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'Bridge-builders' and 'boundary spanners': a qualitative study of youth workers' perceptions of their roles and practices with vulnerable young people in school-based settings

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a qualitative study of 22 youth workers' perceptions of their roles and practices in seven school-based settings in a large post-industrial city in regional Australia. Youth workers are often engaged in school-based settings working with vulnerable young people, yet knowledge of how workers perceive and conceptualize their role and practice in these settings remains limited. Through focus group interviews, youth workers were asked how they engage, and work with vulnerable students, how they conceptualize their roles and the bodies of knowledge to which those practices and roles pertain. We find that youth work in school-based settings requires the dynamic and non-linear application of the practices of youth accompaniment, family support and youth-centred advocacy, underpinned by respect for the dignity, autonomy and agency of the young person. We argue that the complex application of these practices positions youth workers as 'bridge-builders' and 'boundary-spanners'. Bridge-builders assist young people to connect and engage with support services. Boundary-spanners build relationships across service providers to network different organizations and professionals for better collaboration and support of young people. These findings have implications for youth policy and practice in the area of youth work with vulnerable young people in school-based settings.

Introduction

Youth workers are often engaged in school-based settings working with vulnerable young people, yet knowledge of how youth workers perceive and conceptualize their role and practice in these settings remains limited. Responding to this issue and seeking to provide greater conceptual clarity about the role of youth workers in schools, this paper presents a qualitative study illuminating the practices of youth workers responding to the needs of vulnerable young people in schools in a large post-industrial city in regional Australia. Youth work is increasingly undertaken in school-based settings and has received some scholarly attention (Coburn & Wallace, 2011; Corney 2010; Galilea, 2022; Luxmoore, 2000). However, the day-to-day practices of youth workers, particularly with young people in school-based settings and the theoretical frameworks underpinning those practices, remain limited and poorly conceptualized, with discussion largely remaining within grey literature (e.g. Barker et al., 2012; Chowdry et al., 2018; Williamson & Weatherspoon, 1985).

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This paper builds on and extends prior work through a qualitative study of 22 youth workers in seven school-based settings in a regional city of Australia. Through focus group interviews, youth workers were asked how they engage and work with vulnerable students, how they conceptualize their roles and what bodies of knowledge pertains to their roles. The youth workers in this study described practice in school-based settings as a dynamic and non-linear application of the practices of youth accompaniment, family support and youth-centred advocacy, underpinned by respect for the dignity, autonomy and agency of the young person.

We suggest that the complex application of these practices positions youth workers as 'bridge-builders' and 'boundary-spanners'. Bridge-builders assist young people to connect and engage with support services. Boundary-spanners build relationships across service providers to network different organizations and professionals for better collaboration and support of young people. This locates youth work in school-based settings within the broader human services literature and provides a common disciplinary basis for understanding between youth workers and other professions in multidisciplinary settings such as schools. These findings have implications for youth policy and practice in the area of youth work with vulnerable young people in school-based settings. Furthermore, the findings may support youth work practitioners engaged in school-based settings and other inter-agency work to communicate their practice to cognate social and pedagogic professions.

Youth work and school-based settings

The practice of professional youth work is not well understood outside the youth and community sector (Corney, 2021). The issue of communicating what exactly youth workers do remains a perennial problem in youth policy design and youth work practice (Davis, 2011; McMahon, 2021; Spence, 2008). Spence (2008, p. 3), in her foundational research on what youth workers do found that 'youth workers are generally highly skilled communicators across a range of circumstances and contexts', however 'their work is not fully understood beyond the boundaries of their own profession . . . ' and that the youth workers' 'processes of intervention with young people remains under-developed', particularly in regard to the educational contexts in which youth work takes place. The relational nature of youth work, and the words used to describe the relationship and the various frameworks that inform youth work practice, are often contested (Cooper et al., 2024). However, there is broad international consensus about the social pedagogic nature of youth work and its non-formal educational basis (Corney et al., 2023). The variety of work undertaken with vulnerable young people in society is as diverse as the young people themselves are, including non-formal education programmes with a focus on harm minimization; outreach and street work dealing with complex social issues such as youth homelessness or drugs and alcohol; and recreational and sporting programmes focusing on youth development (Corney, 2021). This work is undertaken in a variety of community settings, including schools.

Professional youth workers have been employed in educational contexts for many years (Corney, 2010), with the origins of youth work being associated with the ragged schools of industrial Britain (Jeffs & Smith, 2002). Cooper (2018) has identified schools as contemporary sites for much youth work, while Galilea (2022, p. 2) has recently asserted the 'increasing relevance' of youth work to formal education systems. Luxmoore (2000) has described listening roles that youth workers perform in schools, while Coburn and Wallace (2011) state that the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of youth work in school settings can be transformational for young people, particularly those that are vulnerable. Lohmeyer (2020) has recognized the potential for tension between the differing peda-gogical approaches of teachers and youth workers in school settings. However, consistent with Spence's (2008) finding of a decade and half ago, and despite youth work in educational contexts increasing, there has been little research on the specific practices and theoretical frameworks that youth workers are drawing on in their work in school settings, particularly with vulnerable young people (Corney, 2010; Galilea, 2022). One exception is Kährik's (2020) study of school youth workers

in Estonia. Through a desktop survey of a national school database, Kährik (2020) identifies the occupational descriptors and activity fields of youth workers in Estonian school-settings. He identifies three roles for such workers: being a part of school management, supervising youth activities and acting as a 'network promotor'. Kährik (2020) argues that the 'school youth worker as an active agent in the cooperative network of youth work in a local community'. Building on this work, our study seeks a better understanding of how youth workers operate in school-based settings in Australia.

Background and context of the study

Professional youth workers are often employed in targeted work with young people who are deemed vulnerable, that is they may be experiencing marginalization, disadvantage or discrimination and with adverse social and developmental outcomes. The study was conducted with youth work practitioners employed in a government-funded not-for-profit welfare organization programme which works in partnership with schools and other welfare service providers to address youth and family issues associated with poverty, disadvantage and marginalization including homelessness in a large post-industrial city in regional Australia. Youth workers in the study operate across seven secondary schools which have been identified as being socio-economically disadvantaged. These schools are participating in the place-based collective-impact Community of Schools and Services (COSS) (MacKenzie & Hand, 2019) programme. The COSS programme is a partnership between the welfare agency which employs the youth workers and the schools plus other youth and family support services. COSS schools adopt a systematic and proactive approach to identifying young people as vulnerable through annual surveying of the school student population to identify levels of vulnerability using the *Australian Index of Adolescent Development* (AIAD) (MacKenzie, 2018). Once students undertake the survey, the results are analysed and used to identify and refer vulnerable students to youth workers employed in a welfare agency working in partnership with the COSS schools. Through the youth workers, young people are then often referred to other support services.

Within the COSS programme potential for young people to become homelessness was considered a key vulnerability (MacKenzie & Hand, 2019). The typical pathways to youth homelessness are known (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006) and while youth homelessness appears to be preventable, youth homelessness and associated problems are a growing social and public health issue in Australia (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2021). While there is debate in Australia about how youth homelessness is defined (MacKenzie & Chamberlain, 1992, 2008), and young people can be either accompanied by parents/guardians or unaccompanied, this paper understands youth homelessness to be a young person aged 12–24 living unaccompanied and without the presence or immediate prospect of stable accommodation (AIHW, 2021; Coffey, 2009; National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2009; National Youth Coalition for Housing [NYCH], 1985). This age bracket is broad, with both young people and those above the age of majority (young adults over 18 years) being affected. As such, the pathways into youth homelessness can vary considerably (Morton et al., 2020). In addition to having different pathways into homelessness than adults, young people generally have different experiences or 'careers' (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2006) when they become homeless. Young people living on the streets are exposed to daily dangers and stressors, such as physical violence, and may not have the necessary resources available to them to deal with these situations (Heerde et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2006). The lack of these resources compounds the vulnerabilities, especially when coupled with associated lack of access to education and income (Chowdry et al., 2018; Legislative Council, 2021; National Youth Commission, 2008).

A key role of the youth workers in such contexts (as with the COSS programme) is to engage with the vulnerable young people, offer support and referral options to them and also to their families to mitigate vulnerability particularly of homelessness. Data from the AIAD survey and assessment are collated in a spreadsheet and used to inform meetings between the youth

workers and the schools' wellbeing teams where students' levels of vulnerability are identified according to three tiers. Tier one young people are identified as having some vulnerabilities for homelessness present in their lives and requiring a low level of support from youth workers. These young people will be actively monitored by school staff and may be engaged through group work with youth workers. Tier two young people are identified as high vulnerability of homelessness due to the presence of multiple compounding vulnerabilities. These young people are assigned a youth worker for casework support. Tier three young people are those who are already homeless and are provided support that formally involves referral to multiple agencies. This approach aims to be youth-focused and family centred. The youth workers support young people in the development of an integrated care plan which engages a range of stakeholders including family, school and other agencies/services. This includes helping young people to manage and mitigate family conflict; address health issues; access income support; remain engaged in education, access and/or referral to training or employment and other government or community-based support services and to develop life skills. Youth workers have access to small-scale brokerage funding which can be used to support a young person's immediate needs in a timely manner.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), involving in-depth empirical inquiry to investigate a real-world phenomenon (in this case, youth workers' perceptions of their roles and practices with vulnerable young people in school-based settings). This study used focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and a demographic questionnaire of participants. This supported the triangulation of data in the analysis phase, before a final feedback session with participants to validate the research findings (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Participants were recruited through one youth service agency employing youth workers, working in school-based settings with vulnerable young people. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 1998) and selected based on their knowledge, programme role, willingness to participate and availability. Invitations to participate were sent with permission of the agency to youth workers via an email that included a plain language statement explaining the intention of the research project and included information regarding participant consent. All participants volunteered to participate and no reimbursements or inducements were provided. Participants provided their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. The study was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval HRE19–47) and performed in accordance with ethical standards.

Three focus group interviews were conducted with participants ($n = 22$). All participants were over 18 years old and directly connected to the agency's work in school-based settings with vulnerable young people, employed as youth workers. Participants overwhelmingly identified as women (86%); ranging in age from 17 to 55 years (36% were aged 25–35 years and 29% were aged 35–45 years); and participants had varied experience in the human services workforce (22% reported being in the human services workforce for less than 1 year; 14% reported over 20 years; while the majority (33%) reported being in the human services workforce for between 5–7 years). Focus groups were approximately 90 minutes long and involved dialoguing around interview discussion questions (see Appendix for indicative focus group interview schedule). The focus groups were facilitated by members of the research team and conducted in-person on the premises of the employing youth agency. The format involved a series of semi-structured questions on the topic of youth work practices in school-based settings with vulnerable young people (see appendix). The focus groups were facilitated to enable both direct answers of individuals and dynamic group interactions, to increase the depth and reliability of the data (Adcock & Collier, 2001). As dominant themes emerged in the focus groups, they were fed back in situ to participants for further comment and validation (Guest et al., 2012). All focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

A dualistic thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) of the data was conducted using both deductive and inductive approaches, enabling the capture of themes related to the line of enquiry, as well as other themes emerging as part of the interview processes. Data were thematically analysed for patterns, frequency of responses and common concerns of participants (in line with Guest et al., 2012). Themes were crosschecked with field notes, and the research team discussed emerging themes. Subsequently, the themes and findings were fed back to participants in a third feedback focus group for authentication and validation, comment, confirmation and review (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). The findings were affirmed and validated by youth workers in the final feedback session. The final selection of themes was based on frequency and relevance to the aims of the study.

Findings

This study set out to understand how youth workers involved in school-based settings with vulnerable young people, particularly of homelessness conceptualize and describe what they do with young people in their day-to-day practice. Three practices core to the youth workers' role emerged from the data: youth accompaniment, family support and youth-centred advocacy. These practices are employed by youth workers in complex, non-linear ways because *'the nature of every case is fluid'*. Workers describe a role that operates across multiple spaces and settings to meet the different needs of young people, families and stakeholders at any given time. The three core practices of youth workers in the school settings with vulnerable young people are described below.

Youth work practices

Youth accompaniment

Accompaniment is a key practice of the youth workers. This involves building meaningful, respectful relationships with young people and using a conversational approach to support them to reflect on and address issues. Building these relationships takes time and skill to foster. Youth workers report that many young people '*hold a lot of trauma'* and '*really struggle with forming attachments and being able to trust adults'*. This is compounded when families have a negative experience of other human service professionals. Youth workers reported young people making statements such as '*I can't let my parents know that I talk to you. I'm not supposed to be talking to people like you' and 'I hate social workers. My family hates social workers'*. For the youth workers then, building trust is essential. This begins by being reliable and '*a consistent sort of person'* who '*catches up with them every week'*. It requires showing the young person that the worker is '*someone who's not going to judge them'* and who is '*listening to what they want and trying to work with that'*. Workers demonstrate the respectful nature of the youth work relationship by transparently negotiating with young people around how parents and teachers were involved in discussions:

> After a conversation that you might have had about mum or school or something, 'okay so when I speak to mum next, what are you comfortable with me talking to her about? Is there something that you want me to leave out of that conversation?'

In this way, youth workers fostered the dignity and agency of a young person through a dialogical method. For example, a young person might approach a worker as say:

> 'Oh, I'm failing [class]. I can't do it.' And I'm [the worker] just like, 'I think you can.' And maybe that's all they need to hear. Somebody else believes that they can do it and that helps foster their own belief that they can.

Workers find that investing in meaningful relationships often leads to the young person '*being honest with you about what's going on ... so that you can then find out what the cause is and then send them on to appropriate services and to appropriate supports.'* Other elements of accompaniment include signposting to practical resources and/or supported referral to

services, '*facilitating and arranging meetings with the young person [and other professionals]*' and engaging in structured conversations to prepare and track progress with a youth and family case plan.

For young people identified as being vulnerable (tier one), youth workers work with the schools' wellbeing teams to identify the issues presented and '*tailor that group work to reflect those issues.*' Through the practice of accompaniment, youth workers build bridges of understanding and connection with young people '*integrating all parts of their life*'. This relationship becomes the vehicle which enables workers to proactively foster protective factors in a young person's life:

> When we see a young person, they'll talk about what's going on with their friends and then they talk about what's going on at school, and then they'll mention home and then a teacher and then how they're doing. So it's not just focusing on one thing in their life. It's everything that's going on in their life at that time and then we can offer our support in all those different avenues for them.

No matter what a young person talks about, workers focus on '*listening and being curious and planting seeds*' about alternative behaviours and pathways. In these conversations, workers '*support [young people] to identify their own safety net*' and to have '*ownership*', '*resources*' and '*tools*' to act.

Family support

A second key practice of youth workers is building relationships with a young person's caregivers to support a healthy family system. Youth workers get consent from young people to have regular check-ins with parents: '*We call them up and say, "Hey, look, how are things going on your end?*' Building trust with caregivers is crucial to establishing an effective working partnership to support the young person. This can be a slow process that '*happens over months, reminding them that you're not here to judge over and over again*'. Workers find that family conflict is a major driver of youth homelessness and reported undertaking family mediation training as a staff team, with a family support worker also available in complex cases. Family mediation is at times a strong focus of the work, with workers highlight how they find themselves '*supporting young people resolving a lot of conflict that might be going on in the home*'.

Conflict between caregivers and workers can also arise, requiring patience and the careful navigating when workers '*push buttons at times*', as reported by one youth worker who described a discussion with a parent about paying for a driving lesson from youth service brokerage funding:

> 'So and so [the young person] has just said about the lesson . . . What are your thoughts? We have brokerage. We could pay for it.' She's [the mother] like, 'No. No. I'm teaching her a lesson that if you want something, you have to pay for it', and was quite defensive with me about it.

In cases such as this, workers reported deferring to the parents' wishes. If trust is established and conflict navigated, youth workers can be a supportive presence in the family:

> A lot of what we do is providing emotional support and just holding a space when it's sometimes hard for a family to kind of navigate whatever it is that they're faced with.

Youth workers help caregivers to access additional supports such as food vouchers and family support workers as well as navigating the social services and school systems. Youth workers described this as a 'bridging' role which recognizes that many families can benefit from support in navigating complex bureaucracies:

> A lot of our families haven't gone through the system. And so are unaware of actually how to do that. So they want to be part and want to be present. They just don't know how.

Managing such complexity is '*delicate and time-consuming work*' with young people, their families, and other agencies. Indeed, youth workers noted that an intervention '*doesn't always work*' and requires re-evaluation, indicating the iterative nature of youth work practice.

Youth-centred advocacy

A third key practice for youth workers is to engage in youth-centred advocacy with other professionals, schools and agencies. This involves maintaining effective professional partnerships while carefully advocating for approaches that protect the dignity and agency of the young people. For example, taking a youth-centred, trauma-informed approach rather than a caregiver-centred or disciplinary approach. This begins with building effective partnerships with the schools' leadership and wellbeing teams to administer and analyse the survey and screening processes:

> After the screening day we'll have a meeting with the AP [assistant principal], the wellbeing team, the [youth] workers that have done the screening.

In this meeting, teachers, wellbeing staff and youth workers identify what level of support each young person needs and if additional professionals are required:

> Who would be appropriate for group work? Who would be appropriate for working 1–1 for case management? Who would be appropriate to work with the mental health early intervention worker if mental health is a primary issue?

Having these close working relationships with teachers and other professionals in the school setting is important for providing ongoing support to young people and 'linking' them to other services:

> I kind of see my role as being a link: between the young people and their families, the young people and their school, the school and [the youth service], young people and other services.

However, youth workers relationship with the schools is challenging at times. Workers note that schools can have rigid systems and procedures that are slow to embrace youth work's more dynamic approach. At times the two '*systems butt up against each other*', but workers recognize that to negotiate this space '*you can't have someone going to a school that's rigid, you have to have somebody that's able to be good at partnerships*'. A further challenge is a clash of philosophical perspectives, with youth workers drawing from a trauma-informed lens while at school they may be '*exposed to a disciplinary response*'. In this case, youth workers attempt to '*advocate for a young person at school*', working with allies in the wellbeing team and using a conversational approach with other professionals towards '*building capacity within the school [for trauma-informed practice]*'.

In their youth-centred advocacy, workers engage with a variety of other professionals alongside the young person. Workers see themselves as a '*bridge*' and '*the link between the school and the community*'. Through their unique relational approach to youth accompaniment, the youth workers are able to support the young people to engage with welfare services such as drugs and alcohol workers and mental health support workers: '*we are the person that will make sure that they get linked in with who they need to get linked in with*'. Through their accompaniment and advocacy to help young people to overcome barriers to accessing supports, youth workers felt like a '*a one-stop shop for anything that the young person might need*'. In this way, workers variously described themselves as a '*link*' '*connector*', '*advocate*', '*bridge builder*', '*mediator*', '*coach*', '*navigator*' and '*problem solver*'.

Discussion: bridge building and boundary spanning

In order to better understand the youth worker's role in school-based settings, our study explored how such youth workers conceptualize and describe what they do. Furthermore, we sought to identify the bodies of knowledge to which practice in school-based settings pertains in order to provide greater conceptual clarity for school-based youth workers in multidisciplinary settings. Our thematic analysis of focus group data demonstrates that youth workers conceptualize their role as the dynamic and non-linear application of the practices of youth accompaniment, family support and youth-centred advocacy, underpinned by respect for the dignity, autonomy and agency of the young person. Youth workers described how work with vulnerable young people requires the novel and responsive application of the practices identified adapted
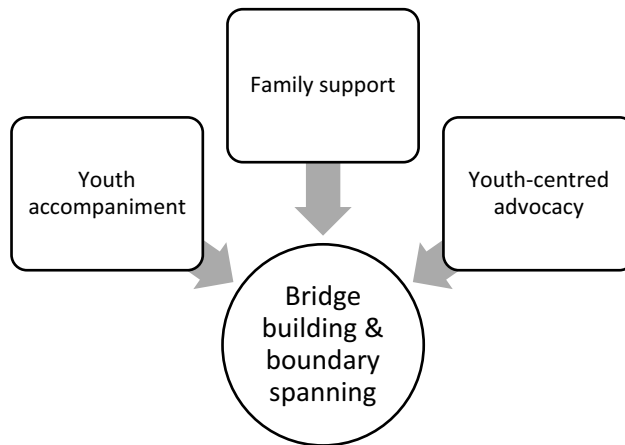
Figure 1. Youth workers' practices contribute to strategic bridge building and boundary spanning.

to individual situations. Youth workers apply these practices to *'link and connect'* young people into a broad social safety net of support. The work is therefore not static and segmentable with hard and definable boundaries. Instead, it involves a wide range of possible practices along a spectrum of interventions. While it is therefore difficult to circumscribe the youth worker's role, their self-described linking and connecting function aligns youth workers in this study with the concepts of 'bridge building' and 'boundary spanning' in the broader human services literature (Figure 1).

Bridge building

In the human services literature, a 'bridge builder' is described as an initiator of cooperation, someone who actively brings different parties together (e.g. students, parents, teachers and service providers) to the benefit of all (Bradshaw, 1999; Dunst, 2000; Kährik, 2020; Miller, 2009; Oliver, 2013; Williams, 2013). Higgins et al. (2020) suggest that bridge builders operate at the intersection of two needs – establishing lines of communication and solving urgent problems – and they build the bridges between vulnerable young people and an array of community and personal resources. This is consistent with the youth workers' descriptions of their mediating and advocating role between young people and other adults, and with youth work practices generally (Corney, 2021; Williamson, 2017). Furthermore, it coheres with Kährik's (2020, p. 214) findings that Estonian school youth workers are 'network promotors' who are engaged in 'maintaining information flows' and coordinating cooperation 'between the school and other [local] institutions'. In the Estonian context, such workers engage the general student population in recreational and cultural activities. Kährik (2020, p. 219) argues that that youth workers are therefore 'one of the key players in the local community initiating and managing different networks for common communal educational, cultural and youth work related activities.'

This 'bridging' role of youth workers is particularly important for vulnerable young people to assist them to locate and access support services and other resources in times of need (Rhodes & Roffman, 2003). This sees youth workers assisting young people to 'navigate' and traverse difficult 'spaces' in order to 'connect' to resources and services (Higgins et al., 2020). Williamson (2017, p. 16) calls this youth work task the 'winning and giving of space to young people' and the 'creating of opportunities, experiences and interactions that represent stepping stones, or bridges'. It is in this context that he sees 'youth work as a distinctive practice and as a discrete component of wider [social] policy directed towards and responsive to young people' (2017, p. 16). For Williamson, youth

work is about 'bridging the gaps between the circumstances of young people and their destinations' (2017, p. 18).

Unlike the Estonian context Kährik (2020), the school-based youth workers in our study, and in the Australian context generally, often plan a targeted role supporting vulnerable young people alongside other human services professionals. In such instances, their role aligns with emerging literature around the role of wellbeing-focused professionals in school-based settings which suggests that they play a mediating role between adult-led, discipline-orientated school environment and young people themselves (Marcus, 2020; Williams-Livingston et al., 2020). However, it must be acknowledged that youth workers are operating in a wider social context over which they don't have control. The efficacy of youth worker's bridging efforts can therefore be limited when the institutions or services being linked into are punitive, coercive, overwhelmed or ineffective. Further research is needed to explore how practitioners navigate such challenges, recognizing that many youth workers are employed in contexts shaped by neoliberal policy imperatives.

Boundary spanning

Boundary spanning is a related but distinct concept in the human services literature. Boundary spanners are professionals who can work across systems and communicate effectively with a variety of actors (Leung, 2013; Miller, 2009; Oliver, 2013; Peel, 2013). The findings of this study suggest that workers go beyond 'connecting and bridge building' responses and can be considered 'boundary spanners' because they are required to operate across a wide range of spaces and institutions with a variety of stakeholders who hold different and at times competing concerns, systems and philosophies of service provision. Quick and Feldman's (2014) describe boundary spanning as an activity that renders boundaries porous, overcomes barriers, increases connections, enables flexibility and builds resilience in systems. This involves three practices.

Firstly, translating differences (i.e. using different language to express multidirectional understandings in order to create new shared understandings and junctures that diminish boundaries). Youth workers engaged in translating differences in a variety of ways, for example through active collaboration with the wellbeing team during the screening process. Secondly boundary spanning requires aligning differences (i.e. recognize differences but enhance connections). Workers reported aligning differences between schools' disciplinary approach and workers' trauma-informed philosophy. They attempted to work with school leadership to recognize these different approaches while building understanding between professionals and across professional boundaries. Finally, boundary spanning requires decentring differences (i.e. minimizing meaningful distinctions between parties). Workers recognized their asymmetric position within the schools' systems and prioritized flexibility and finding common ground with school staff who may misunderstand more non-formal youth work practices. In practical terms, Oliver (2013) describes the interprofessional practice skills and activities of boundary spanning as characterized by networking, collaborating, bridge building, advocating, connecting, referring, preventing and intervening. This aligns strongly with the youth workers' description of their work, which relies on building strong relationships to cultivate a network of trusted contacts.

Implications

This study investigated the practices of youth workers in school-based settings working with vulnerable young people in order to provide greater conceptual clarity around how youth workers perceive and understand what they do. Our analysis finds that three core practices of youth accompaniment, family support and youth-centred advocacy are employed in a non-linear and complex manner by youth workers. These practices contribute to workers' overarching strategic approach: to build bridges and span boundaries for and with young people to mitigate vulnerabilities and increase supports. While other scholars have considered the role of youth workers in school-

settings (Galilea, 2022; Kährik, 2020; Luxmoore, 2000), the unique implications of this study are to explicitly conceptualize the practices and strategies that characterize youth work in school-based settings. The findings of this study have several implications for youth work practice, education and training as well as for community practitioners engaged in inter-agency collaboration. Greater conceptual clarity can support youth workers in communicating and evaluating their work, as well as collaborating with other professionals and services. Furthermore, it can better enable youth work educators to prepare practitioners and enable employers to support them in such roles. Furthermore, it may assist policymakers in designing interventions which utilize youth work practices and methods.

The frames of bridge building and boundary spanning offer youth work practitioners and scholars an enhanced conceptual frame to theorize and communicate the role of youth workers engaged in school settings with vulnerable young people and other forms of inter-agency collaboration. This framing may help such youth workers to better articulate and communicate their role, achievements, challenges and training needs (Goodrich et al., 2020), particularly in communication to other professionals and policymakers, thereby fostering an even stronger interprofessional identity and sense of purpose (Oliver, 2013).

Professional preparation and training are paramount to the success of interventions with vulnerable young people (Curry et al., 2021). Yet Oliver (2013) suggests that some social professions are not necessarily equipped by their professional training with the skills, competencies and traits for effective boundary spanning. This suggests a clear need for youth worker education and continuous practice development to incorporate boundary spanning training to better understand interprofessional and inter-agency collaboration, including between formal and non-formal educational settings. Several studies in the human services literature report individuals who were observed to act as boundary spanners beyond formal role expectations or descriptions (Schotter et al., 2017). However, Needham et al. (2017) stress that the work of boundary spanning is 'emotionally laborious' and that emotional labour is likely to be differently experienced depending on whether the boundary spanning is an 'emergent' expectation or an 'explicit' part of the job. Therefore, it is important for employers to reflect on whether existing roles require boundary spanning and explicitly recognize and resource this work.

Finally, we recognize that youth workers may be engaged in boundary spanning interactions with the cultures and practices of other social professionals with strong professional and organizational identities (such as teachers, nurses, psychologists and social workers). Korschun (2015) argues that an employee's professional identity significantly influences how effective they will be as a boundary spanner, with boundary spanning more likely to be successful when the employee perceives the group identity of the other organization to be similar to their own. Conversely, a lack of identification with other professionals or organizations can result in a relationship that is more adversarial than cooperative (Korschun, 2015). This presents challenges for boundary spanning youth workers, who tend to be in a structurally asymmetric power relationship with other professions of greater social capital. Developing cross-professional understanding and collaboration through joint-education initiatives at tertiary level and continuous practice development could address this barrier to effective cross-professional boundary spanning.

Conclusion

Youth workers are often engaged in schools in work with vulnerable young people and their communities. Through a qualitative study, this paper builds on and extend existing scholarship on youth work by illuminating youth workers; perceptions of their roles and practices. This research suggests that youth work requires the dynamic and non-linear application of the practices of youth accompaniment, family support and youth-centred advocacy, underpinned by respect for the dignity, autonomy and agency of the young person. The complex application of these practices position youth workers as bridge-builders and boundary-spanners. Bridge-builders help young

people to navigate spaces and services to mitigate vulnerability. Boundary-spanners build relationships to network different organizations and professionals for better collaboration. The findings of this paper have implications for the education and training of practitioners as well as their ongoing support in the field. Clearer conceptualization of what youth workers do can also support practitioners and policymakers to design effective programmes with young people.

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Appendix. Indicative focus group interview schedule

(1) How would you describe your role in The Geelong Project?
(2) What do you do on a day-to-day basis with young people?
(3) Can you specify what effective youth work practices and/or approaches you are currently using with at-risk young people?
(4) Can you specify what effective youth work practices and/or approaches you are currently using with young people's families?
(5) Can you specify what effective youth work practices and/or approaches you are currently using in schools?
(6) What services and other professionals do you work with regularly outside of the BCYF team?
(7) Can you name and describe a theoretical framework or model that your interventions and practices may be informed by?