Youth Work: The Possibilities for Critical Practice

This summary provides a concise overview of the article in nine sections:

1. Introduction
2. Optimism in Fractious Times
3. Youth Work as a Special Relationship
4. Power and The Power of Unthinking Consent
5. Purpose and Context in Youth Work Today
6. Developing Socially Useful Theory
7. Critical Youth Work: A Model for Practice
8. Critical Practice Stems from Critical Practitioners
9. Conclusion and Take-Away Points

1. Introduction

- Critical youth work practice provides an opportunity for youth workers to engage with old problems in new ways.

- Youth workers need to be more informed on concepts related to power, purpose, learning, and other forms of social connection that can better connect the personal to the political.

- The authors propose a theoretical framework for critical youth work that:
    - connects personal problems to social issues;
    - analyses individual and local situations within a wider socio-economic context;
    - develops theoretical understanding in the resolution of practice issues and problems;
    - draws from critical literature to inform the practice struggle;
    - seeks to redress the socially divisive imbalance of power in society; and
    - seeks to embody the fundamental values of democracy, justice, and equality in its methodology.

2. Optimism in Fractious Times

- The policy context within which youth workers work features:
    - increased managerialism
    - severe resource constraints
    - competition, marketization
    - restructuring of welfare
    - ideology of individualism
    - the reorganization of local government

- There is a need to increase citizen involvement in policy development and decision-making.

- Youth work should not just be seen as a means to deliver 'capable' young people into areas of employment and training, but should rather be pursued as a holistic approach that views youth workers as educators treating young people as whole persons who can significantly contribute to areas such as housing, drugs, or health education so they can become "fully human" (according to Friere, 1972).

3. Youth Work as a Special Relationship

- Critical practice can be found whenever there is an opportunity for youth workers to create a 'special relationship' with young people built on foundations of mutual trust, respect, sharing of power, and purposeful learning. Students sometimes express disappointment when they do not come across critical youth work practice in the field and when critical practice is dismissed as a 'theory'.

- Young people need to feel trusted and respected in order to meaningfully explore aspects of their personal and social lives with youth workers. It is problematic to see young people as only being deficient and in need of firm guidance from 'respectable authoritative adults'. Young people are able to make very valued contributions to society and need to be helped to use the power that they have to make significant decisions with social consequences.

- There remains an overwhelming emphasis on personal development, otherwise known as social education, rather than on social development through political education.

- Critical practice supports individuals to think through issues that connect the personal and political. It shifts the emphasis from personal to collective responsibility for addressing large-scale political issues, such as sexism and racism. "The methodology that we argue for takes as its starting point the interests and inclinations of groups of young people, in whatever situation they find themselves." This is critical pedagogy (Freire).

- If critical practice is to become part of everyday practice, there needs to be ongoing conversations on rethinking concepts of power, purpose, and learning in a way that links personal troubles to social issues.

4. Power and The Power of Unthinking Consent

- Participation and empowerment needs to move away from being person-centred to a process that more readily analyses structures of power in society.

- The greatest form of power is not forcing someone to do something that they would choose not to do, but, rather, influencing or helping others to make sense of their world.

- Basic assumptions sometimes cause people to think that it is impossible to evoke change or to influence any wider forces, but people who want to maintain the status quo usually embrace this perspective.

- If youth workers believe that they cannot challenge restrictive processes in their own organization, it will be challenging to develop critical forms of practice with the young people they work with.

5. Purpose and Context in Youth Work Today

- According to Friere (1972), we should encourage people to be critical in such a way so that they can see possibilities for change. He believes two things go in hand: action and reflection. He also believes in the need to hold theory and practice together.

- Critical practice seeks not only to explain oppression, but to challenge it. The authors see youth workers as informal educators and argue for practitioner-led action research.

6. Developing Socially Useful Theory

- According to Anyon (1994), 'socially useful theory':
    o responds to the local and broader social context;
    o includes feasible actions that address the problem identified;
    o embodies values for how things are done (walk the talk, live the change you want to see); and
    o reviews, refines, and reengages the change process.

7. Critical Youth Work: A Model for Practice

The authors propose a three-stage model of critical youth work:

1. Young people are supported to identify a problem to address (name it).

2. Young people examine the social issue identified from multiple perspectives (critically examine it).

3. Young people are supported to design an intervention to address the issue (act on it).

Importantly, every stage requires substantial group discussion, critical examination of issues, and "deep" connected and meaningful learning.

Stage One: Developing Critical Theorems

- Identify a theme that is important for participants and discuss how power constructs/intersects with the issue.

Stage Two: The Organization of Enlightenment

- Offer new insights and knowledge about situations and provide the wider organizational, social, and political context.
- Encourage people to learn with and from each other.
- Embrace experiential, didactic, and reflective moments.
- Articulate and realize the significance of your position in an issue.
- Acknowledge difference within the group (sex, gender, race, etc.).
- Use conflict and disagreement as a means to move discussion forward, as opposed to seeking forced resolutions and phoney consensus.
- Be aware of group dynamics (forming, storming, norming, and performing).
- Identify the varying personal positions with the issue and connect the personal to the political.

Stage Three: The Organization of Action

- Plan and take realistic action.
- Clarify aim, set objectives, identify responsibilities, allocate resources, and monitor and evaluate systems.
- Involve all participants in the conversation on action.
- Clarify what can be done and determine what can actually be done.

8. Critical Practice Stems from Critical Practitioners

- Mathiesen (1980) believes that people must start the work from where they are by making small changes and gains in their local situations in order to work towards eliminating oppressive circumstances.
- Youth workers have to be realistic and prudent about their decisions to avoid calling forth forces of reaction that can stop their efforts. The focus should always be on what can be achieved, in however small and purposeful ways.
- Youth workers should work with like-minded colleagues in their own settings in order to engage with young people in a critical way.

9. Conclusion and Take-Away Points

- Mutual trust, respect, power, and purposeful learning are important elements of social education that should be connected to social action.
- In order to engage in meaningful critical practice, we have to connect the personal to the political (micro and macro).
- Youth workers need to become researchers of their own practice, with a focus on changing the social conditions that limit possibilities for equity.
- Professional youth workers should return to their fundamental educational role and be less used for quasi-managerial and administrative functions.
- Youth workers should look to address issues not only at the micro level, but to make social changes at the macro level.
- The authors argue for a model of youth work that views young people not as simply in need of instruction, but, rather, as agents of social change.

Download the article to access the complete bibliography, including the articles cited by Friere, Anyon, and Mathiesen in this summary.

Bamber, J., & Murphy, H. (1999). Youth work: the possibilities for critical practice. Journal of Youth Studies, 2(2), 227-242.

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