Are You For Real? Investigating Authenticity in Community-Based Youth Work Practice

"The interaction between youth workers and young people is characterised by levels of trust, respect, sincerity and above all authenticity" (p. 1).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Youth workers support young people in their personal, social, and emotional development. They help youth overcome challenges, build life skills, and engage in activities that promote positive growth. Their role is to empower youth, support them to develop a sense of identity, and guide them through their transition into adulthood. To do this effectively, youth workers need to build meaningful relationships with young people based on trust, respect, sincerity, and **authenticity**, or being 'real'.

This research highlights the tensions between maintaining authentic relationships with young people and meeting imposed and predetermined targets. Funders and policy-makers often impose expectations and performance measures that limit a youth worker's ability to address young people's immediate needs, making it harder to build trust and provide meaningful support.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in an inner-city neighbourhood within a major city in Scotland.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research about the experiences of seven youth workers.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The researchers first synthesized a review of literature related to authenticity and youth work practice, resulting in four key themes: relationships, awareness of current youth issues, context, and critical reflection.

They then collected *qualitative data* (describing qualities, characteristics, processes, or experiences) by conducting one-on-one interviews with seven community-based youth workers who met specific professional criteria. These participants were required to hold a professional qualification

from a training program approved by the Community Learning and Development (CLD) Standards Council of Scotland (the professional body for people who work or volunteer in CLD contexts). The interview questions explored their experiences and perspectives regarding the themes identified in the literature review to understand how authenticity is supported and/or compromised.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The key findings describe the importance of authenticity and the ways in which authenticity can be compromised across the four themes identified:

i) Relationships

Relationships between adult practitioners and young people are central to youth work practice; developing authentic and meaningful relationships is essential for building trust and rapport and supporting young people in navigating difficulties. Youth workers' authenticity is often deeply rooted in their own personal experiences.

However, relationships can be compromised by policy shifts that limit youth worker autonomy (i.e. through a focus on predetermined employability outcomes). Instead of fostering voluntary engagement, youth workers are increasingly required to monitor attendance and compliance, which undermines mutual trust and shifts their role from mentor to enforcer and the relationship to one resembling more of a child/parent dynamic than a partnership.

ii) Awareness of Current Youth Issues

Youth work is unique in its commitment to starting where young people are at, rather than following predetermined outcomes, which requires practitioners to be well-versed in current youth issues. However, the shift toward structured programs with predetermined outcomes limits the flexibility of informal, responsive, and youth-led learning. One participant shared that young people – rather than receiving support tailored to their specific circumstances – are often pushed into programs that don't align with their needs or interests.

While practitioners are aware of these needs and remain engaged in the broader aspects of young people's lives, their ability to adapt their practice is increasingly restricted by the necessity to comply with broader accreditation requirements.

iii) Context

Youth workers face significant challenges due to time constraints, limited resources, and pressures to meet specific funding targets, all of which can prevent them from engaging in meaningful social justice work with young people. Many practitioners expressed that the constant need to secure finances for their work is so time-consuming that it shifts their focus away from engaging with the young people they're meant to support.

As funding has become more fragmented and tied to rigid outcome measures, youth workers face pressure to provide evidence of the work they do with young people. Many participants expressed frustration with this shift, as they're forced to focus on meeting targets and funders' expectations rather than responding authentically to young people's needs.

Youth work in Scotland (and elsewhere) is increasingly shaped by policy expectations around "positive destinations" (p. 11), emphasizing outcomes over meaningful support. The pressure to demonstrate immediate results overlooks deeper challenges, such as mental health struggles and social barriers, which must be addressed first. As a result, practitioners may unintentionally push young people into difficult situations rather than focusing on their individual interests and developmental needs. For example, instead of genuinely helping youth to build long-term stability in the labour market, youth workers feel complicit in a cycle of instability – pressuring young people into jobs with limited opportunities for growth.

iv) Critical Reflection

Policy and funding pressures often clash with youth workers' core values and preferred approaches. Despite these constraints, however, they emphasize critical reflection to maintain authenticity, ensure their work remains responsive to young people's needs, reaffirm their purpose, and adapt their practice to uphold principles while still meeting external expectations.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Authenticity is fundamental to youth work, as it builds trust, fosters meaningful relationships, and ensures that support is truly responsive to young people's needs. When youth workers are **genuine**, **open**, and **honest**, young people feel heard, valued, and are more likely to engage in positive development.

This research emphasizes the importance of **critical reflection**, **professional integrity**, and r**emaining firm in core youth work values**. By doing so, youth workers can remain aware of how policies shape their practice and **actively challenge** those that fail to truly benefit young people.

Ultimately, authenticity strengthens the impact of youth work. This research calls on youth workers, training programs, and professional organizations to prioritize young people's needs over bureaucratic demands, **ensuring that support remains youth-centered, flexible, and meaningful.**

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