Ideology and Competencies.

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Introduction to the research project.

This research project has been concerned with exploring whether competency based training for the youth work "industry" would be practically possible even if it were desirable. For the purposes of this research, questions of the desirable of competency based training are set aside. (The philosophical issues are argued elsewhere.) This paper refers to youth work as a profession, without intending to debate the issues around professionalism. If the word "industry" as use by the ITABs is a preferable term, considered these to be synonymous.

Context

The initial discussions of competency based training for the youth sector were concerned with finding a basis from which to identify a cohort of objectively measurable skills which, taken together, would be considered as the basic skills of a competent youth worker. (Field consultation YACWA & WACYWT, 1991). The potential falaciousness of this argument is discussed elsewhere, Davies & Durkin, (1991), Cooper (1992). By 1992, the Community Services Industry consultation in Perth had broadened the remit on agreement of "industry wide" skills, to include "Higher Professional Competencies".

Higher professional competencies are skills which are involved in making complex professional judgements. The NOOSR research paper on establishing competency-based standards in the professions states

> "It seems to be very reasonable to hold that professional work involves more than a set of specific competencies. It is not just a set of observable units of behaviour that can be ticked off on a list."

(NOOSR, 1990:15)

The consultative meeting in Perth discussed "higher professional competencies" and was, I believe, correct in connecting these to values, and in stressing the importance of viewing competency as transcending the earlier formulation of a collection of "objectively" measurable skills.

Relating the debate on higher professional competencies to youth work, two important points emerge. Firstly, the skills involved in assessing "Higher Professional Skills" rest on the judgements of the assessor concerning whether decisions made by youth workers are justifiable in terms of the broad goals of the profession (or industry). This assumes that within the profession (industry) there is agreement on the overall goals of youth work. It is not clear that such a consensus exists. Secondly, before competencies can be established in youth work, agreement has to be achieved not just on goals, but also on the permissible range of methods within the profession (industry). Both goals and methods hinge on the values, both at the macro level of "world view" and at the micro level of the linkage between ends and means. It is not clear that agreement exists in these areas either.

The Research Project

The first aim of the research was to find out the degree of diversity in values which existed within West Australian youth work agencies. Since the value differences were being considered in relation to the skills required by youth workers in their initial training, the research set out to find out how this divergence was reflected in skills expectations, for newly trained workers, of a range of agencies across the State.

This research had auxiliary purposes in that it was intended to provide feed back from the youth field locally about whether, in their view, students were being appropriately equipped in the degree course in Youth Work. It was also intended to provide information to students on the likely expectations of their future employers.

The Sample

The research surveyed sixty youth agencies, and this represents about half of the youth work agencies known to us in WA. The sample was drawn from our list of potential placement agencies and agencies were selected in ways which would avoid an over representation of agencies of one particular type. Our sample included agencies in youth accommodation, Drop-in Centres, Youth Activity Centres, Youth Access Centres, Youth Clubs, Youth agencies offering specialised services, (Drug rehabilitation, alternatives to school, young offender/ at risk programs), street work programs, and Youth information services. Some of the agencies were community based, some were government organisations. Some of the agencies had Christian philosophies, some did not. Some of the agencies were in the Metropolitan area, some were in country areas. All types of youth work currently undertaken in Western Australia were represented.

The survey was restricted to Western Australia for practical reasons, cost, contact and relevance of the findings to the Edith Cowan Youth Work course. (Almost all our graduates find work in Western Australia, less than 10% work interstate in their first youth work job.)

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire asks practising youth workers about agency expectations of attributes they would expect a newly qualified youth worker to possess. In order to determine which attributes should be included in the questionnaire, research was undertaken in two main areas.

Firstly, the content of pre-service youth work training courses were examined to determine what areas of skill or values they sought to develop in students. Secondly, advertisements for youth work positions were examined for their specific skill or value requirements. The resultant Broad Skill Areas are indicated in appendix 1. (A category of "Other" was added and left open for respondents to fill in any additional requirements not mentioned in the questionnaire.).

Specific attribute requirements were then attached to each of the Broad Skill Areas. Within each area, the attributes requirements where written to reflect a range of different models of youth work practice, where this was relevant. Respondents were then asked to rate the importance of each attribute according to how they judged each in the context of the appointment of a newly qualified youth worker. The scoring use was:

- 1= essential

- 2= useful

- 3= could be provided by on the job training

- 4= not useful

- 5= undesirable.

The questionnaire asked for information about the location of each agency and the principle focuses of its work. This will be used in later analyses to determine whether there is levels of agreement within different types of youth work agency and to see whether there are any significant differences in responses between metropolitan and country agencies.

A request was made that the questionnaire should be completed by the youth worker with-in the agency who was responsible for advising the appointment panel when staff were selected. In non government agencies this was usually the co-ordinator. The person filling in the questionnaire was asked to answer the questions in relation to the requirements of their own agency.

The questionnaire is "semi-closed" in format in so far as it asks respondents to select replies from a given range, but allows the possibility of "other" as a reply in most sections. If this option is chosen, an open ended reply is requested. These "open ended" answers will be analysed separately.

Methodology

The questionnaire was piloted on three youth work agency, where the appropriate worker filled in the questionnaire in the presence of the researcher, but without prompting. The researcher then discussed the replies with the respondent and noted any questions which were not clear. As a result of the pilot study, there was a slight re-wording of one question, two questions were omitted, and one was added.

Sixty one youth work agencies were then approached, initially by phone, to see whether they would be willing to take part in the survey. All except one agreed, and the questionnaires were then sent to the agency. From the 60 agencies approached, 42 returned completed questionnaires. Of these questionnaires, one had to be discarded because the person completing it had misunderstood the instructions.

Raw quantative data from the questionnaires has been entered into a database and calculations of means and standard deviations have been undertaken on each item. In circumstances where no response has been given to a particular attribute, for the purposes of this analysis, it was considered as a void and was discounted. At a later stage it will be important to go back to all questions which scored more than an occasional void to determine from the comments any reasons which might explain this. Some possibilities include that there may be ambiguity in the wording of the statement, or that agencies may have ambig-

ous feelings about the desirability of a particular attribute. It should be noted that only a few questions fall into this category.

First analysis of data

The first part of the analysis attempts to define areas of strong agreement and areas of strong disagreement and has been completed in its initial form. More detailed parametric analysis will be conducted over the next six months.

This analysis of the data placed the responses into one of three major categories, according to the mean rating of usefulness of different attributes. Each of these three major categories was further divided into three minor categories according to the degree of disagreement among respondents.

The first major category examined the clusters of attributes which were generally considered to be useful or essential as pre- requisites to employment as a qualified youth worker. The sub groupings examined firstly those on which there was a high level of agreement, secondly those on which there was general support for this opinion but some disagreement, and finally to examine those on which, although there was clear majority support for this opinion, there existed a minority opinion which was strongly dissenting.

The second major category examined the clusters of attributes which were generally considered to be unnecessary or undesirable as pre-requisites to employment as a qualified youth worker. The sub groupings examined firstly those on which there was a high level of agreement, secondly those on which there was general support for this opinion but some disagreement, and finally those on which, although there was clear majority support for this opinion, there existed a minority opinion which was strongly dissenting.

The third major category examined the clusters of attributes which fell in the mid range. The interpretation of these clusters is more complex because there are two quite different possible explanations for why attributes should fall into the mid range category. The first explanation suggests that attributes fall into the mid range because opinion is divided between respondents who think that the attributes are useful, if acquired pre-service and those who believe that the attribute is easily acquirable through on the job training. The second explanation suggests that there are some attributes on which opinion is so divided that whilst some agencies considered the attributes to be essential, others considered them to be undesirable, and that there is no clear majority position.

Each explanation would produce a characteristic pattern of response. Where standard deviations are low, the first explanation is more likely. Where standard deviations are higher, the second explanation becomes dominant. This requires an examination of the data to determine where the "break point" occurs between the two different patterns.

Summary of the Research Findings

1. Attributes generally considered to be essential or useful as pre-requisite to employment as a qualified youth worker

There were fourteen attributes which were considered to be essential or useful and on which there was a high level of agreement. It is interesting to note that most of the attributes in this category are either personal qualities or interpersonal skills, (even when they were categorised elsewhere on the questionnaire). The high priority given to team working, indicates that youth work has moved away from being a solitary pursuit for the worker. Only one of the attributes, (YWz) has implicit in it any reference to youth work. It is noteworthy that this particular attribute, which is the ability to articulate ends and means, is a primarily a communication skill, implying no commitment to any particular model of youth work practices or any particular youth work values.

In the category of attributes which were considered to be essential or useful, but on which there was some disagreement, there were twenty four responses. These included all the remaining personal qualities except one, most remaining interpersonal skills and the least contentious and most generalisable youth work skills.

Management, and especially self management skills appear (MS3, MS4, MS5). The statements about youth work practice reflect a preference for non controlling styles of working (1W2, 1W4, GW6,). The day to day realities of having little personal or professional support (but also high levels of autonomy) are suggested by some of the attributes (IT1, IT3, IT4, GW6, GW7, MS3, MS4, MS5, YW1, YW3). Awareness of the needs of groups not traditionally prominent in youth work is indicated by three of the responses, (YW4, PS5, PS6). Other differences in priority given to each of the attributes seem to reflect primarily circumstantial, rather than values differences, (PS1, PS7).

There were six responses in the category of attributes on which there was a majority opinion affirming essentialness or usefulness, but where there was a minority view strongly dissenting. The attributes do not form a coherent group. There is one values statement, concerning the desirability of an anti-oppressive approach to youth work (V2,). This indicates that there is majority opinion on the value base for youth work, but that this basis is not uncontested.

The comparative unimportance of time keeping as compared with other personal qualities, is interesting and may be suspected to reflect the nature of youth work practice and the need, on occasions, to continue with a task, even though it will mean that the worker will be late for the next appointment, and also to recognise that colleagues may be similarly delayed.

It is not yet clear from the analysis whether the responses relating to group work represent circumstantial or ideological differences. On the question of first aid, whilst the majority thought that this was a useful or essential pre-employment attribute, a sizeable minority considered this to be something which was either not useful or could be provided by on the job training. Similarly with the question which related to the ability to prepare competent funding applications.

2. Attributes generally considered to be generally unnecessary or undesirable as pre-requisite to employment as a qualified youth worker.

There were no responses in the category of attributes considered to be unnecessary or undesirable, on which there was a high level of agreement.

There were three responses in the category of attributes generally considered to be not useful or undesirable, but on which there was some disagreement. All the responses in this section related to abilities to use computer packages (desk top publishing, graphics, spreadsheet). Most of the respondents were of the opinion that these skills were either not useful at all or that they were skills which could be learnt on the job. A minority of agencies, however felt that all or most of these skills were either essential or useful. There was a division between agencies which indicated that generally either they considered all these attributes to be useful, or considered none of them to be so. It is hard to tell whether this reflects differences in organisational structure in the agency, in access to software, or in attitudes to the use of computers, or in agency circumstances.

There were five responses in the category of attributes on which there was a majority opinion that they were either not useful or were undesirable, but on which there was a minority view strongly dissenting. Opinion on two of these attributes seems to reflect ambivalent attitudes to the controlling aspects of youth work (IW6, GW8,) and seem to indicate philosophical differences rather than differences in response to circumstances. The attribute overly concerned with values, (V1) indicates a general secularisation of youth work but with a dissenting Christian minority. The division of opinion on specialist skills, (PS1) is likely to reflect the differences in in circumstances of agencies rather than a difference in philosophical perspective, but this will need to be examined more fully in later analyses.

3. Attributes on which there was no clear evidence concerning their desirability as a pre-requisite to employment as a qualified youth worker.

There were no responses which were categorised as mid range and on which there was a high level of agreement.

There were sixteen responses in the mid range category of attributes which are generally considered to be not undesirable and on which there was some disagreement about their usefulness as a pre-requisite to employment. In this category attributes score in the range of "essential" to "not useful" with a peak in opinion divided between those of who believe that the attribute is useful as a prerequisite to employment and those who believe that the attribute can be learnt on the job. (IW5, AS4, OS1, OS2, OS3, CS1, CS2.) The division of opinion relating to these attributes mostly hinges around when the skill should be learnt, with only minor dissension concerning the overall usefulness of the attribute. It seems unlikely that this cluster reflects any philosophical disagreements about the nature of youth work. Some doubt must be expressed about the question (IT5) which was badly worded and should have been changed after the pilot study. Comments by respondents indicate there was some difficulty in understanding the meaning of the question. Therefore, caution should be exercised in interpreting responses to this attribute.

There were fourteen attributes on which there was such considerable divergence of opinion that there seemed to be no agreement about whether the quality was essential, useful, unnecessary, undesirable or best provided by on the job training. Many of the attributes in

this category relate to controlling aspects of youth work practice (IT6, IW1, GW1,GW2, PS4). One of the value statements, commitment to family values, also came into this category. The interpersonal skills in this category relate to publicity (IPS3, IPS3) and possible reflect an ambivalence among youth workers about the media, and the public. At least eight of the statements in this group (IT6, IT7, IW1, IW3, GW1, GW2, GW9, PS4, possibly GW3) relate to the methodology of youth work practice, in other words, how youth workers should work with young people. Others attributes in this section may relate more to variations in the circumstances of the agency, but at this stage this is not clear. (AS3, IPS3, IPS4 and possibly MS1).

Conclusions

The preliminary conclusions of this first analysis support the view that there is a wide variation of opinion on both the values which underpin youth work and on the methodology of youth work. This is deduced from two main aspects of the study. Firstly, the attributes on which there was the highest level of agreement were those which had no implications for either the fundamental values of youth work or the methodology of youth work practice. Secondly, the attributes on which there was the least agreement included those which specified particular methodologies or values. It is significant that all the overt values statements were placed in categories where disagreement was the greatest. This degree of disagreement within the profession about values and methods indicates that discussion of values and methodology is important in any pre-service training of youth workers. This is because, in the absence of a consensus, it is not possible to prepare youth workers to adopt a single methodological approach. The results also possibly indicate a transition between value bases, away from controlling models of practice and toward empowering styles of work, but we have no way of determining whether this is so. On the question of whether competency based training, (and hence assessment) is possible, the research can not be conclusive. It highlights some areas of potential difficulty as well as some areas of agreement. To overcome the difficulties would require a focus on higher professional competencies and an assessment process which took account of the range of ideological bases which currently exist. Such a move would then allow the possibility that contradictory approaches and practices could co-exist and be recognised as equally valid. This is a long step from the behavioural competencies which were the starting point of competency based training. One thing which is certain from this study so far is that a highly behaviouristic from of competency based training could not be implemented with any kind of consensus support from practitioners.

REFERENCES

Cooper T, (1992) *"Qualified for the Job:the New Vocationalism"* Education Links, no.42, pp18-22.

Davies B, & Durkin M, (1991) *"Skill', 'Competence' and 'Competences' in Youth and Community Work"* Youth and Policy, September,pp1-11.

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Appendix 1

Table 1

Major category 1—Essential or Useful attribute (Pre-employment)

Ranges used: 1 <= Mean <= 2.

		Number of Attributes
High Agreement	(0 < standard deviation<=0.5)	14
Moderate agreement	(0.5 < standard deviation < 1.0)	24
Significant disagreement	(1.0 <= standard deviation)	6
		Sub Total 44

Major category 2—Unnecessary or undesirable attributes (Pre- employment)

Ranges used: 3 <= Mean.

		Number of Attributes
High agreement	(0 < standard deviation<=0.5)	0
Moderate agreement	(0.5 < standard deviation < 1.0)	3
Significant disagreement	(1.0 <= standard deviation)	5
		Sub Total 8

Major Category 3—Mid Range Attributes

Ranges used: 2 < Mean < 3.

		Number of Attributes
High Agreement	(0 < standard deviation<=0.5)	0
Moderate Agreement	(0.5 < standard deviation <= 1.0)	16
Significant disagreement	(1.0 < standard deviation)	14
		Sub Total 30

TOTAL NUMBER OF ATTRIBUTES   82

Table 2—Responses by Major and Minor Category

1. Attributes generally considered to be essential and useful as pre-requisite to employment as a qualified youth worker.

1a. Attributes which were considered to be essential and useful and on which there was a high level of agreement. (Means less than or equal to 2, Standard deviations less than 0.5)

IT2: The ability to work jointly with others as a member of a team

IPS1: To have good listening skills

IPS2: To have good written skills

IPS6: To be assertive

PQ1: Honesty / Trustworthiness

PQ2: Sense of Humour

PQ6: Self motivated

PQ8: Reliable

PQ9: Ability to learn

PQ10: Adaptable

PQ11: Accepting of those with different beliefs or lifestyles

PQ12: Common sense

YW2: To be able to explain clearly to others what they are attempting to achieve and how they are proposing to do this.

YW5: To be aware of their own impact on others

1b. Attributes which were considered to be essential and useful, but which there was some disagreement (Means less than or equal to 2, standard deviation greater than 0.5 but less than 1.0)

IT1: The ability to work without direct supervision

IT3: The ability to work alone with groups of young people

IT4: Ability to take decisions in crisis

IW2: To help young people to resolve their own problems through non-directive counselling

IW4: To have a high level of sensitivity to how young people are feeling

GW6: To be able to diffuse a volatile situation

GW7: To have effective strategies for responding to aggression

AS5: To be able to present reports to management committees

MS3: To be able to prioritise their own work

MS4: To know how to forward plan their own work to enable them to success-fully perform complex long term tasks

MS5: To know when and how to refuse work

IPS5: To have a good telephone manner

IPS7: To be able to ask for help when they don't know how to do something

IPS8: To be tactful

PQ3: Friendliness

PQ4: Hardworking

PQ5: Persistent

YW1: To have a clear sense of their purpose in youth work

YW3: To be able to evaluate their work

YW4: To have a knowledge of different cultures

PS1: To have a knowledge of welfare rights

PS5: To have the ability to work appropriately with Aboriginal young people

PS6: To have the ability to work appropriately with young women

PS7: To have a knowledge of health issues

1c. Attributes on which there was a majority opinion affirming essentialness and usefulness, but where there was a minority view strongly dissenting (means less than or equal to 2.0, standard deviation greater than or equal to 1.0)

GW4: To be able to plan a structured session with a group of young people around youth issues relevant to that group

GW5: To be able to judge the mood of a group of young people and to adjust their own responses accordingly

AS6: To be able to produce competent funding applications

PQ7: Good timekeeping

PS3: To have a current first aid certificate

V2: To have a commitment to anti-oppressive youth work (anti- sexist, anti-racist, anti-heterosexist).

2. Attributes generally considered to be generally unnecessary or undesir-able as pre-requisite to employment as a qualified youth worker.

2a. Attributes considered to be unnecessary or undesirable, on which there was a high level of agreement. (Mean of 3.0 or greater, standard deviation less than 0.5)

NULL—There were no responses in this category.

2b. Attributes generally considered to be not useful or undesirable, but on which there was some disagreement. (Mean of 3.0 or greater, standard deviation less than 1.0)

    CS3: To know how to use a spreadsheet

    CS4: To know how to desk top publish documents

    CS5: To know how to use a graphics program

2c. Attributes on which there was a majority opinion that they were not useful or were undesirable, but on which there was a minority view strongly dissenting. (means greater than or equal to 3.0, standard deviation greater than or equal to 1.0)

    IW6: To apply behaviour modification techniques

    GW8: To be respected as an authority figure whom young people will obey

    IPS9: To be outspoken

    PS1: To have special skills in the arts (e.g. drama, community art, jewellery making, photography).

    V1: To have a commitment to Christian values

3. Attributes on which there was no clear evidence concerning their desirability as a pre-requisite to employment as a qualified youth worker.

3a. Attributes which were considered to be neither essential nor undesirable, and where opinion was divided about whether the attributes were useful pre-requisites to appointment or whether they should be provided by on the job training. (Means greater than 2 but less than 3.0, Standard deviations between 0.0 and 0.5 inclusive)

NULL—There were no attributes in this category.

3b. Attributes which are generally considered to be not undesirable and on which there was some disagreement about their usefulness as a pre-requisite to employment. (mean of greater than 2.0 but less than 3.0, with a standard deviation of greater than 0.5 but less than or equal to 1.0)

    IT5: (The ability to make) Legal (or) ethical judgements

    IW5: To work effectively with young people who are very withdrawn

    AS1: To understand basic book keeping systems

    AS2: To be able to take accurate minutes of meetings

    AS4: To have a knowledge of occupational health and safety legislation as it applies to youth work

    AS7: To be able to raise funds

    MS2: To know how to supervise and support other staff

    PS2: To have special skills in sports (e.g. referee, coaching skills, canoeing, bushwalking)

    PS4: To have a class B drivers licence

OS1: Typing

OS2: Filing

OS3: Tidiness

CS1: To know how to use a word processor

CS2: To know how to use a database

PS2: To have the ability to organise sports activities

PS3: To have the ability to design and implement a program of informal social or political education

3c. Attributes on which there was such considerable divergence of opinion that there seemed to be no agreement about whether the quality was essential, useful, unnecessary, undesirable or best provided by on the job training.(Means greater than 2.0 but less than 3.0, standard deviations greater than 1.0.)

IT6: To always work within the law, even if this means breaking a young persons confidence

IT7: To always put the welfare of the young person first, even if this means ignoring minor illegalities in which young people are involved

IW1: To have the knowledge and experience to enable them to guide and advise young people who have problems

IW3: To have the skills to make friends with young people and to act as their confidant

GW1: To have the skill to use peer group pressure to encourage young people to avoid anti-social behaviour

GW2: To be able to control a rowdy group of young people

GW3: To have an awareness of what is happening elsewhere in the room whilst engaged in conversations with a group of young people

GW9: To always maintain the highest moral standards so as to be a good example to young people

AS3: To know how to set up office systems

MS1: To know how to train and support volunteer youth workers

IPS3: To be able to address large groups of people

IPS4: To be able to publicise the project through the media

PS4: To have the ability to organise therapeutic programs

V3: To have a commitment to family values .

Table 3—Broad Skill Areas

- Independent team work
- Work with individuals
- Work with groups
- Administrative skills
- Management skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Practical skills
- Personal qualities
- Office skills
- Computing skills
- Youth Work
- Specialised skills
- Values
- Other