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Inter- and intra- boundary struggles within the Youth and Community Work profession.

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Background

Youth and Community Work is a profession with distinct recognition by a trade union and (CYWU) and the national Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC). Over 40 further and higher education establishments in the United Kingdom provide accredited programmes, producing approximately 1,500 professionally qualified workers each year. They are occupied in a wide range of statutory and voluntary settings with young people and communities, using group work and educational techniques with underlying principles of participation, empowerment, and social justice.

However, the notion of a Youth and Community profession with a clear identity and boundaries has become increasingly contested, given its base in such a diverse range of multi-agency and multi-professional contexts, and a lack of status and understanding by others of our role and purpose. For professional youth and community workers, there are multiple sites of contention and boundary crossing: 'professional pluralism' (Schon, 1983) in relation to other professions; changing social policy (e.g. the forced introduction of the Connexions service); changing relationships with our service users; and our own practice. Youth and community workers are still in a state of 'ontological insecurity' (Freire, 1998), where we have created our own professional boundaries (through developing statements of ethics and professional principles), but have ongoing internal debates about them still. Sites of resistance are therefore both inter-professional, where some workers are resisting the profession's absorption into other services, and intra-professional, where the emphasis on service user empowerment perpetuates anti-expert and anti-elitist views. These result in continuing struggles regarding the occupational/ professional boundary. In addition, other areas of intra-professional resistance occur around questions of whom the service should work with: primarily with young people, or for community development and community education, or a combination of both.

Research Questions

The key question addressed in this paper is whether there is a need for a clearly boundaried Youth and Community Work profession. At its inception the profession shared a professional qualification with teacher education during a period when almost half of all youth provision was provided on schools sites. The role of the youth and community worker was then delineated by distinctions between formal and informal educators (Smiths and Jeffs, 1980). However, many of the distinctions in characteristics between teachers and youth and community workers no longer hold. For example, one characteristic ascribed to Youth and Community Work has been that we would facilitate work on curriculum and themes/issues identified by the participants, and that participants had to have engaged voluntarily (Ord 2007). Yet increasingly, youth and community workers now operate beyond traditional centres and leisure/issue based projects, and have to work within the boundaries of formal educational settings and the prescriptions that apply therein. It has therefore become critical to decide the future direction of the profession. Should there be a return to a profession focussed on young people, sharing boundaries with other workers involved in children's and young people's services? Or should one which make the case for a unique, specific and clearly boundaried youth and community professional identity? Or for a critical community of practitioners, whose occupation is truly un-boundaried?

Methods

I am a professionally qualified Youth and Community Worker, the manager of a voluntary Youth and Community organisation, and the course leader of a professional qualifying course for youth and community workers. The research will therefore be carried out as practitioner action research. Ongoing recordings and observations will be made of the changing context of Youth and Community

Work practice, particularly in relation to work with volunteers and a range of other professionals . In particular this will build on previous research about my professional intervention with a team of volunteers in Tameside. Here I investigated the application of key characteristics of Youth and Community Work, and undertook formative and summative evaluation with the participants. The research will also include analysis of the new body of Youth and Community Work texts concerned with identifying particular and effective professional practice through the use of reflective practice (e.g. Banks, 2007; Harrison and Wise, 2005; Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Packham, 2008; Thomson, 2005; Roberts, 2009).

Frame

The paper will draw on this body of Youth and Professional literature, particularly that related to professional formation, ethics and principles to frame debates around professional identity. Freirian (1972,1992) concepts of 'praxis, critical dialogue and conscientisation' in relation to informal education, the role of the worker, and research approaches will underpin the study. The paper will also critique the work of Butcher, Banks, Henderson and Robertson (2007) and Ledwith (2005) in relation to their concept of 'critical community practitioners', and Banks' (1999) notion of committed practitioners as opposed to distinct professionals.

Research findings

The paper will contribute to knowledge firstly by establishing the nature and extent of boundary setting (both internal and external) in the Youth and Community Work profession, and the relevance of associated academic debates. It will address the case for 'ontological security' and 'cultural identity' (Freire, 1998). It will establish criteria for judging whether there is a need to define a clearly bounded profession of Youth and Community Work, what challenges might attend such a project, and what would be required to enable it.

The findings will contribute to the development of professional training in this field, and offer an increased awareness for other professions of the role and identity of youth and community workers as informal educators. They will also contribute to the on-going debate between occupational and professional characterisations of this work, as reflected not only in the academic literature, but also in current occupational standards for Youth Work and Community Development, and in the subject benchmark for Youth and Community Work.