

Beyond Rhetoric: Asserting the importance of professional ethics and values in the training of Youth Support Workers in challenging times

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Abstract

In the austerity drive affecting most helping services in the UK and other North Atlantic countries, this article asserts the importance of professional ethics and values in the training of youth support workers. It asks for a pro-active and self-aware approach when wrestling with ethical problems and ethical dilemmas. Professional ethics and values are explored in terms of their function within youth support training and practice that aims to place the needs of the young person as the focus of the work. The article offers a critical discussion on principles; alongside policy, legislation and practical implications within a target driven environment. The context for the discussion is sited within multi-professional and multi-agency young people's services in England. However, the focus on education and training concerning ethics and values will be of interest elsewhere; as high levels of youth unemployment and social exclusion create circumstances where practitioners make difficult decisions in challenging times.

Key words: Ethics, values, Youth Support training.

THE IMPACT of the ongoing economic recession suggests a need for more professional creativity in working with young people via 'helping' services, alongside less reliance upon previous working practices. This is relevant to existing youth support workers, who are negotiating the many changes in the sector and those who are entering the work, who may be seeking a clear professional steer. Our premise is that a critical consideration of professional ethics and values is essential in initial education and training for these practitioners and as part of their ongoing professional development.

In England, a major factor in the changing landscape of youth support services is the devolution of services to local authority control. This is coupled with economic challenge and financial deficit which has meant that resources are stretched and in some cases, have been heavily decreased or even withdrawn. The spending cuts to public services have occurred across the UK, although it should be noted that the delivery of youth support differs across the four home countries. The financial crisis across the EU and in other countries in the North Atlantic has resulted (or is likely

to result) in the reduction or withdrawal of financial support for helping services that are often viewed as peripheral, when compared to the ‘core’ services of health and education. One way of managing reduced resources for supporting young people is to create a combined service, ‘pooling’ resources, with a view to reducing instances of duplication; alongside counteracting possibilities of young people ‘falling through the net’ – the latter as a consequence of inadequate information sharing. This combining of services can lead to blurred operational boundaries and professional uncertainty, experienced by the practitioners themselves, and the view of their role by others (Lewin and Colley, 2011). Yet, the vision for youth support work in England was portrayed as a resolution to fragmented working, to bring coherence and ensure a holistic overview of the needs of a young person (Smith, 2007). Smith (2007) highlights a range of issues that have led to the ‘failure of Connexions’ (the name given to the now disbanded ‘holistic’ service) – significantly, the lack of assessed and supervised practice in the training of youth support workers. Our paper cannot offer a full exploration of youth support services, but Smith’s point is worth noting, as it demarcates the ‘professional’ youth worker from that of the ‘youth support worker’. Professional youth worker training, similar to that of social work professionals, comprises ongoing vocational assessment and supervision. Additionally, the ethical code for youth work (NYA, 2004) does not seamlessly translate to the role of youth support worker, which is explored further on in this paper.

It is important to clarify at this point that what is offered here is a debate on a contemporary issue, not a report derived from an empirical study; thus the discussion is not based on sets of research data, but on teaching practice. To support the arguments, reference is made to relevant literature in the field. The article will conclude with recommendations for an approach in the vocational and educational training of practitioners, derived from the experience of the authors and discussions with trainee youth support workers. However, before continuing it is necessary to explain the terms that we are using in this paper.

Definition of terms

We will return to our use of the word professional later, but first we should clarify our use of the term ‘youth support worker’. Youth support workers in England are practitioners working with young people in a range of supporting roles in the helping services; for example connected to education, community, social and youth work. The job titles used for these roles vary, but include learning mentors, those working in educational welfare, voluntary work in community settings and ‘personal advisers’ supporting young people who face a number of barriers to full participation in education, training and/or work. These barriers may be social, psychological or physical in nature: for example, related to poverty, homelessness and other social disadvantage, abuse or mental health issues, substance use or criminal activity, learning or physical disability.

Personal advisers (the term used in England where the role was developed within the Connexions service) work with existing helping professionals such as social workers, probationary teams,

educationalists, health professionals, counsellors, youth workers and so on; but their role was designed to be the first point of contact for a young person when experiencing a difficulty in terms of education, or the transition between education and work. They may be referred to as ‘intensive’ personal advisers working with young people over a period of time, rather than providing interim guidance on educational and work decisions at particular transition points. As mentioned, this ‘new’ youth support role differs from that of a ‘youth worker’ in terms of training and qualification and the manner of working with young people, yet the initial conception of youth support services (which later became known as Connexions) indicated that the job specification of the Connexions Personal Advisor role paralleled that of a youth worker (Smith, 2002). But, youth support work has a greater emphasis on one-to-one work with young people sited within formal institutions, albeit that outreach work does take place. The focus of youth support work is located in case work and case management, which is a detour from traditional youth work: the latter is centred on association and group; hence the reference to youth and community work. Professional youth work is rooted in learning by doing; ie. learning is a co-constructed process resulting from wider activity. This is different from the outcome focussed and target driven agenda that influences ‘youth support’ practice. Indeed, there have been a raft of arguments against traditional youth work being ‘corrupted’ by this way of working. For example, Payne (2009:218) argues such contrived support work ‘serves to marginalise “pure” youth work’.

However, upholding the concept of ‘professional’ is not to yearn for a ‘golden age’ of elite workers whose knowledge base and practices cannot be open to accountability or scrutiny. There has been a well documented crisis of trust in professionals among policy makers across the UK and elsewhere (Furlong, 2000; Evetts, 2011). It is no longer the case that there is unquestioned faith that professionals always act responsibly in relation to their clients (Reid and West, 2011). As part of the ‘modernisation’ of human services, governments have influenced professional educational programmes and practice via the language of standards, accountability and an economic ‘what works’ agenda (Bradbury et al, 2009). Practice is complex and the ‘technicising’ and reductive discourse of ‘what works’ in social interactions within the helping services, and within teaching and learning, ignores the worlds of meaning that influence outcomes (Kemmis, 2011). Part of the difficulty that we refer to in this paper is the lack of an established professional structure for the (relatively) ‘new’ role of the youth support worker in England. Opening up a discussion about structure is to engage with a debate that cannot be covered here. We are mindful of Wenger’s (2000) work on communities of practice and situated learning and acknowledge that youth support workers in England are, in most cases, shaping their practice as they practice. We acknowledge that this evolving shape is informed by theorizing about the work from a range of existing helping services, but the professional identity of youth support workers is contested and fragile (Smith, 2007).

Referring to Kemmis (2011) and Kubiak (2010), about ‘practice shape’, one could argue that there is a traceable history that predetermines the shape of youth support practice. Practitioners do not

have a distinct view of their professional identity or the professional agency that such identity may bring, as described by Kemmis (2011), yet youth support workers symbolise contemporary service provision for young people. As Kemmis notes: ‘cultural-discursive, social and material-economic frameworks existed prior to the arrival of these particular people, in this encounter, in this setting’, which invariably gives ‘the practice its character, meaning and significance’ (Kemmis, 2011: 150). They lack the social capital found in related professional fields and are learning to build the capacity to participate appropriately – and professionally. So, what we mean by professional should become clear in what follows: it cannot be separated from an autonomous, reflexive practice that pays attention to ethics and values in the service of ‘helping’ others. Ongoing attention to ethics and values is needed to question and counter the reductionist ‘what works’ approach with its focus on outcomes and outputs, as ‘the technicist view threatens to empty practice of its *moral* dimension’ (Kemmis, 2011:163).

The training context for youth support workers

The context for our discussion derives from teaching participants, working in the roles described above, on a Foundation degree in Supporting Young People. These youth support workers are employed by schools, by local government authorities and in community or voluntary services. As they work in multi-agency, multi-professional contexts, youth support workers invariably support the role of other professionals, for example teachers, but they are not classed as assistants. Kubiak (2010) explores paraprofessional development in the UK and although he refers specifically to roles in health and social care, it is comparable to youth support workers, who in some ways reflect the description of a paraprofessional. Kubiak states the ‘reconceptualisation of support worker roles is a reflection of the professionalization of this workforce’ (Kubiak 2010:128), and as youth support practice takes shape, it is part of this reconceptualisation. Kubiak warns of the potential disruption to ‘well-established occupational hierarchies and of who does what work’ (2010: 128) – an important issue when considering ethics and values in multi-professional working, across a range of agencies.

Youth support workers may already have relevant work experience or be designated as trainees in the role, and their age on the programme spans the range from young adults (20+) to mature workers. Some may have an undergraduate degree, but the majority will not have qualifications at Higher Education level. On successful completion of the Foundation degree, the participant gains 120 credits at HE level 4 and 120 credits at HE level 5 (the equivalent of two years of a three year undergraduate degree in the UK), and they can complete a third year in order to gain a full Bachelor of Arts degree. Foundation degrees are vocational and, normally, for participants who are in work and want to gain a relevant HE qualification: participation may or may not be sponsored by an employer, but all require a significant amount of work-based learning. Having explained the use of terms and described the context for the following discussion, we will now move on to outline the four key themes related to ethics and values, which are introduced within the vocational and

educational training of youth support workers on the Foundation degree to which we refer. These themes are:

- Understanding the function of professional codes of ethics, regulation and professional autonomy.
- Managing ethical problems and ethical dilemmas.
- Acknowledging the personal/professional interplay in working lives.
- Exploring notions of professional identity within multi-professional and multi-agency contexts.

Professional codes of ethics, regulation and professional autonomy

According to McCulloch (2007:54), ‘Ethical practice is action that leads to human well-being from a perspective that values the disposition to act truly and justly’. These are fine words that encapsulate an ethical approach, but they are open to different interpretations. The ‘disposition to act truly and justly’ can be constrained by strict adherence to the rules when the latter can conflict with the practitioner’s wish to do what seems ‘right’, rather than what is ‘correct’. Such difficulties present the individual with ethical dilemmas: these are less easy to resolve than ethical problems.

Discussions around ethical principles derive from debates in moral philosophy that occurred in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Predominant discourse defines three main stances, those of virtue, consequentialism and deontological, which are reframed by Cribb and Ball (2005) as dispositions, goals and obligations respectively. One could argue that in a target driven context, virtue ethics – or those related to one’s personal traits or dispositions, are shrouded by a more consequentialist, or goal-driven stance, that is intended to serve the most people. In some ways, deontological considerations (concerned with duty and moral obligation) serve to mediate virtue and consequence. Cribb and Ball promote an approach to ethics that frames these positions as complementary, rather than competing; what they term a ‘three-dimensional account of ethics’ (2005:124). This is also favoured by Haynes (1998), with her presentation of the triadic taxonomy of ethics, as part of a wider exploration of ‘ends and means’. On the Foundation degree, trainees are encouraged to consider which of these positions they naturally tend toward and then to reflect upon each position as complementary in their consideration of ethical situations they are facing. This approach helps trainees to acknowledge the ethical gaps created by conflicting agendas related to the espoused ‘young person centred approach’ (Reid and Fielding, 2007) within a context that prioritises the meeting of targets, which can also often challenge trainees’ values.

The helping professions, drawing significantly on the discipline of psychology, have their roots in values which assume that the individual has it within their power to change for the better – ‘better’ here meaning what the mainstream society defines as socially acceptable behaviour. This individualistic view, which has dominated the traditional approaches within psychology, ignores

how an individual's 'success' is shaped by the social, cultural, historical and political context within which they operate (Parker, 2007). Ethics, based on values that are underpinned by the discipline of psychology alone, can be problematic if issues related to power and position, are not considered. However, whilst it is important to recognise the influence of such complex issues, problems in practice are rarely addressed if action is always viewed as, ultimately, ineffective. An ethical and reflexive practitioner will acknowledge the difficulties, but action should, primarily, consider the best interests of the young person.

At a practical level, ethical codes do attempt to address ethical problems and to regulate professional behaviour. They exist to protect the service user (the client) and the practitioner in a society that requires agencies (and their professionals) to be accountable for the services offered. Codes are more than guidelines – the latter appear optional, whereas 'a code' implies a system of laws to be followed; based on a prevailing standard of agreed moral behaviour. The meaning is precise and it becomes difficult to find an alternative word that carries the same impact. Codes serve to unify a group of people around a common purpose and, by so doing, help to define that purpose. Professional codes of conduct within the helping services are usually, but not exclusively (Daniels and Jenkins, 2000), governed by the legislative framework within a particular country. For the trainee youth support worker it is essential that they become familiar with the codes that apply to their work. As part of the Foundation degree, trainees compare and contrast a range of ethical codes, including social work (BASW, 2012), counselling (BACP, 1988) and youth work (NYA, 2004). In so doing, youth support workers have an opportunity to understand the codes that govern the wider landscape, in an attempt to understand their own practice and also enhance multi-agency working.

Responsible and reflective practice requires a practitioner to interpret (rather than just follow) the codes of practice which govern their work and to develop an attitude of 'ethical watchfulness' (Reid, 2004). Maintaining ethical watchfulness becomes increasingly important when conflicts arise in the pressure to meet 'placement' targets (ie. getting young people to take up engagement opportunities that may not always be suitable). Russell et al (2010:1) have likened this to 'playing the numbers game'. At the heart of ethical watchfulness however, lies a respect for persons and an acknowledgement of the defining principles of autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice and fidelity.

Ethical principles

Ethical codes and guidelines are developed from a consensual view within a profession and function as a demonstration that the organisation and its services are accountable. It is also important to state that ethical codes set boundaries around practice. These boundaries aim to protect clients from malpractice, but can also serve the particular profession by determining its place within the helping professions. In other words such codes also enhance and protect the boundaries around a particular

area of expertise (McLeod, 1998). Working to support young people within a multi-professional context does not mean that the range of interventions can be ‘boundary-less’; as professional youth workers will know, practitioners must be aware of the limits of their own expertise and know when to make a referral.

When existing codes of practice compete, or professional common sense and intuition do not provide a solution, reference can be made to more general ethical principles. The principles mentioned above are well known, but are now summarised briefly. Autonomy refers to the right to freedom of choice and freedom of action, provided that these freedoms do not harm others. In many countries such rights are upheld by legislation. Non-maleficence translates as ‘above all do no harm’. Even where a young person has sought help and given informed consent, the practitioner cannot assume that the responsibility for the consequences of any interaction is the young person’s alone. Beneficence refers to the principle of ‘doing good’ and promoting human well-being. To meet this, practitioners ensure they are working within their competence and maintaining and updating their knowledge and skills. Justice focuses on the equitable distribution of and access to goods (ie. resources) and services. Access to those services is constrained by funding and by policy controls. Finally, fidelity relates to the qualities of loyalty, reliability and acting in good faith. Codes relating to confidentiality are informed by the moral and ethical principle of fidelity (even where there are limits to confidentiality, these limits need to be explicit and explained).

Whilst all of these principles are relevant to the helping professions, and in particular when working with people who may be vulnerable, it is possible that they may conflict with each other in some circumstances. Within an increasingly litigious society, adherence to such principles can be difficult. To a practitioner working within a multi-professional and multicultural context, such principles can appear somewhat abstract as they are based upon rational decision making (Banks, 2009). Further, ethical issues cannot be separated from their social and historical context: learning and practice is always situated in a social context (MacIntyre, 1981; Wenger, 2000). McLeod (1998) gives the example of the debate over abortion to illustrate the point: whose rights predominate, the rights of the woman to choose or the rights of the unborn child? McLeod (1998: 274) continues, ‘Moral concepts such as “rights” or “autonomy” only have meaning in relation to the cultural tradition in which they operate.’ Such debates are included in the training of youth support workers on the Foundation degree: our concern is that they may cease to be given the same critical attention where training moves exclusively to ‘in house delivery’ in the current climate of financial cutbacks. It is likely that the focus will shift to a mechanistic approach based on ‘what to do’ (as enshrined in organisational policies), without an exploration (ie. understanding the why) of the wider social, cultural and moral issues that underpin an ethical code of practice. Banks (2009) makes the point that models for ethical decision making are useful at the trainee stage, as tools for ‘students to reason and reflect systemically on ethical issues in practice’ (2009:4). Banks promotes a concept of ‘ethics in professional life’ (2009:5), which acknowledges and synergises personal and professional considerations within professional ethical decision making.

To move beyond an abstract discussion, the next section offers a practical approach for managing ethical problems and ethical dilemmas, in order to ‘open up’ such discussions further.

Managing ethical problems and ethical dilemmas

It was a really difficult situation and I worried about making the right decision. In many ways I wish she hadn't told me, but then again I suppose she needed to tell someone, and that someone was me. That's what comes of building trust and rapport! I had done the confidentiality bit at the start of the interview and I did tell her when it came out that I would have to report what she'd told me – she asked me not to and I explained again that I had to, but then she clammed up after that. Anyway, I knew that I had to do something, but my main worry was that taking action could mean separating her from a parent that she clearly loved. I didn't think she would see being taken into care as in her best interests! In the end I decided to talk to my line manager – well I did this the same day, which was the right decision it seems. It was made clear to me that within the terms of our professional code it had to be reported. It's out of my hands now, but I'm still uncomfortable about all of this.

The ‘story’ above (a case study, not a research transcript) is used to illustrate the concerns that many practitioners have when faced with an ethical problem. In this case seeking advice from someone with more experience and greater authority, and doing this without delay, is a safe and ‘correct’ action to take. However, how does it fit with the moral and ethical principles outlined previously? We might ask if it is always the case that removing a child or vulnerable young person from their home is the right decision and question on whose behalf the practitioner is acting; for instance, who is being protected here – the young person, the practitioner, the service – all three? In this case, agreeing with the young person’s request would conflict with the organisation’s policy on safeguarding young people and, indeed, the law. When working in state funded agencies reporting is usually mandatory and in the story above, the practitioner had informed the young person in advance of the circumstances within which they would breach confidentiality. But that does not make it easy. That said the instinctive justification that ‘she needed to tell someone’ is reasonable – the young person perhaps wanted someone to take action, even though she did not ask for this explicitly.

It is important for youth support workers to have, and be aware of, their own sense of right and wrong, and to acknowledge that this may vary across different cultures. What the practitioner is facing above is an ethical problem, rather than an ethical dilemma, that is resolved by adherence to the organisation’s ethical code; albeit they are left with residual concerns. Codes should make explicit behaviours that are considered safe and appropriate – for example, on aspects such as where to meet with a client within the bounds of a professional relationship. However, there are other situations that arise which are not encompassed by codes and guidelines or where such codes are ambiguous. When the issue cannot be solved by ‘ethical watchfulness’ or by strict adherence

to a code, the practitioner is then faced with an ethical dilemma. Birdsall and Hubert (2000:30) state that ethical dilemmas usually display four characteristics. First, the dilemma ‘offers a reasonable choice between two alternative courses of action’. Second, ‘each of these carries its own consequences’. Third, ‘either course of action can be defended in terms of ethical codes of practice’ and, fourth, ‘each course of action will compromise one of the ethical principles’.

What follows is a case study of an ethical dilemma where a trainee practitioner is working with a young person in a community based provision, with a high proportion of Muslim families:

I didn't know what to say or do next – she said: ‘I need sexual health advice but have nowhere and no one to go to for it. I am too frightened to go to a clinic or something by myself – please come with me. I am frightened of what is going to happen next and am even frightened that I am talking with you about it.’ I was torn between my duties as a youth support worker and in preserving the trusting relationship I was developing with the young person and my duties as a Muslim woman, wife and mother. How would I feel if this were my own daughter? Am I being dishonourable by helping this young woman? Which of my duties and obligations prevail? I had more questions than answers and this was compounded by my awareness of my own fear. I do not have the expert knowledge to advise her and I knew of a clinic that would be able to do so, but what would happen if a member of my community saw me going into the building?

First person narratives from practitioners or ‘clients’ (like these two case studies) can help trainees gain a different perspective on an ethical issue. A third person case study often suggests there is a preconceived ‘correct’ response, whereas a first person story can be more engaging and can generate a deeper discussion and analysis of the issue. An ethical dilemma, like the one above, will be less easy to resolve than an ethical problem. Corey et al (1993) suggest a reflective process that can be followed when such ethical dilemmas occur. The steps are:

- Identify the problem or dilemma in clear terms.
- Identify the potential issues involved.
- Review relevant ethical guidelines, codes and legal requirements.
- Discuss and consult with colleagues.
- Consider possible and probable courses of action.
- Enumerate the possible consequences of various decisions.
- Decide what appears to be the best course of action.
- Document each step so that the decision-making process can be shown to be sound.

In deciding on what is the best course of action, Stadler (1986) advises that any action taken to resolve an ethical dilemma should be measured against the criteria of ‘universality’, ‘publicity’ and ‘justice’. When working with young people in a multi-professional context, the practitioner

(and their line manager) could ask themselves the following questions (adapted from McLeod, 1998:274): ‘Would I recommend this course of action to anyone else working in similar circumstances? Would I condone my behaviour if I observed it in someone else?’ (Universality). ‘Would I tell other practitioners what I intend to do? Would I be willing to have the actions and the rationale for them published on the front page of the local newspaper or reported on the evening news?’ (Publicity). ‘Would I treat another young person in the same situation differently? If this person were the son or daughter of someone well known, would I take the same action?’ (Justice).

Whilst useful, it is important to acknowledge that the opportunity to take a step-by-step approach is unlikely to be available in the moment of practice; as described in the second story above. Learning ‘what to do next’ develops in the experience of practice, in what Schön (1991:42) referred to ‘as the swampy lowland’ rather than the ‘high hard ground’ of research-based theory. It is, usually, after encountering a new or untested experience that the youth support worker will need to find time and a ‘space’ for such reflective processes. And it should not be assumed that spaces for formal reflection are available in ‘busy’ practice, where access to supervision for youth support workers and personal advisers can be limited, if not entirely absent (Reid, 2010; Lewin and Colley, 2011).

When highlighting the difficulties of ethical decision making, it is possible that what gets lost in the complexity is the belief and trust in the practitioner’s ability to act intuitively – with good faith. Practitioner autonomy is important, but the level of this can vary across the helping services. For example, ‘traditionally’, youth workers have had considerably more autonomy in terms of their working practices, than have colleagues working within the social services (McCulloch, 2007). Within contemporary youth support services, this autonomy requires some examination to ensure standards of ethical working are understood and shared; particularly when what is perceived as ‘good practice’ may vary between different groups of practitioners (McCulloch, 2007).

Banks (2009) also uses case studies to explore ethical ‘good practice’, to help trainees to contextualise the situations they face. Often, the ‘cases’ used within the Foundation degree are either direct narratives from trainee practice, or are case studies derived from such narratives. In this way, trainees are afforded the space that Kubiak (2010) deems necessary in paraprofessional learning and development. Banks (2009) states that ‘from a virtue ethics point of view’, via an exploration of their own narrative accounts, trainees can reflect upon ‘their feelings, imaginings, hopes and fears’ (2009: 7). Banks also opposes separating ethics work from other aspects of practice, which is the approach taken on the Foundation degree.

The personal/professional interplay

Working with young people in a multi-professional context can sometimes be a challenge to one’s personhood. What a group of practitioners think, or are directed to think, of as ‘good’ may be adverse to, and can challenge, an individual practitioner’s sense of what is ‘right’. An awareness of

the role of ‘personhood’ within professional practice can help to exercise the most effective tool of all – ‘self’. Professional ethics and values are often internal (silent) influences in work with young people but, when made visible through reflective practice, can help practitioners to manoeuvre through the complexities of the work, in relation to a range of sometimes conflicting professional guidelines. At the crux of ‘being professional’ for the youth support worker is the ability to be autonomous, yet compliant, which is a delicate balancing act between acting on one’s own initiative and abiding by the ‘rules’ presented in legislation, policy and codes of practice. Singer (1979: 185) asserts that ‘The “internal voice” is more likely to be a product of one’s upbringing and education than a source of genuine ethical insight’. In the multi-professional arena this is further complicated by the range of professional policies and codes, as well as the influence of organisational cultures and inter/intra personal dynamics.

In a wide ranging article derived from a sociological analysis of professional work, Evetts (2011) considers, amongst other issues, professionalism as an occupational value. Aware of the disciplining aspects of professional codes and standards, where ‘professionalism is being constructed and imposed “from above”’ (2011:11), Evetts goes on to discuss the benefits that standardization and formal processes create. For example such processes involve Human Resource Management practices that protect all employees and increase ‘the transparency of what were often hidden, even “mysterious” arrangements’: for instance the way career development has moved away from ‘the sponsorship of the privileged few’ (p13). Thus there are constraints and opportunities in professional (and multi-professional) contexts that are considerations when attempting to balance the personal / professional interplay. In relation to evaluating the degree of individual professional autonomy, a critical question posed by the trainee would be, ‘Am I able to say “No – this is not in the best interest of my client”?’

Developing the capacity in youth support workers for doing ‘ethics work’

Youth support workers swing between wanting to be told what to do and how, and desiring autonomy: it is only through honest and systemic reflection that they are able to acknowledge which aspects of their work are challenging to them personally. In considering the personal/professional interplay, some key questions that practitioners can ask themselves from the outset of their training, and then as an ongoing reflexive dialogue throughout their careers, are:

- How, when and why do my personal value systems influence my professional practice?
- Upon what do I base judgements and professional decisions?
- Have I developed the resilience to make professional decisions that may conflict with my personhood and manage the consequences of doing so?

Fundamentally, decision making is a matter of prioritising in a proactive, reflexive and thoughtful

way, balancing a range of considerations. Arguments as to whether the ‘ends’ justify the ‘means’ may be regarded as an infinite dialogue that will, ultimately, be subjective. Haynes (1998) discusses such instances, which initially present as straightforward professional situations, but become much more complex: as upon reflection they amount to little more than personal, value based judgement. Haynes (1998) goes on to present a model for considering three such priorities, termed the ‘Triadic Taxonomy of Ethics’, as mentioned earlier, which acknowledges the interrelationship of care, consistency and consequence and how discounting any one of these aspects is a challenge to the required equilibrium.

Reflection and self analysis are essential for an understanding of professional ethics and values, so as to acknowledge one’s ‘self’ in order to place the young person at the centre of the work. In ‘people based’ services, a relationship between the professional self and the personal self is inevitable, which is contrary to the view that ‘there is inevitably a difference between private and public morality’ (Robinson and Garratt, 2004:53). The conflict between personal and professional values is often referred to as a way of ‘highlighting the difference between how they would have acted in a situation if it had arisen in their private lives and how they felt they should act in the role of a professional worker’ (Banks, 2001a:69). It has been implied that there is a need for congruence between private and professional values, that ‘how’ we are, correlates with ‘who’ we are; what Banks (2001b) determines to be a core quality and what Parsons (2002) claims to be the ‘personal touch’ that bureaucracy can destroy.

Self efficacy is a critical aspect of professionalism; requiring the practitioner to have developed qualities of autonomy and self sufficiency. This reflects the current expectation for young people to be able to navigate the challenges of ‘being young’ in contemporary society. There is a parallel process between the resilience of the practitioner in their ability to be flexible and autonomous and the necessity for young people to develop these skills also.

Moving on, the next section outlines how youth support workers can develop the capacity to manage, reflexively, the conflicts and challenges to professional ethics and values. The suggestions are based on collaborative discussions with students exploring professional ethics and values on the Foundation degree and were found to be effective ways of developing ethical practice.

Ethical decision making in professional practice – building on discussions with students

Earlier, we referred to ‘autonomy’, in relation to the person accessing the service and also in relation to the practitioner’s professional freedom. At the core of this is developing professional wisdom and maturity, what was referred to previously as ‘ethical watchfulness’ (Reid, 2004). It could be argued that ‘autonomy’ and ‘professional freedom’ are welcome attributes when the practitioner has reached a level of confidence and comfort within their role, where they are able to

make use of such attributes to exercise considered responses, as opposed to reactive ones. Within this, there is the aspect of the practitioner agreeing to ‘uphold the integrity of a profession’ (a typical inclusion in ethical codes) and, consequently, ‘autonomy’ and ‘professional freedom’ are developed intrinsically, rather than being ‘awarded’ extrinsically. It is this intrinsic professional development that is outlined in this section, via some activities that students find useful in developing skills for ethical decision making.

1. Opportunities for honest reflection upon a broad range of ethical dilemmas

In determining a child or young person in need, the practitioner makes a judgement as to what constitutes ‘need’ and in relation to this, what is meant by being at risk of ‘significant harm’ (Brayne and Carr, 2008). This amounts to a subjective estimation of what is ‘significant’. On what basis is significance measured and what determines what is significant enough to warrant a particular intervention or response? Such questions need to be engaged with in a ‘safe’ space, to enable the many facets of a given situation to be explored, within contemporary policy and legislative contexts. The learning environment of tertiary/university study can provide one such safe space, complementing work-based forums, such as supervision (where it exists) and case discussions. Many of the methods and priorities for target driven work, are in conflict with the person-centred approach (Rogers, 1967) and do not attend to the dynamic intricacies that person-centred work requires and generates; hence the attempt to synergise virtuous, deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics work (Cribb and Ball, 2005). The demands of contemporary society, especially when resources are restricted or cut, can mean that the focus moves away from the young person and, as Russell et al conclude, ‘it is the young people themselves who are most likely to suffer from the ‘numbers game’ that PAs [personal advisers] are forced to play’ (2010:11).

2. Opportunities for developing professional empathy, within the bounds of professional codes and also policy changes

Information sharing is based upon two things: ‘need to know’ and ‘consent’ – which will often differ across professional contexts. Multi-professional learning forums, perhaps via shared training events that also comply with the promotion of pooled resources, can be useful in this instance. Additionally, critical examination of a range of professional and ethical codes enables a deeper and broader awareness of other professionals working with young people. However, a further complication is presented by changing roles and remits; for example, the youth support worker increasingly in the role of record keeper, the social worker as co-ordinator (rather than as face-to-face practitioner). These may also present a dilemma for the practitioner – ‘Is this what I believe I should be doing with young people?’ Constant changes can lead to misunderstanding and confusion and for those whose job role has changed beyond recognition, this may also breed resentment – ‘Is this what I want to do?’ For some trainees, this occurs during their course of study, as shifting policy and funding regimes can result in frequent alterations to practice. Practitioners are part of a wider professional context that is inherently transient and inevitably fractious, as expressed by Smith (2002, 2007). In their research with Personal Advisors engaging young people

through Education to Employment (E2E) programmes, Russell et al quote a PA who states that ‘... one of the biggest frustrations and it always seems to come back to this is the fact that not everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet’ (PA1 in Russell et al, 2010:9).

3. Acknowledgement that ‘being professional’ is about being aware, mindful and observant of one’s own morality and its influence upon professional practice

Trainee youth support workers will often talk about ‘being professional’ and not ‘allowing’ their own values into their professional practice. Reference is made to professional ‘hats’ and that although they hold a particular view in their personal life, it does not, they feel, cross over into their professional world. This suggests a belief that ‘being professional’ involves a denial of personal values. To question this simplistic view, students are encouraged to consider the meaning of professional ethics and values – as it relates to core concepts within the Foundation degree. In this way, the programme is a developmental learning experience for many youth support workers, who, although governed by legislation and professional codes for practice (eg. where and when to meet a client) may not have a specific ethical code, or developed practice shape, as explored earlier. On the programme they explore the relationships between their personal values, their own career trajectory and the purpose of professional ethics and values in their current professional role. This need to define and acknowledge the relationship between personal and professional values in the development of a professional identity resonates with the work of Cooper (2008). Kemmis (2011) encapsulates this in his claim that the practice of a professional practitioner ‘draws on a particular history of personal experience; it involves a particular view of what an appropriate professional identity is, and a particular way of being a “subject” (a knowing and knowledgeable person)’ (Kemmis, 2011:151).

Cooper also champions ‘a “safe” space where “mistakes” are allowed and are seen as part of an open learning culture’ (Cooper, 2008: 70). This concurs with Oliver (2006) who endorses an approach that is ‘dialogical, reflective and collective’ (Oliver, 2006 cited in Cooper, 2008:68). This echoes Winnicott’s (1971) concept of a safe transitional space for learning. The importance of critical, reflective and collective discussion, contained within a safe space, that embraces the presence and the significance of personal values and their relationship to professional practice, cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion

Understanding and applying professional and personal ethics and values when working with young people in any helping service is complex and, additionally, problematic when working in a multi-professional context. It has been argued that degrees of professional status and ethical watchfulness are interwoven with self-awareness and the acknowledgement of the interlocking and disconnection of the personal and the professional. When this is introduced in training and achieved in practice, the practitioner can then exercise and perhaps even enjoy what Mahoney

(2001) refers to as 'free wheeling time'. Arriving at this point in a professional identity, where a practitioner can be both ethically watchful and ethically confident, is not a static state: it takes on-going reflexive practice. Our concern is that the demands of youth support work have increased alongside a decrease in resources: this may result in practitioners becoming undereducated or underprepared for the complexities of the work if the quality of professional training is diminished. The learning space that higher education provides moves beyond the potentially mechanistic nature of in-house training, which can be viewed as a pragmatic alternative in times of austerity. A safe, reflexive space for initial and ongoing professional development within busy practice is vital if ethical principles are to be understood and embodied – beyond the often shallow rhetoric of ethical codes and standards. Young people, at the core of the work, deserve no less.

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Note

* Cooper is incorrectly attributed to Cooper Bradford in the original article in *Youth & Policy*.

