Meaningful Youth Work Careers: Assumptions, Misconceptions, and Realities

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Abstract

The existing literature pertaining to youth work as a career is sparse, limited, and outdated, with the literature that does exist representing a largely negative image of youth work as a career. What then of those who have had a long-term career in youth work? The authors use a recent phenomenological research study to question assumptions and identify misconceptions about youth work as a career, and to discuss the findings from this research to provide a more realistic and contemporary understanding of long-term youth work careers. The phenomenological study discussed in this paper interviewed ten degree-qualified youth workers in Western Australia who had experienced careers in youth work spanning over twenty years. The authors will discuss the disparity between the findings from this research with existing literature, including characteristics of continuous employment; sustainability through supportive connections; longevity through leadership opportunities; and a diverse fusion of opportunities, variety, and flexibility in roles undertaken. These characteristics were found to support career longevity in youth work, culminating in a provisional model of the youth work career. This article provides insight into youth work career longevity and invites further conversation and research to further explore if the research conducted is transferable to different contexts both nationally and internationally.

Keywords Youth work · Youth worker · Career · Profession

Introduction

A limited number of studies on youth work careers have been conducted, either in Australia, for example, Maunders and Broadbent (1995), Taylor et al. (1991), and White et al. (1991), or internationally, for example, Barford and Whelton (2010),

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Harland et al. (2005), Huebner et al. (2003), Keller (2007), Savicki (2002), and Thompson and Shockley (2013). This has resulted in a common discourse of youth work as an illegitimate career option, a discourse that the authors argue is outdated and inaccurate.

The key deficits presented throughout existing literature from the 1990s included how youth work lacked its own professional identity, was characterised by burnout, and was a temporary employment prospect often used as a segue into related professions (Bessant and Webber 1999; Maunders and Broadbent 1995; Taylor et al 1991; White et al 1991). This poses the question, 'with such an apparent negative basis, how have youth workers carried out long-term careers in youth work, and what has led to their longevity?' Further adding to this problem is the fact that of the little literature available, most was written over twenty years ago. This presents interpretational issues because of the significant developments in the field of youth work and beyond such as professionalisation, new public management, and more broadly the rise of neo-liberalism (Connell et al. 2009; Cooper 2013; de St Croix 2018; Taylor et al. 2018). This article discusses findings from recent research into the long-term careers of youth workers, offering new perspectives on this phenomenon through the experiences of those who have been in the youth work field for over twenty years in both pre-professionalised and professionalised youth work contexts. Further details of this study can be found in Sutcliffe (2021).

Research Design

The research study that informs this discussion examined the long-term careers of ten graduate youth workers in Western Australia through the qualitative methodology of phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of a phenomenon through the shared experiences of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon, in this case a long-term career in youth work (Creswell and Poth 2018; van Manen 1990). This research used purposive sampling to select participants who had engaged in long-term youth work in Western Australia, spanning pre-professionalisation and post-professionalisation stages, and held a higher education qualification in youth work. The sample was drawn from Edith Cowan University's youth work programme who graduated between 1990 and 2000, with a sample size of ten in accordance with phenomenological methodology (Morse 2000; Polkinghorne 1989). The participants were all women (not by design), with one participant identifying as Indigenous Australian. Capturing a twenty-plus year career in youth work, the interviews explored the participants' individual experiences of the youth work career using the timeline interview technique, whereby participants draw their life and career as a timeline with significant events throughout the interview. The timeline interview technique allows for relational discussions of participants between career and significant life events to capture a more holistic understanding of how and why their careers developed in the manner that they did (Adriansen 2012; Goodson and Sikes 2001).

The interviews were semi-structured, with the central research question being, 'what does it mean to have a long-term career in youth work?' The inquiry into

this central question was expanded throughout the interviews to explore three key elements. The first was to seek an understanding of changes in the field throughout the participant's careers. The second was to ascertain the key factors of longevity as experienced by participants. The third was to explore both the positive and negative aspects of long-term careers in youth work. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, with analysis of the data following an adaptation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Giorgi 1994). Through their reflections, research participants explained the key factors that had supported longevity in their careers as youth workers. Significant statements were identified throughout the data before clustering those statements into meaning units through the horizontalization coding process (Cloonan 1998). From the coding process, seven major themes emerged from the data, with sub-themes existing within each major theme. Four minor themes also emerged and were considered minor due to the lower amount of impact and frequency in which they appeared. From the data analysis and findings, an essence statement was synthesised to capture the shared experiences of the participants, with a provisional model of the long-term youth work career being developed. The research was approved by the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Assumptions and Misconceptions About Youth Work Careers

A commonly held belief is that youth work is perceived to be an entry-level role or a stepping-stone to supposedly higher-status professions. Australian literature pertaining to youth work as a career included Maunders and Broadbent's (1995) tracking of youth workers between 1979 and 1992 in Melbourne, Victoria. Participants in this study described youth work as a stepping-stone or temporary employment prospect, particularly for those without youth work qualifications. Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2006) echoed this point, 'many youth workers regard working in youth programs as a 'stepping-stone' or supplemental job opportunity' (p. 2). North American literature also aligns with this perspective, describing youth work as an interim means of employment (Hartje et al. 2008), and an entry-level employment prospect (Thomas 2002). It is worth noting that the North American literature does have considerable differences from the Australian context, with roles being most commonly youth development and after-school care programmes as opposed to youth work.

The concept of burnout is common within the discourse of youth work as a career (Barford and Whelton 2010; Savicki 2002). According to Barford and Whelton's (2010) Canadian study on burnout amongst child and youth care workers, a lack of professional identity was found to be a significant contributing factor, with experiences of low respect from other professionals being common. Savicki (2002) conducted a cross-cultural examination of burnout, also finding that lack of professional respect was a contributing factor to the retention of child and youth care workers. Whilst staff turnover due to burnout is commonly assumed as 'part of the nature' of youth work, Keller (2007) contested this assumption, 'no facts and figures are available to suggest the actual scope of the problem' (p. 7). Similarly, Barford and Whelton (2010) stated, 'little research has gone into better understanding the difficulties these workers face' (p. 272). Burnout has often been linked to the notion of youth

work as a vocation of calling as opposed to a legitimate profession, where goodwill and altruism are relied upon for longevity (Anderson-Nathe 2008; Bessant 2004; Bouffard and Little 2004), and a theme shared in human service work more broadly (Dik & Duffy 2009; Homan 1986; Treadgold 1999). Disagreement in the literature, albeit sparse, provided another important question, 'is burnout a common characteristic of the youth work profession, or simply a misplaced assumption?' Furthermore, is burnout a feature of certain youth work contexts or patterns of work, rather than an all-encompassing characteristic of youth work?

Finally, the view that youth work is a profession of low pay and funding instability constitutes another common pattern of discourse. Taylor et al. (1991) described an industry characterised by 'low salaries, adverse working conditions, lack of professional status, and uncertain funding arrangements' (p. 5). More specifically, Maunders and Broadbent (1995) found that, 'Respondents stressed that a career in working with young people imposed limitations on their options. Some raised the issue of short-term funding and its link to the length of stay' (p. 5). Short-term funding arrangements have often been cited as negatively impacting the viability of youth work as a long-term career option, resulting in low pay, poor employment stability, and casualisation of the youth work field (Bessant and Webber 1999; Borden et al. 2004; Maunders and Broadbent 1995; Quixley and Westhorp 1985; Taylor et al. 1991; White et al. 1991). It is therefore important to understand the experiences of youth workers who have forged long-term careers in this profession to investigate if these are outdated misconceptions within the field, or if they do exist, how have they been mitigated or even tolerated?

Youth Work Professionalisation in Western Australia

Significant structural and cultural changes have taken place in the youth work field in Western Australia from the beginning of the twenty-first century. Three changes are especially relevant to a study of youth work careers. These are the increase of degree-qualified youth workers in the field, the development and revision of ethical codes of practice, and the establishment of a professional association for youth work. Youth work in Western Australia operates within government and non-government organisations, has a public higher education degree programme through Edith Cowan University, a professional body (Youth Work WA), a peak body for youth affairs (YACWA), and a code of ethics for youth workers. A voluntary professional association for youth work was established in 2006 in Western Australia with the core purposes of developing and maintaining the youth work code of ethics, developing training, setting youth work standards for practice and training, and celebrating the impact of youth work (Youth Work WA 2020).

Australian literature regarding youth work professionalisation was mostly written before the introduction of professional youth work associations, with early discussions regarding youth work professionalisation dating back to the 1960s in Victoria (Goodwin 1991; Irving et al. 1995). During this time, many of the deficits and negatives of the youth work career led youth workers to drive professional standards from within to bring about improvement for the profession (Bessant 2004; Cooper

2013; Maunders and Broadbent 1995; Sercombe 1998). Professionalisation of youth work is mostly supported on the grounds of ethical practice, qualification standards, and pragmatic commitments to funding requirements and legislation (Beker 2001; Bessant 2004; Corney et al. 2009; Emslie 2012; Krauss et al. 2012; Sercombe 1997, 2004). Those who opposed professionalisation argued that it undermined autonomous practice, claiming risk aversion would take priority over youth work practice that was genuinely responsive to young people (Grogan 2004; Quixley and Doostkhah 2007). These perspectives reveal the dilemma of professionalisation in youth work, with new managerialism being cited as a means for enhanced professional training and practice standards, whilst also being associated with undermining professional autonomy and judgment (Bessant 1997; Ord 2013).

Research Findings and Discussion: Realities of the Youth Work Career

Seven major themes emerged from the research: Qualifications and Training, Supportive Connections, Values, Youth Work as a Distinct Profession, Leadership, Diversity, and Barriers. The findings of this research contested much of the existing literature pertaining to youth work as a career, and this article will discuss each of the seven themes in detail.

Qualifications and training were central to the shared experience of the youth work career, with participants discussing the benefits of work placement as part of their degree programme as well as the experiences of retrospective reflection upon how learning from their degree had been subsequently useful in their career. The foundational skills and knowledge developed within their degree provided the basis for skill acquisition in the form of lifelong learning, with participants explaining how socio-political frameworks underpinned ethical and reflective practice in the field regardless of practical context. When discussing the learning from their degree in youth work, participants often linked these elements, identifying work placements as central to their learning which fostered reflective practice. Reflective practice included experiences of retrospective learning, where participants explained how theory was constantly revisited throughout their careers.

> Research participant: When I look back on my youth work degree and when I look back on the variety of topics that we covered, you know, everything from philosophy to you know, understanding young people through to the political space they occupy in the world.

The research findings support the position that youth work is a knowledge-driven profession rather than an occupation reliant only on skill-based competencies. Understanding young people within socio-political context was central to effective youth work practice amongst the research practitioners, which reflected youth work literature supportive of professionalisation through degree-level education programmes (Bessant 2005, 2007; Bessant and Emslie 2014; Borden et al. 2004; Cooper et al. 2014; Emslie 2012). Engagement with the degree programme also provided valuable connections to industry practitioners, leading in part to the next major finding of supportive connections.

The major theme of supportive connections was commonly shared amongst participants in the study. This theme included meeting a professional mentor, teams, and organisations that prioritised support including professional supervision, and networks in the broader youth field. Many participants linked the experience of their professional placement during their degree with meeting their first professional mentor. The impact of the mentor was often profound, assisting participants to establish themselves in youth work and to achieve a sense of belonging within the profession. Some studies support a praxis approach to youth work education and training, with the preference of novice youth workers being to learn from those who had worked specifically in the youth work field as youth workers rather than related fields (Hartje et al. 2008; Walker 2003; Windon 2018). Furthermore, some participants explained how their mentor also supported both their professional and personal development.

> Research participant: He (my mentor) would lead the way but allow me the space to develop my views, and just to look outside a situation for what's going on around it ... I ended up getting my first job with him ... he was pivotal in my development in youth work for sure ... I'm still in close contact with him.

The sub-theme of supportive teams and organisations was an important element of the participants' shared experience. The key factors to supportive teams and organisations were transparent and trusting relationships with colleagues, and quality supervision. Professional supervision was described by participants as being integral to self-care as well as professional growth. An interesting finding within this theme was the link between personal responsibility and organisational responsibility concerning the self-care of participants. Organisations that offered internal supervision, external supervision where required, and external support such as counselling services were cited as being valued by participants in the study.

> Research participant: For me, the team is the most important asset to any organisation. If I didn't have good supports around me personally and professionally, I would never have survived. If you build a good workplace with a good healthy environment where you can be yourself, you can go through trauma struggles, happiness, sadness, whatever and still come back and be able to do your job with a little bit of flexibility. That's what keeps you in the job.

> Research participant: I'm a big believer in you can't, you know, fill anyone else's cup if yours is empty. I would be looking for that support to be internal as well as having that external support provided by the organisation.

Within the theme of supportive connections, the ability to build relationships and networks with the broader youth field community was experienced by participants. Formally arranged inter-agency networks and collaborations including peak bodies and associations were cited as examples by participants, explaining how this connected them to something greater than their own individual role or organisation.

Research participant: I think I've always had that connection to those people. Yeah, which continue to inspire me in that space and having that connection with Youth Work WA I think keeps you connected to why you're doing this. Research participant: People knowing each other is really helpful and I'm always using my connections, yes, it would be connections. I had always kept in contact with what was going on.

Values were found to be central to the discussion of youth work careers amongst the participants, with intrinsic motivation linking most commonly to the core value of social justice. Values such as fairness and equality were often discussed by participants as reasons for initially entering the profession of youth work.

Research participant: Why would you do youth work if you didn't have any desire to want to make the world into a better place? That's what you've got to want to do in youth work.

Youth work has historical roots in being a vocation of calling reliant on individual goodwill. However, Savicki (1993) contended that such reliance leads to conditions where individuals can lead to attrition due to exploitation, stress, and staff turnover. Participants in this study stated how their individual values required support from other areas such as supportive connections, leadership, and diversity in opportunities. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of direct contact with young people throughout their careers, particularly for those who undertook formal management roles.

Research participant: That's why you do what you do, you know, although I've learned as I've aged that, you know, your advocacy at a systems level can perhaps improve the lives of more young people than just that individual, but I think as youth workers you need to remain connected in some way to what's happening for young people.

Youth work as a distinct profession constituted a major theme in the findings, with sub-themes including enhanced standards and ethical practice, increased professional identity, and increased professional respect. Participants cited the youth work code of ethics along with enhanced occupational health and safety requirements as key factors in fostering a more professional identity for youth work.

Research participant: In terms of professionalism, youth work is so much higher standard now. Back then we really had no contingency plan, no risk management plan … most youth services are now well-structured and have clear policies and procedures in place to support people to ensure that they are getting the best service would be the biggest thing that's changed. We definitely have higher expectations and standards, you know, we expect youth workers to know the code of ethics and to work within the code of ethics, we expect them to have strong boundaries.

Reports of pride relating to identifying as a professional youth worker were evident in the findings, which contradicts earlier literature that found an historical reluctance to self-identify as a youth worker (Borden et al. 2004; Huebner

et al. 2003; Savicki 1993, 2002). Participants reported that self-identification and pride in being a youth worker were also related to youth work progressing into its own distinct area of academic knowledge and professional practice, particularly regarding concepts of informal education, considering the young person as the primary client, and the contextual understanding of young people in society. These findings are inconsistent with much of the earlier literature that characterised youth work as having a lack of identity from similar more established professions such as social work (Bessant and Webber 1999; Maunders and Broadbent 1995).

> Research participant: I've worked with a lot of social workers, and I've worked with psychologists and I think youth work does it very differently, it's almost more of a script to the way that they operate. With youth work it's about being in that moment with that young person and not going in with that hidden agenda that you think that you know what's best, because everything is centred around the young person. And that whole empowerment model, I don't actually see it in its true form as much as I do in youth work.

Professional respect was also reported by research participants who explained how their role as a youth worker had become more widely understood and acknowledged by other professionals and the community.

> Research participant: It's now come to real fruition, and it's recognised in society as important, and we are valued in what we do and what we have to say and what we offer. Youth work over the years has become much more respected, and people value, I think, youth work more today as it has become more professionalised.

Whilst external professional respect was evident in the findings, there were also mixed responses which will be further discussed in the major theme of barriers.

Leadership was commonly cited as a key factor for career longevity and came in various forms. The previously reported finding that career pathways and opportunities were lacking in youth work was not found in this study, with participants describing roles such as programme coordination, senior management, regional management, and state management. A commonly shared experience within leadership was that of strategic advocacy including policy review and reform, service design, and community strategic plans. Experiences of consultation, service design, and systematic change were key factors for many of the participants staying in youth work and experiencing satisfaction in their careers. The ability to have autonomy over decision-making and to impact the systems that often impact negatively on young people, such as child protection and housing systems, was important for many of the study participants.

> Research participant: What my role has emerged to is advocacy at a systems level not necessarily with the individual young people. And I've succeeded in that. I created a youth development framework … and really expanded the youth leadership programs ... it was a new strategy that needed to involve all

kinds of divisions around how they engage and incorporate young people into their planning and into their service design. So that was fantastic. It was the first time that young people were included.

Leadership was also experienced by some participants in terms of mentoring new youth workers including staff members and youth work students on their practicum placement. A strong sub-theme within leadership, 'becoming the mentor', enhanced a sense of purpose to the youth work career for the study participants. Participants described this element as challenging and enjoyable, and a point of development in their careers whether the mentoring was formal or informal in nature.

Research participant: Managing people is always one of the hardest jobs. I have direct supervision of six youth workers to support them into supporting young people, which is what I've always been passionate about … just being able to influence and mentor the young youth workers. I can see the direct impact of supervising youth workers when I see them out in the field, and to know that I was part of that is really important.

The findings about leadership differ from the assumptions and previous findings in the literature, particularly in terms of youth work being described as a temporary or stepping-stone occupation (Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew 2006; Hartje et al. 2008; Maunders and Broadbent 1995; Thomas 2002). Observations by participants, discussed under the theme of leadership, illustrated how youth work has become a viable long-term career, at least for those who had leadership opportunities. Leadership opportunities offered satisfaction and meaning, arising from opportunities to effect change through mentoring new youth workers and long-term strategic planning. These findings connected with the principle of advocacy that is central to youth work theory and practice (Cooper and White 1994). Examples of radical advocacy discussed by participants included innovative homelessness service models, youth leadership programmes, and alternative education services.

Research participant: I developed the (homelessness) program in response to that issue faced by a young person in our service and established the (homelessness) program, which was quite pivotal in progressing towards a very holistic organisation for young people.

The theme of diversity within the youth work career included variety in roles and flexible working arrangements. Participants described their youth work as having variety, both within existing roles and between roles and across organisations. The variety of roles and contexts was described by participants as being important for longevity as it maintained interest, mitigated stagnation, and presented new challenges and opportunities for growth.

Research participant: It's never the same job. It's never the same day. Yeah, always being able to do something different, and I think that is definitely something that, you know, I've enjoyed about working in youth work.

> Research participant: I couldn't stay in the industry for 40 years still doing the same sort of job. I've had so much variety where I've been able to grow and develop and build on my career.

Participants described youth work as being a flexible career, with various roles and work arrangements being supportive of an enjoyable and balanced lifestyle. When discussing career flexibility, participants highlighted the positive effects of balancing work commitments with other aspects of their lives such as family, which ultimately played a significant role in career longevity through effective self-care. The principle of self-care is integral to the Youth Work Code of Ethics in Western Australia (YACWA 2014), and is promoted as a mechanism for the prevention of burnout.

> Research participant: I guess you always think you want office hours, but I kind of thrived on the flexibility of shift work. I kind of really enjoy being able to go to the beach when I was there, or, you know, be in my garden during the day and work at night. I did find it interesting to adjust to office hours, but it wasn't for me, so then I did go back to shift work.

Within the theme of diversity was that of opportunity, with participants reflecting on how the profession of youth work has led to career prospects that were often unexpected and rewarding. An interesting element of this finding was that most participants were satisfied with the remuneration involved in their careers, with some commenting on how their salaries and benefits exceeded their expectations. Furthermore, every participant in the study experienced continuous employment, with no participants being involuntarily unemployed throughout their careers.

> Research participant: It's been almost like a bit of a charmed life, you know, like I never set out to achieve anything and yet that ended up in very substantial and very highly regarded roles.

> Research participant: I just loved doing the outreach work there. I loved the freedom. I loved going into people's home, really supporting young people. I loved the holiday programs. I just loved everything.

Youth work as a viable long-term career was supported by the elements of variety, flexibility, and opportunities, culminating in a diverse career path. The different contexts in which youth workers are employed are illustrated in these findings, most notably homelessness, local government, and education settings. This finding stands in contrast with the notion of youth work as an entry-level occupation rather than a viable long-term career option, with participants describing the variety of opportunities throughout their long careers as central to job satisfaction and a core element of longevity.

When asked about barriers to career longevity, participants identified sub-themes of bureaucracy, unsupportive organisations and teams, funding issues, and lack of professional respect. Participants characterised unsupportive organisations as being overly bureaucratic, particularly amongst those who had significant local government experience as opposed to those working for non-government organisations.

Local politics and risk aversion were cited as the most common causes underpinning these experiences. Participants most frequently nominated unsupportive organisations as a barrier to career longevity, describing experiences of dissatisfaction, exploitation, and feeling undervalued.

> Research participant: It is so tiring to try and get anything done. Bureaucracy, too many layers, just to get permission to do anything, the number of memos and reports and presentations. It's down to the politics and what agenda they are driving, all very risk averse.

> Research participant: The team is the most important asset to an organisation … I've worked in organisations where that's not been appreciated and it really is challenging, you know, and in a small organisation it's amazing what you can achieve but when you come into a bigger organisation it's a massive obstacle to overcome.

The theme of barriers presented some experiences that were reflective of the existing literature. These experiences were however most common amongst participants recounting events from the 1990s, particularly regarding funding issues and professional respect. Despite the discussion of barriers and the sub-themes within, none of the participants described these experiences as leading to burnout and seriously considering leaving the profession or field of youth work. These findings indicate that where barriers exist, they present as tensions where some individuals may experience them whilst others do not.

Conclusion

We conclude by exploring the potential explanations of the variance between the research findings and the earlier findings in the literature. The long-term youth work career was found to be a viable profession rather than an interim or temporary occupation, a career characterised by variety and flexibility rather than burnout, and a career supported by regular employment rather than one of poor pay and funding instability. Through speculative reflection, we will focus on the possible reasons for these differences in relation to the long-term career viability for youth work and implications for further research.

The findings from this study do not offer any definitive conclusions because of the small sample size and limited geographical location; however, there are explanations worthy of exploring. Firstly, the neo-liberal turn in youth work funding from inputs-based to outputs-based models during the 1990s (Cooper and Brooker 2020; de St Croix 2018; Taylor et al. 2018) may unexpectedly account for the increased viability of youth work career viability. At first glance, outcomes-based funding might be expected to make youth work careers more precarious as organisations competed with each other for contracts, with staff contracts being contingent on agencies retaining those contracts. However, outcomes-based funding may have unintentionally enhanced career viability for youth workers through this process

as organisations had more incentive to retain qualified and experienced staff with the ability to achieve the outcomes. As a structural explanation, if there is a link between changes to funding arrangements and career viability for youth work, it is likely to be complicated and this is worthy of further research. Secondly, it is plausible that youth work professionalisation has led to improved viability of the youth work career. It appears plausible that professionalisation has raised the status of youth work by promoting the importance of youth work qualifications, and by contributing positively to youth workers' self-concept as a profession with a distinct identity. The consistency amongst the participant's experiences of career longevity supports the interpretation that, 'youth workers do not burn out and move away from youth work, but rather enjoy meaningful careers in this profession' (Sutcliffe 2021, p. 111). Further studies would be useful to explore youth work careers in other policy contexts and for other samples, to see whether the findings of this study are replicated. It would be useful to explore whether youth work career patterns differ between graduates and non-graduates, and whether the career patterns differ in contexts where professionalisation has not occurred, or where the policy environment has not embraced neo-liberal funding models. Finally, it would be useful to study the career trajectories and decision-making of youth workers who leave youth work after less than ten years to pursue other careers.

Declarations

Ethical Statement The authors hereby acknowledge that the submission is the authors' own work, and this work has not been submitted elsewhere for publication.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals Not applicable.

Informed Consent Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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