* that would be beneficial to them, she articulated that they should help them *‘know about drugs and stuff and help in how to get things that we want for ourselves’*.

Sixth, the young people were not always content with the relationship that developed with youth workers. They spoke of youth workers being angry, too serious and not fair. When asked to say more about these circumstances, the participants responded by giving personal examples of previous *‘power-over’* relationship that they had experienced in various youth work environments. For example *“that ***** was a total idiot, who went mental when we don’t do what he wants”* and some adults who worked with them were too serious about stuff and never able to have fun – *“ye know their only interested in telling us what to do and what not to do all night”*.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

These young people have glimpsed ethical and empowering practice but this appeared to be marred by misunderstandings and allied to a lack of transparency about decision making.

The National Youth Agency (Harrison & Wise 2005) set out that a key principle in the ethical conduct for youth work was *‘valuing each young person and acting in ways that does not exploit or negatively discriminate against certain young people on irrelevant grounds’* (cited by Harrison & Wise, 2005, p21). This study indicated that the young people desired this kind of experience which was not tainted with favouritism by valuing some over others. One participant’s desire for the perfect youth worker was that she/he had *‘No Favourites’* (because) *“some folk are just liked more than others. Some of the people (volunteers) hang out more with certain young folk and listen to them more. The same people get picked to do things like make rules, and go on special trips”*.

Thus, these young people sometimes felt left out and devalued because the youth workers seemed only interested in *‘certain’* young people. This was emphasised when

one participant voiced that they thought the youth worker should “*respect us all – as when I’m at *** youth club, I feel respected and when at *** I don’t, by some leaders*”.

It could be argued that some young people believe that youth workers can favour particular young people either intentionally or unintentionally. Also, it is clear that young people recognise the connection that ‘some’ young people have with particular youth workers and they desire to have this same level of relationship.

There are three major challenges facing youth work which need to be tackled in order to address this issue. The first is to consider the recruitment processes into the profession to ensure that the people being employed are suitable in terms of personality, values and motivation. Second, there is a need to ensure that the education and training of youth workers inculcates a practice which is inclusive, reflective and equitable. The final task is to ensure an effective system of professional development which supports fresh, current and ethical practice to create “integrity within the work, (through) nurturing non-manipulative environments, free from exploitation” (Stuart 2006:86). The success of meeting these challenges will depend on a coherent and sympathetic organisational structure which both encourages and enables youth workers to practice in a transformative way by holding the needs and aspirations of **all** young people at the heart of the youth work experience.

Next, through exploration of how important age was for engaging with a youth worker, the group came to the understanding that personal qualities were more important than age. The results revealed that the young people prioritized a varied combination of attributes and provision. However when the responses were categorised, it showed that 66.7 % of the priorities were based around the personal characteristics of the youth worker rather than the activities engaged in (33.3%). This does not suggest that the activities are not valuable and an integral part of youth work. Instead, it emphasised that, although there can be a lack of clarity around the role of a youth worker, the young person wants to connect with the youth worker and that perhaps one to one support should be recognised as a significant aspect of the work (Nemko, 2006). However, what is clear is that the personal qualities of the youth worker and how they relate to young people is pivotal in developing the youth work experience that the young people want.

In relation to the third finding, this cynical outlook upon youth workers in paid positions has the potential to be counter productive to the youth work relationship. However it could be deduced that in adopting this stance the young people are seeking ‘congruence’ with the worker, which is one of the core Rogerian concepts in his ‘Person Centered Psychotherapy’. This contradicts Young’s (1999) expectation that they would not respond with answers like ‘a listening ear’ as the young people eloquently articulated the importance and value of the personal relationship.

In the youth work literature, it is held that the agendas of young people and youth workers often differ as they enter into the youth work relationship. However, maybe

it is a lack of role clarity which precipitates a cynicism and wariness about the genuineness of the youth workers intentions. In order to overcome this perception youth workers must be overtly open, transparent, equal and just in their practice.

The fourth main finding reveals how certain young people recognise that they need support with particular issues that they face in their lives. The research highlighted a desire to be part of the process of social change which started with voiced concerns about their own community. They wanted the youth worker to help them *'clean up the community'* and *"tidy community"* as the *"place was a dump and rubbish all over the place"*.

However, this was not limited to the physical environment that *"**** was rubbish and nothing to do most nights... junkies everywhere and young folk just get wasted"* (on drugs) but they demonstrated an understanding of key community issues in their community and wanted their circumstances change. In the discussion it was clear that the youth worker was regarded as a key component to help them to realise their environmental goals. Thus, the type of action they required was not only a focus on the individual needs or on particular groups but on the community at large (Stuart, 2006). Therefore, it is very much part of these young people's agenda to be involved in the decision-making process and have their concerns voiced to identify lasting solutions to local issues.

With reference to the fifth finding, these young people clearly understood that they needed youth work *"to help them get on in their lives"* and although they had numerous ideas about what they wanted out of life, they expressed a view that they could not do it alone. The participants were not averse to working with adults, in fact the evidence showed a desire to do so. It is important however to point out that a group of participants specifically mentioned the negative way that they were portrayed by adults and how they *"were put down all the time and no given a chance"*. This would confirm Sercombe's (1998) argument for 'power-with' relationships as the preferred basis on which to develop a youth work relationship which can influence other adults.

The young people who participated in this study communicated a desire to enter into wider society and identified the youth worker as a route for resources and opportunities to enable them to become more included. It was evident that they wanted to move out of their current circumstances *"I have lived in xxx all my life and seen nothing else"*. It could be argued that they saw the limitations of their current circumstances and experiences and wanted to experience more, but recognised that they needed support to achieve these wider goals.

With regard to their relationship with youth workers the young people were drawn towards 'power-with' relations with adults. Having a meaningful connection with the youth worker which is equitable and fair was high on this group's agenda. A major part of the discussion confirmed a desire for the youth worker to be *'helpful... to "help us dae things"*. There may be a misconception that young people just want

things done for them but this attitude certainly was not evident in this study. Therefore, from the analysis it would be appropriate to conclude that young people want meaningful, mature relationships and view the attributes of the youth worker as key to facilitating them doing things that benefit them now and in the future.

CONCLUSION

This research project set out to examine and analyze what young people want from their youth workers. It has shown that young people understand the benefits of connecting with a youth worker as they endeavour to make sense of their life. It also discovered that previously experienced negative youth work relationships significantly shaped the perceptions and expectations of these young people. Although there were limitations to the research, it has been beneficial in shedding further light upon young people's perceptions of effective youth work practice. It asserted that the youth work relationships must remain central if young people are to flourish in a discriminatory world. It has also highlighted and drawn out the importance and significance of relationships upon effective youth practice through the voices of young people.

As Krueger (2004) maintains youth workers are like modern dancers because they "plan (choreograph) their shifts in advance, bring themselves and their skills to the moment, and improvise along the way" (2004, p1). However, this research reminds us that youth workers do not dance alone, but adventure with young people in their complex, transient worlds and move with them as they negotiate the transitions and uncertainties of life. To perform this role successfully, youth workers need to be at their best, having chosen their theoretical scripts and rehearsed their routines within the practice community. Through this, they prove their ability and commitment to give full concentration during the live act and listen to the 'audience' to gauge the impact of their performance. In this way, practitioners and young people have the potential to develop contemporary relationships as they mutually dance through their daily lives. Finally, it is through this connection, attention and symbiotic movement that youth work has the potential to be a special part of young people's lives. This makes youth work a unique and privileged profession.

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