



# CONTINUOUS EDUCATION Lifelong Learning to professionalise youth work programmes

---

ESTHER NJIRO

Department of Adult Basic Education & Youth Development  
School of Educational Studies  
University of South Africa  
Email: njiroel@unisa.ac.za

MPHO DICHABA

Department of Adult Basic Education & Youth Development  
School of Educational Studies  
University of South Africa  
Email: dlchamm@unisa.ac

## ABSTRACT

Professional youth work is in most cases blurred and not acknowledged appropriately by policy and the power that be. The demand for professionalism is increasing as investment in youth work is considered beneficial to holistic development and progress in South Africa and other Commonwealth countries. According to this paper, investing in the knowledge base and expertise of youth workers is imperative for professionalism in youth work. Youth work professionalism is critical and it is suggested that the role of continuous education and training, also known as lifelong learning, can lead to a professional recognition of youth workers and their work. Mere formal education resulting in a certificate is not enough for the professional development of youth work in a rapidly changing and globalised world of innovation and high technology. A review of the available literature was the main source of information for this paper. A library search was conducted and relevant information examined to provide the description and analysis of the various approaches to youth work professionalism. Professionalism in youth work through continuous education and training should produce the following distinctive qualities: acceptance of the moral and ethical responsibility inherent in youth work practice; promotion of the well-being of young people and their families in a context of respect and collaboration; and taking care of young people as essential for emotional growth, social competence, rehabilitation and treatment. There is a need to acknowledge the strengths arising from cultural and human diversity.

Valuing individual uniqueness and family, community, culture and human diversity is integral to the developmental and intervention process. Advocating for the rights of youth and families promotes their contribution to nation-building and the development of society.

**Keywords:** Continuous education and training; professionalism, youth work, youth workers

## INTRODUCTION

Across the world, youth work practice is moving towards professionalism from different directions. This path towards professionalism is taking place in different ways: in some countries youth work practices are represented by professional associations, while others attempt minimum mandatory standards of training and still others accept government regulatory provision of incentives [Barwick 2006; Emslie 2012; Sercombe 2004; Bhana, Swartz, Taylor, Dlamini and Vawda 2011]. There is an urgent need for professionalism as governments are actively engaged in bringing youth work into acceptable governance. Ethical concerns are mounting and many youth workers are busy drafting codes of ethics to ensure accountability. Youth work in many Commonwealth countries began as voluntary initiatives of various non-governmental organisations and churches. Youth workers lacked education and training of reputable standards, making their work unstable, amorphous and precarious. South Africa is one of the Commonwealth countries where youth work has made progressive, rapid strides towards professionalism [Hiagala 2012; SAYWA 2001; Bhana et al. 2011].

In this paper we argue that continuous education or lifelong learning is better than other approaches for achieving youth work professionalism in South Africa and other Commonwealth countries. Lifelong learning, as offered by the Department of Adult Education and Youth Development at Unisa, is described and compared to other approaches regarding the likelihood of it achieving professionalism for youth work programmes in South Africa and other Commonwealth countries.

These views are informed by literature sources from online databases, library sources and academic dissertations cited in this review paper. We start with a description of key characteristics of youth work, followed by a description of lifelong learning and its role in the professionalisation of youth work. Finally a conclusion is reached and recommendations are made.

### Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the critical essence of professionalism in youth work and to suggest continuous education and training as a more effective approach to achieve this professionalism. The objectives are as follows:

- To describe the main characteristics of youth work
- To demonstrate the merits of continuous education in achieving youth work professionalism
- To reach conclusions about possible outcomes for youth work professionalism in South Africa

## **What is youth work?**

Youth work is a field or occupation that focuses on the holistic development of young people by offering them opportunities and support in their personal, social, economic and political outlook. A holistic development is central in most youth work programmes. According to the Draft Youth Policy (DYP) of the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) (2009,35), young people benefit from youth work when their developmental objectives are achieved through a combination of focused strategies. Youth work practitioners should identify where needy young people are and where they would like to be in terms of development. They should also identify any obstacles that impede progress and any competencies that young people have that may be developed for them to attain their desired developmental objectives. Youth work is critical for nation-building and it is imperative that its professional status be enhanced by tackling systemic challenges faced by young people.

In the South African context, youth work was predominantly practised by faith-based and community-based organisations before the 1980s as a response to concerns about the challenges young people faced (Bhana et al. 2011; Hlagala 2012). However, there is currently an increasing need in the practice of youth work to professionalise. Many institutions of higher learning are thus now offering education and training for youth workers (Beukes and Gannon 1996).

## **Youth workers**

Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2006, 1) provide a functional definition of a youth worker as someone who works in a programme directly with young people to facilitate their personal, social and educational development. Unlike other social service workers, those who work in youth programmes are mainly part-time employees and many do not receive the benefits or earnings associated with a full-time job.

Another characteristic of youth workers is that they enter the profession through a number of different paths and have backgrounds in a range of fields, including social work, education, public health and community education. Other youth workers enter the profession without any formal education and training and gain knowledge and skills on the job. Many youth workers regard working in youth programmes as a "stepping stone" or supplemental job opportunity. Education, training and capacity



of youth workers are usually questioned. Sercombe [2004] reiterates that in Australia youth workers are marginalised because their professional standing is not recognised by other professionals. Their knowledge base and expertise are usually fuzzy and their capacity to advocate effectively for all young people is questionable. Regarding the disdain for youth workers, he says:

*Some agencies hire psychology or social work graduates for what are ostensibly youth work positions, because their professional accreditation gives some guarantee of standards of practice, or at least some recourse if standards are breached. Institutional employers such as schools, conscious of public accountability, remain cautious about engaging youth workers in the absence of professional recognition. The problem solving and advocacy skills of youth workers are contested (Sercombe 2004, 5).*

Seriously unethical practices are said to characterise youth workers who are accused of:

- + giving themselves hefty pay packets at the expense of the programmes;
- + selling drugs to young people and having sex with them;
- + sharing pornographic videos;
- + buying electronic goods from young people;
- + embezzling agency funds; and
- + turning up for work drunk or stoned.

On the other hand, there are those who regard youth work as providing space for young people to come together and associate. Youth work has an impact on young people's lives, helping them reach their full potential by contributing to their personal development and facilitating their social and educational development. Youth work is legitimised by the networking that helps give voice to the young people making youth work visible. According to Sojarvi [2011, 2), contextual conflicts between youth workers and civic and political activities blur youth work identity in Finland where it is viewed as unstable and is distinguished from other sector workers by policymakers.

In South Africa, those practising youth work do not have similar qualifications and competencies [NYDA 2009, 36). Youth work suffers a shortage of skilled personnel, lack of financial resources and disparities in practice because of inadequate education and training. These problems are exacerbated by the lack of resources to facilitate total development of young people through improving their skills and capabilities. Youth work interventions are in high demand in view of enormous challenges such as unemployment and HIV/Aids facing young people. Implementing youth work interventions could effectively be realised through dedicated skilled personnel whose work is recognised as professional.

## What is youth work professionalism?

Professional development refers to a variety of education, training and support opportunities offered to all professionals, including youth workers. Professional development has existed for several decades among national youth organisations. However, professional development options have become increasingly diverse, reflecting the diverse paths people take to become youth workers. According to Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2006,1), professional development opportunities for youth workers are varied and may include but are not limited to the following:

- + Higher education training, such as continuing education courses and degree programmes
- + Pre-service training and orientation for new staff
- + In-service training provided for current staff
- + Training seminars and resource centres provided by external organisations
- + Local and national credentialing systems and programmes
- + Local and national conferences
- + Mentoring programmes
- + Ongoing informal resources such as newsletters, online discussion boards and "brownbag" lunches for staff members to share ideas and expertise

Christian (2007,3-5) points out that adults feel more confident in the ability of youth workers if the latter have the requisite professional qualifications as this becomes the *raison d'etre* for investing time and money in youth education. When young people are viewed as economic units of the work force, the emphasis on their development puts a premium on training which gives young people skills to make them economically productive. If we view young people as citizens of a democracy, not only in terms of governance, but also a whole way of life, we take account of a wider set of skills and a wider set of processes. Training is a process in which people are given skills to perform specific tasks. Education on the other hand is a broader concept - It is lifelong and continuous.

Resolving issues of how to professionalise youth work has not been easy (Emslie 2012, 23; Sercombe 2004, 64; William and Morgan 2009, 290--291) as it is prone to all sorts of challenges such as corruption, serving its own interest, lack of clarity, conflict of interest, misrepresentation and lack of discipline. Youth work professionalism was the main objective of the Commonwealth Youth Programmes' Strategic Plan of 2003--2006. A summary of progress in professionalism in some Commonwealth countries is given below :

- + In the United Kingdom where youth work has long been organised industrially, youth work in terms of informal social education and training is well established.

Unfortunately their code of ethics has ambiguous status and has not achieved national adherence.

- + Codes of ethics have been developed in Wales, Malta, New Zealand, and by international child and youth care bodies including the prestigious *Federation Internationale des Communautés Educatives* [FICE]. Youth work has recognition in law in several countries, including Finland and Ireland, and in Wales and Scotland [Nicholls 2003, quoted in Bowie 2009, 4].
- + In New Zealand, following the work in Canterbury on a code of ethics, based in part on the Fairbridge Code [Canterbury Youth Workers Collective nd), a national survey on professionalisation is being driven by the Department of Internal Affairs.
- + Western Australia Youth Affairs Conference ratified unanimously the Fairbridge Code that had agreed definitions of youth work.

### **Continuous education as lifelong learning and youth work professionalism**

Continuous or lifelong learning is a concept that has gained interest across the world and has been embraced by South Africa's Department of Education. It refers to the ongoing voluntary and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge suited to multi-faceted youth work. In the last 50 years, constant scientific and technological innovation has profoundly affected learning needs and styles. Learning is no longer only conveyed in a fixed place and time to acquire knowledge [school] or a place and time to apply the knowledge acquired [the workplace]. Instead, learning takes place on an ongoing basis from daily interactions with others and with the world around us [Watson 2003].

Continuous education has the advantage of ensuring that learning takes place in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. Formal learning is typically offered by a training or education institution structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support leading to certification. Non-formal learning, on the other hand, takes place in planned but highly adaptable places. It is structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time and learning support. Informal learning takes place in a spontaneous, unstructured, unplanned, incidental and informal manner. No formal curriculum is followed and instructors are not necessarily trained. The place and time limitations are not taken into consideration. There is no systematic assessment and evaluation after the learning [Lerner and Hertzog 2004, 3].

Delors [1996] identifies the following four pillars for lifelong learning:

- + Learning to know: mastering learning tools instead of acquisition of only structured knowledge
- + Learning to do: equipping people for the types of work needed now and in future, including innovation and adapting learning for future work environments

- Learning to live together with others: peacefully resolving of conflict, discovering other people and their cultures, fostering community capability, individual competence and capacity, economic resilience and social inclusion
- Learning to be: education that contributes to a person's complete development of mind, body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality

Ufelong learning can instil creativity, initiative and responsiveness in learners, thereby enabling them to show adaptability in a post-industrial society by enhancing skills to manage uncertainty and communicate across and within cultures, sub-cultures, families and communities. It enables people to negotiate conflicts and brings personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability.

According to Desjardins (2007, 1), learning does not only occur in school; it is both life-wide (i.e. it occurs in multiple contexts, such as at work, at home and in our social lives) and lifelong (from cradle to grave). These different types of learning affect each other in a wide variety of ways. Their impact in terms of the outcomes of learning is equally complex - whether it is in the economic and social spheres, the individual and collective, or the monetary and the non-monetary. Further complicating the picture are substantial gaps in our knowledge base on a number of issues, including the following:

- The cumulative and interactive impacts of life-wide and lifelong learning
- The potential impacts of informal learning, later interventions in adulthood or even different types of formal education
- Impacts of different curricula (general, academic, vocational) and different learning at different stages

Learning thus transcends the narrow economic and vocational type of education as it is a continuous process which stimulates and empowers individuals to knowledge, values, skills and understanding required throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles circumstances and environments (www.generation-europe 2010,9).

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Youth work has been described as a broad term covering a large scale of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature, including sports and services for young people. Youth work is also a space for young people to come together and associate. The essence of youth work has been shown to have a profound impact on young people's lives as it helps them reach their full potential through contributing to their personal development and facilitating social and educational development. It enables them to develop their voice, influence and place in society.

Youth work professionalisation is therefore essential in South African and other Commonwealth countries. Various approaches to youth work professionalism have been described. Continuous education and training or lifelong learning as offered by youth and development programmes at Unisa can achieve professionalism for youth work by providing formal credentials that are critical for professionals. It is particularly suited to the multi-faceted youth work that comprises grassroots community-based activities and the nationally recognised youth programmes and agencies. Comprehensive educational opportunities help move youth development workers to the point where they are acknowledged. The lack of a nationally agreed-upon curriculum for youth workers and the lack of an accredited body leave youth workers unable to take their educational experience to the point where they are seen as professionals.

## Recommendations

- + We recommend more research into the situational analysis of youth work in South Africa and other Commonwealth countries so as to keep updating the lifelong learning modules.
- + Youth work in a changing time and a rapidly globalised world requires highly oriented, academically skilled young people whose skills in communication will enable them to cope with global economic, political and cultural activity.
- + Young people are at the forefront of the fight against poverty and exclusion, and they need to connect with other youth cultures to help overturn stereotypes that have shackled people- financially, socially and emotionally.
- + Continuous education will ensure that youth work opens opportunities for dedicated skilled personnel if they are recognised as professionals.
- + Lifelong learning can build youth workers' confidence and enable them to manage life challenges.

## References

- Barwick, H. 2006. *Youth work today a review of issues and challenges*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Youth Development.
- Bessant, J. 2004. Up periscope: the future for youth work in Australia. *Youth Studies Australia* 23(3): 17-25.
- Bessant, J. and R. Weber. 2003. Youth workers, professional identities and narratives of workplace changes: a preliminary report. *JAS, Australia Public Intellectual Forum* 78.
- Beukes, K. and B. Gannon. 1996. *An orientation to child and youth care*. 2nd ed. [revised 1999]. Cape Town: National Association of Child Care Workers.
- Bhana, A., S. Swartz, S. Taylor, N. Dlamini and M. Vawda. 2011. Youth work in South Africa. In *South African youth context: the young generation*, ed. B. Magongo and M. Motimele. Mdrand: National Youth Development Agency.

- Borden, L. M. and D. Craig. 2002. *Educating youth development professionals: current realities, future potentials*. Tucson, AZ: Institute for Children, Youth and Families, University of Arizona.
- Bowie, L. M. A and J. Bronte-Tinkew. 2006. The importance of professional development for youth workers. <http://WWW.childtrends.org> (accessed 10 January 2013).
- Bowie, L. M. A. 2009. 4 Youth Training: Teaching & learning from An International Perspective. The International Child and Youth Care Network CYC-Online Issue 120. <http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cyconline-feb2009-bowie.html> (accessed 10 February 2013).
- Christian, C. 2007. Youth work education and training—a strategic paper. *Commonwealth Youth and Development* 5(1):91-108. Commonwealth Youth Programme Strategy: Papers from the Commonwealth Youth Ministers' Meeting.
- Delors, J. 1996. Learning: the treasure within: report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the twenty-first century. <http://www.unesco.org/delors> (accessed 19 January 2013).
- Desjardins, R. 2007. Understanding the social outcomes of learning. <http://ul.fcpe.rueil.free.fr/IMG/pdf/9607061E.pdf> (accessed 23 January 2013).
- Emslie, 2012. It's time: a case for the professionalizing of youth in Youth Studies Australia Volume 31, Number 4 December.
- Hlagala, R. B. 2012. Emergence of youth work: perspectives of social service professionals in South Africa. PhD thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Lerner, R. M and S. M. Herzog. 2004. *Creating a community youth development profession: from vision to Institution*. Concept paper. Boston, MA: Tufts University.
- Mattingly, M. A., C. Stuart and K. Vandenberg. 2002. North American certification project (NACP) competencies for professional child and youth work practitioners. *Journal of Child and Youth Care Work* 17 :16-49.
- National Youth Policy 2009–2014. Unpublished document from the Presidency Republic of South Africa.
- South African Youth Workers Association (SAYWA) 2009–2014. unpublished draft.
- Sereombe, H. 2004. Youth work: the professionalization dilemma. *Youth Studies Australia* 23(4).
- Soajarvi, K. 2011. What is professional youth work? Taming of wild youth work Sector. A Doctoral thesis. HUMAK University of Applied Sciences, Finland.
- Watson, L. 2003. *Lifelong Learning in Australia*. Canberra: Department of Education Science and Training.
- Williamson, B. and J. Morgan. 2009. Educational reform, enquiry-based learning and the re-professionalization of teachers. *The Curriculum Journal* 20(3):287-304. <http://www.generation-europe.eu/forum/2010/05/an-eu-strategy-for-youth-investing-and-empowering> (accessed 18 January 2013).