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Working with Diverse Groups of Young People:
Pedagogical Convergences and Divergences Across
Five Countries*

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Article

Professional Youth Work Education and Training for Working with Diverse Groups of Young People: Pedagogical Convergences and Divergences Across Five Countries

John Marion ^{1,*}, Tim Corney ¹, Brett Woods ¹, Ciara Bradley ², Hilary Tierney ², Saoirse Reynolds Conlon ², Kristi Jüristo ³, Ilona-Evelyn Rannala ³, Marko Kovačić ⁴, Mario Žuliček ⁴, Katrin Karu ³, Sofija Arnaudova ^{5,6}, Dragan Atanasov ⁶ and Bojana Ćulum Ilić ⁴

¹ Institute Sustainable Industries Liveable Cities, Victoria University, Melbourne 3000, Australia; tim.corney@vu.edu.au (T.C.); brett.woods@vu.edu.au (B.W.)

² Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University, W23 F2H6 Maynooth, Ireland; ciara.bradley@mu.ie (C.B.); hilary.tierney@mu.ie (H.T.); saoirse.reynoldsconlon@mu.ie (S.R.C.)

³ School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia; kjuristo@tlu.ee (K.J.); ilona-evelyn.rannala@tlu.ee (I.-E.R.); katrinka@tlu.ee (K.K.)

⁴ Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Rijeka, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia; marko.kovacic@uniri.hr (M.K.); mario.zulicek@uniri.hr (M.Ž.); bojana.culum@ffri.uniri.hr (B.Ć.I.)

⁵ Faculty of Philosophy, University St. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, 1000 Skopje, North Macedonia; sofija.arnaudova@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

⁶ Union for Youth Work, 1000 Skopje, North Macedonia

* Correspondence: john.marion@vu.edu.au

Abstract

Defining professional youth work and its activities presents a challenge for developing international consensus in the university level training and education of professional youth workers. This research is concerned with the question of ‘how youth work students in universities are educated and prepared for professional youth work practice, and, in particular, with diverse young people’. The article presents research examining the experiences of those undertaking the education and training of professional youth workers in universities located in five countries: Estonia, Croatia, Macedonia, Ireland and Australia. Educators from a university in each of the five participating countries completed a survey on the content and underpinning values of their course, and educators from each university participated in a focus group interview discussing their motivations to teach youth work, theoretical underpinnings, and pedagogical practices. The article finds that across the five national contexts there is broad agreement among the university youth work educators that youth work is a ‘social and critical pedagogic’ practice with a commitment to broad values of ‘social justice’ and ‘social inclusion’ for young people. However, the specific expression of these concepts differs depending on the national context, often influenced by historical and political events. The personal values, worldviews, and biographies of youth work educators play a role, both in the conception of themselves as educators, as well as their motivations and teaching practice. Educators also stressed the importance of youth work as a profession and distinct academic discipline, especially in the context of neoliberal pressures in universities that seek to conflate youth work with similar disciplines and areas of study.

Keywords: youth work; youth work education; social pedagogy; informal education; diverse young people; social justice



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1. Introduction

Youth work as both a professional practice and as a voluntary undertaking occurs internationally in both the Global North and South and covers a range of programmes and activities for young people's personal and social development and enabling their rights and active participation. There is a global consensus that youth work is an educational and developmental practice (i.e., a form of social pedagogy, both informal and non-formal education, based on human rights, and often drawing on critical pedagogic traditions) undertaken with individuals and groups of young people in their communities (Corney et al., 2024). Youth work theory is underpinned by a variety of concepts, arising from the historical and political circumstances of the particular country and context that it is delivered in (Cooper, 2018, p. 4). Different country contexts are shaped by the varying role of government policy, the public sector and civil society organisations and what they are trying to achieve for or with young people (Maunders, 1990). Youth work in the Global South also faces challenges such as remuneration, resourcing, and recognition (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2017, p. 181), though these lie beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on European and Australian experiences.

Aside from the differing international contexts, youth work is also implemented within different community settings with diverse groups of young people (Brooker, 2019). As such, beyond broad commitments to youth work as pedagogical, defining youth work practices conclusively is difficult (Corney et al., 2024; Kiilakoski & Kauppinen, 2021, p. 86; Sercombe, 2010; Williamson, 2015, p. 7). Efforts to define professional youth work more specifically are often resisted and subject to contestation from within the youth and community sector (Seal & Brooker, 2019, p. 23), and subject to external pressures from other human service disciplines that may also work with young people (Fusco, 2013). Considering these tensions, Cooper (2018, p. 4) suggests 'an alternative is to seek conceptual definitions of youth work processes that encapsulate essential features of practice'.

As noted, youth work occurs in a wide range of contexts, which raises tensions for educators between the teaching of generalist versus specific skills and knowledge and "how to effectively train and support all youth workers, regardless of location" (Robideau & Santl, 2020, p. 70). Kiilakoski (2019) notes that this diversity is exhibited at the semantic level, in youth work's relation to larger social systems and social needs, and that these may determine where funding for youth work is directed and what sort of needs may be addressed, which groups of young people may be targeted, what methods of engagement or amelioration are used, and what values and principles underpin it. However, young people's experiences of social exclusion are varied and intersectional, where the layering of disadvantage and discrimination across a person's social identities contributes to their level and experience of marginalisation (Collins & Bilge, 2020). 'Youth' itself is an intersectional category and, as such, young people face exclusion by adult society in some form; for example, those below the voting age are disenfranchised and lack political representation (Corney et al., 2022). However, some young people are further excluded based on various intersectional contexts or identities, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, or disability. This is what makes youth work a rights-based practice underpinned by social justice (Corney, 2004b). The education of youth work students, many of whom come from diverse backgrounds themselves (Bessant, 2012; Corney, 2019), needs to account for how they will work in those diverse social contexts.

In recent times, and in various countries around the world, youth work has moved from a voluntary to paid practice and has been undergoing a process of professionalisation as a result (Sercombe, 2018). This professionalisation process has been supported in countries by the development of a recognised academic literature and body of knowledge, (e.g., youth and community work, youth studies, social pedagogy/non-formal education)

alongside the development of specific tertiary-level education and training courses delivered through universities and other institutions of higher learning (Seal, 2019). This has been further supported by the establishment of country-specific professional associations for youth workers and the development of codes of ethics and standards of practice, often supported by governments and/or alongside relevant government legislation and/or regulation (see Corney & Broadbent, 2021; Siurala, 2012). The establishment of youth work as a profession has enabled youth workers in some of the nations to advocate for their employment conditions, particularly Australia, Estonia, and Ireland (Cooper, 2012, p. 98). Thus, youth work is referred to as a profession, albeit emerging and at different points in the professionalisation process across the five participant country contexts.

The question of what is ‘good’ youth work education and training, or as it is sometimes described ‘best practice’ (Harris, 2005; Rannala et al., 2024), and identifying “the values underpinning both the education and training of youth workers and their practices” (Corney, 2004b, p. 11) are part of a long-held goal of professional youth work educators and trainers (Corney, 2004a; Corney & Broadbent, 2007; Corney, 2019; Bessant, 2009; Cooper, 1999; Emslie, 2013; Fusco & Baizerman, 2013; Magnuson & Baldwin, 2014; McKamey, 2017; Fennes & Otten, 2008; C. Bradley et al., 2024). Identifying best practice in youth work education requires an understanding of both the skills and knowledge needed for youth work practice within a given social, cultural, and economic context. Fusco (2013) states that this requires “descriptions of youth work education that account for what we consider knowledge/worth knowing, how to come by it, our understandings of teaching and learning, and how we envision youth work and the moral and social imperatives of youth workers” (pp. 201–202). This is in essence the subject matter of this research.

This research sits within a larger European Union Erasmus+ project that is focussed on ‘Professional Development for Diversity’ (PD4D) and its overarching aim to improve the quality and recognition of professional youth work. Its particular focus is on professionalising youth work and addressing the needs of diverse youth populations (‘diversity’ in this context being defined as the intersectional identities and contexts experienced by young people that may lead to social and economic exclusion) through a collaborative approach that unites educators, researchers, and practitioners across five countries, each at different stages of the professionalisation process. The overarching goal of the PD4D project is to enhance the quality of youth work education and practice by integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application. It aims to develop innovative approaches for youth workers to effectively engage with diverse groups of young people, promoting evidence-based practices, and providing input to the development of professional youth work education and training at the tertiary level.

Using the broadly accepted conceptual definition of youth work as a social pedagogic practice from Corney et al. (2024, p. 1) who suggest that “non-formal education, framed by human rights, appears to offer definitional common ground for youth work practice globally”, this research is concerned with the question of ‘how youth work students in universities are educated and prepared for professional youth work practice, with a particular focus on diverse young people’ and will examine the international experiences of educating and training youth workers in universities across five countries: Estonia, Croatia, Macedonia, Ireland and Australia.

1.1. Review of Literature

1.1.1. National Experiences of Professional Youth Work

Beyond the abovementioned broad operational definition of youth work offered by Corney et al. (2024), determining how best to prepare youth workers for professional practice requires discussion about the specifics of professional youth work practice. Whilst

acknowledging that youth work is an organic and ever-developing field, and thus its pedagogical approaches to the education of youth workers are also developing (Seal, 2019, p. 296), finding international common ground helps to assure the quality of youth workers and their education (Schild et al., 2017, p. 8).

When examining the histories of youth work in the five nations in this study, two narratives emerge. The first is what has been described as British-influenced youth work (Cooper, 2012) found in the colonial historical contexts of both Ireland and Australia. The development of youth work in these countries followed a pattern of development from charitable voluntary efforts to government policy exercised for national identity development, to sector-led human rights-based professional practice (Maunders, 1990). However, in Croatia, Estonia, and North Macedonia, the history of youth work is shaped differently by their status as former socialist nations or occupied territories of the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). In this context youth work historically was delivered by the state, and often involved ideological transmission (Bužinkić et al., 2015). Upon independence, the history of youth work in these countries diverged, with Estonia establishing youth work as a profession around the turn of the century, compared to more nascent professional development in Croatia and North Macedonia (Youth Wiki, 2024).

The histories of youth work in these nations continue to influence the present-day conceptualisation and delivery of youth work, and there are both commonalities and differences across the five nations. For example, in Ireland, Australia, and Estonia, youth work is delivered by paid professionals with tertiary-level qualifications, often funded by governments but sometimes delivered through civil society organisations, or charities (Cooper, 2018). In North Macedonia, the NGO sector is a key deliverer of youth work, as it is in Croatia (Kovačić & Ćulum, 2018); however, it is often undertaken by volunteers or those without formal youth work qualifications (Youth Wiki, 2024). In Estonia and Australia, local municipal-level governments take significant responsibility for the provision of youth work (see *Local Government Organisation Act, 1993*, for Estonia, for example).

The selection of these five countries reflects a deliberate comparative logic rooted in the diversity of youth work traditions, institutional contexts, and professional development trajectories across the partnership. In a field where knowledge is deeply contextual and locally embedded, methodological rigour requires engaging with genuinely different knowledge systems and ways of understanding youth work and professional practice. A sample that looked too similar would risk producing findings with limited transferability and would reproduce rather than challenge dominant frameworks. The underlying rationale was therefore to bring together countries at different stages of youth work professionalisation and higher education integration, so that the partnership could function critically and dialogically in a space of mutual learning in which more established systems and emerging ones could challenge, inform, and enrich each other.

In all of the five participating nations, youth work is shaped and defined by three key theoretical concepts. The first is 'youth development', which is referenced in the definitions of youth work in Australia, Ireland and Estonia. The second key concept is 'informal or non-formal' education; youth work is a pedagogical practice (Howell, 2021). The European nations locate youth work in this pedagogical tradition, either directly as 'social pedagogy' or indirectly as 'informal' or 'nonformal' learning and education. Youth work in Australia has not typically been defined this way (see *Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, 2013*, p. 3), but efforts are being made to engage with this conceptual framework (Corney et al., 2024). The third area of commonality is a rights-based framework of youth work practice that advocates for the human rights of young people and is found in participating countries' reference or adherence to UN human rights declarations, particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNHCHR, 1989).

1.1.2. Youth Work and Professionalisation

Professionalisation refers to the process by which an occupation becomes a profession, with the associated identity and status that comes with the title (Kenny, 2019, p. 153). Evetts (2003, p. 407) suggests that occupations want to become professions because of the associated social acceptance and status. As such professionalisation recognises that a particular occupation is complex and requires specialist knowledge and skill (Ingersoll & Perda, 2015, p. 170). As an industry gets more complex, so too does the work and the training of the professional practitioner (Runte, 1995, p. 2). A key part of the professionalisation process is the ability of a prospective profession to self-organise and regulate. Evetts (2011, p. 10) identifies a profession's codification of specialised knowledge and skills, ethics and standards as a way of making public the standards and quality of the profession's services. In this way, 'professionalism' is a key part of professionalisation, as professions must be able to create and uphold their own ethical obligations to quality of service (Evetts, 2011, p. 10).

One aspect of the youth work professionalisation debate has focussed on the importance of defining a knowledge base (Emslie, 2013). Purcell et al. (2024) suggests that embedding the professional values and body of knowledge within higher education qualifications will produce practitioners who are equipped to be "reflective and critical practitioners, promoting equality, social justice, and human rights" (p. 180). In youth work, professionalisation is also a response to the threats and challenges youth work faces, especially from neoliberal hegemonies that seek to reduce youth work to segmented activities or outcomes (Corney & Broadbent, 2007, p. 43). Professionalisation, with the effect of a strong and recognised professional identity supported by professional associations, is a vehicle of advocacy to governments and other agencies for the value of youth work and the issues young people face (Cooper, 2012, p. 98).

Finally, the professionalisation of youth work is not a universally agreed upon good. Some argue that professionalisation is undesirable, as it can be undemocratic or elitist in who it considers practitioners (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2013). Others see elements of professionalisation, such as codes of ethics, as unnecessarily regulating and 'conservatising' the free agency of youth workers (Quixley & Doostkhah, 2007). Finally, in some national contexts, 'official' recognition from government or statutory agencies can be problematic, especially in contexts of authoritarianism (Schild et al., 2017, p. 8).

1.1.3. National Experiences of Youth Work Education

The teaching of youth work as a professional human service qualification in universities or colleges of higher education has been undertaken in various forms since the middle of the last century in Australia (Maunders & Corney, 2021) and parts of Europe (Kiilakoski, 2019; Seal & Smith, 2019). The professional recognition of youth work has drawn attention to the formal process of youth worker education and training and the importance of preparing youth workers for practice (Purcell et al., 2024, p. 178; Corney, 2019; Maunders & Corney, 2021; Fusco, 2013, pp. 201–202). Given the distinct international contexts, experiences and practices, there are both commonalities and differences in national approaches to the higher education of youth workers.

There are university-level qualifications offered in Australia, Estonia, Ireland, and North Macedonia. The qualifications have been offered in Australia and Ireland since the 1970s and 80s, and in Estonia since the 2000s (Maunders & Corney, 2021; Kiilakoski, 2019). North Macedonia has recently developed a Masters in Youth Work but does not currently have a Bachelor level course. Croatia has youth-focused units of study but does not have a formalised youth work qualification at the university level. In lieu of this, the University of Rijeka has developed an innovative short course titled "Youth of Today",

which includes courses on sociology of youth, political science, pedagogy, psychology, and cultural studies, emphasising values such as social responsibility, civic engagement, and democratic participation (Kovačić & Ćulum, 2018).

Alongside the Bachelor-level courses, which have a focus on the theoretical body of knowledge underpinning youth work, most nations have technical or vocational-level youth work courses, which are skills- and competency-based. However, this has introduced the risk of a hierarchically structured workforce based on the two-tiered education system and qualification level, where university-educated workers are employed to manage and direct the work of those with lower-level technical qualifications (Corney, 2004a, p. 90). Finally, youth worker education is supplemented in many countries through volunteer opportunities, non-formal education and short training courses provided by community agencies, NGOs, and youth work associations.

1.1.4. Theoretical Underpinnings of Education

There is an ongoing discussion in the literature about the preparation for the practice of professional youth workers and the differences between education and training (Corney & Broadbent, 2007). This is not just contested terrain in youth work but in the tertiary education and training literature generally (Masadeh, 2012). These differences are portrayed through various lenses, such as institutional politics with hierarchical demarcations reflected in qualifications frameworks and levels and types of teaching and delivery. There are also distinctions made between discrete and separate pedagogical concepts. For example, training is often seen as behavioural and skill-based ‘learning by doing’, with assessment often demonstrated through observable practice (such as competency-based training) and is reflected in traditional apprenticeship trades training for manual occupations (Fusco, 2012). This form of ‘training’ is often seen within educational philosophy as a related but subservient pedagogic practice, that training is not education in and of itself but an important sub-category that serves broader educational purposes (Freire, 1972; Corney, 2004a; Corney & Broadbent, 2007). However, others argue that training *is* education, and is a superior form of education, particularly for preparing people for helping professions such as youth work (Brooker, 2019). Williamson (2019, p. 20) has identified the trilemma of educational outcomes as ‘being’, ‘knowing’, and ‘doing’ in youth work, and the need for youth worker education and training to engage with all three facets.

Additionally, youth work is seen as a form of value-rational action driven by occupational values (Maunders, 1990), and thus, necessarily those that teach youth work are also led by a set of values and or world views that influence the teaching and curriculum (Corney, 2004a). Corney (2004b) undertook early work researching the values underpinning Australian youth work education in universities. He found that social justice informed by philosophical, political, ideological, and religious values underpinned the notions of social justice and informed the teaching of youth work academics. This is confirmed by Purcell et al. (2024), who conducted a similar study on the value-based pedagogy of a Scottish youth work course, including reflections from educators and students. They detailed how critical dialogue was essential to teaching youth work values, citing responses from teachers and students (Purcell et al., 2024, p. 187).

There are several key ideas related to best practice in the youth work bodies of literature. Firstly, social pedagogy is viewed as both the content and method of youth work education (Eit, 2019). Various scholars have described the best practice method of youth work education as ‘practicing what you teach’, that youth work education should also be founded in social pedagogical principles (Emslie, 2009). Another concept is the importance of engaging with the body of knowledge, to equip students with “theoretical and practice knowledge and abilities” (Bessant, 2007, p. 47). Praxis (Freire, 1972) and the related concept

of ‘reflective practice’ are also seen as part of best practice youth work education. [Rannala et al. \(2024, p. 205\)](#) highlight the ‘importance of peer-based communities of youth work practitioners meeting together in a deliberate and organised manner to reflect on practice and to learn from one another’. This concept of collective reflective practice provides a framework for critical engagement with the shifting contexts of youth work and the threats of neoliberal hegemony ([Seal, 2019, pp. 300–301](#); [Corney, 2019](#)). This approach aligns with [C. Bradley et al.’s \(2024\)](#) notion of “critical praxis for students which extends beyond the classroom into their professional and personal lives,” highlighting the integration of knowledge, skills, and values across both academic and practical domains.

A key task of youth work education is engaging with ethical tensions. As [Rannala et al. \(2024\)](#) make clear, ‘good’ youth work is ethical youth work. [Bessant \(2012\)](#) goes further noting that a “key test in determining the quality of youth work education is whether it equips students to make good judgments in different situations about where they face tensions or contradictions” (p. 64). As youth work often sits within frameworks of community development, it is best practice for education to be communal, exhibited in classroom settings, in community engagement, and in the communities of practice of youth work educators. Lastly, another key element of best practice in youth work education is the role of youth work educators as ‘pracademics’; that is, the dual- or hybrid identity of a practitioner as well as an academic ([Jain, 2020](#)). Embracing this dual identity allows educators to “open up conversations about the role, function, and purpose of those that do not identify, nor operate, within the confines of the academic or practice and policy domains on their own, but exercise influence and enjoy membership of more than one or all of them” ([Hollweck et al., 2022, p. 17](#)).

As such, this article seeks to examine the underpinning values, theories, pedagogies and related teaching practices of educators found within the five youth work training courses they teach. Based on the work of [Mauders \(1990\)](#), [Corney \(2004b\)](#) undertook foundational research on values in professional youth work. He found a significant gap in published research, both internationally and in Australia, on youth work values and the theoretical frameworks to which they pertain. Corney recommended further research, in particular the pre-service preparation of trainee youth workers and the values and theoretical frameworks underpinning the curriculum and teaching of degree-level youth work courses and the implications for professional practice. This research seeks to, in some part, address this gap.

2. Materials and Methods

The study sought to address the following research questions:

- How are youth work students in universities educated and prepared for professional youth work practice, with a particular focus on diverse young people?
- What are the underpinning values, theories, pedagogies and related teaching practices of educators and of the five youth and community work training courses they teach into?
- How do those approaches and values differ across national contexts?

To answer this broad overarching research question (and sub-questions), the study adopted a deductive critical mixed methods approach ([Denzin et al., 2017](#); [Merriam & Tisdell, 2016](#)). The study drew on the previous research of [Corney \(2004a, 2004b\)](#) to develop the survey instruments and, in particular, the broad a priori value categories found to be present in Corney’s previous study. The research design was further informed by the values of ‘social justice’ ([McMahon et al., 2024](#)) and the theoretical lens of ‘critical pedagogy’ ([Freire, 1972](#)) and social pedagogy, as they are consistent with the underpinning theories and practices of professional youth and community work as a political, values-driven

practice (Corney, 2004a, 2004b; Corney et al., 2024). For example, Ledwith (2016) states that both youth work and community work are pedagogical practices concerned with social justice and informed by a transformative critical pedagogy. McMahon et al. (2024, p. 4) remind us that youth and community-based research is never value-free and as such 'is a form of political action or intervention in the world'. Critical research paradigms are situated in socio-political critique and concerned with values of social justice and social equality and in the social, political and economic relationships and structures of power that enable social injustices and inequality, including how power is "negotiated ... [and] what structures in society reinforce the current distribution of power" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 10). Denzin et al. (2017) describe critical research inquiry as being concerned with "discourses of injustice of various kinds" (p. 494). This study is motivated by the need to inform policy and curriculum developments and teaching practice, in the education of youth workers, especially for work with diverse young people. This aim is in partnership with the Erasmus+ research initiative's overarching aim to improve the quality and recognition of professional youth work. As discussed earlier, addressing the exclusion faced by diverse young people is an expression of social justice.

As previously discussed, the position of youth work educators as 'pracademics' means inhabiting a dual professional identity that shapes how to understand and interpret debates concerning best practice in youth work education. At the same time, this research is conducted within a community which the researchers are also members of, positioning us as 'insider researchers' that share an identity, language, and experiential base (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58). Whilst this insider status affords contextual insight, professional credibility, and relational trust, it also necessitates ongoing reflexivity to critically examine assumptions, power relations, and interpretive bias. Methodological reflexivity is central to this study and requires researchers to critically examine their identity, values, assumptions, emotional responses, relationships, power dynamics, and commitments to honesty and transparency (Kara, 2015). In doing so, the insights provided from this insider positionality facilitate the cross-cultural dialogue at the heart of the study and provide unique information about not only the structure and content of courses, but also their delivery, motivations, and effectiveness.

The study is grounded in a 'critical' qualitative, interpretive approach to research, with the primary objective being to collect, present and analyse/interpret data from the interviews on the research questions (i.e., data is the view of participants who share their experiences and perceptions as answers to questions during interviews and validated in feedback loops to participants). Data analysis and interpretation are informed by engagement with the relevant peer-reviewed literature. Emerging themes and higher-level interpretations were reviewed and validated through participant feedback processes. The limitations of qualitative studies are universalising findings beyond the cohort being interviewed; however, the triangulation of sources and comparison to previous similar studies (Corney, 2004a, 2004b; Petkovic & Bárta, 2020; Purcell et al., 2024) provide rigour and reliability to the findings. The research was designed to maintain consistency between the social and critical pedagogical orientation of youth and community (Corney et al., 2024) work and the critical qualitative methods utilised to answer the research questions.

2.1. Data Collection Methods

This research took a mixed methods approach to data collection, using both quantitative survey responses, and qualitative focus groups and interview data (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Mixed methods are considered useful for investigating complex social situations (Kara, 2015). In this study, the collection of quantitative data about the values embedded in youth work courses enabled the analysis of broad similarities and differ-

ences between the courses, while the qualitative data allowed for in-depth analysis of the experiences, philosophies, and values that informed the educators of those courses.

Representatives from the five partner universities were selected using a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015). As mentioned above, the selection of these five universities reflects a deliberate comparative logic rooted in the diversity of youth work traditions, institutional contexts, and professional development trajectories across the partnership. These participants were chosen because of their status as key academics providing youth work training within their countries, and their involvement as academics from those courses in shaping youth work in their national contexts, which allowed them to draw on perspectives of colleagues.

In accordance with the guidelines of the Ethics Committee of Tallinn University, which acted as the leading partner of the PD4D project, formal ethical approval was not required for this study, as the participants in this study are also project partners in the Erasmus+ project “Professional Development of Youth Workers: learning, researching, communicating values and theories influencing practice with diverse groups” and have already agreed in the project application to carry out the research, including signing the partnership agreements and Declaration of Honour for ethical conduct.

2.2. Quantitative Methods

Each participant facilitated the mapping of their university’s courses with their local colleagues, which took the form of a survey from each partner university. As noted above, the study drew on the previous research of Corney (2004a, 2004b) to develop the survey instruments and, in particular, the broad a priori value categories of values found to be present in Corney’s previous study. Participants were asked to articulate their formal course/programme/unit aims, content, and delivery modes as well as describe the values and pedagogical theories underpinning their courses. As youth work is seen as a form of value-rational action driven by occupational values (Mauders, 1990), and thus necessarily those that teach youth work are also led by a set of values and/or world views that influence the teaching and curriculum, participants were asked about the values and worldviews that underpin their courses. These responses were thematically analysed, with the themes validated by a group discussion among participants gathered in person.

2.3. Qualitative Methods

The second part of this research was the collection and analysis of narratives from triad focus group interviews with youth work educators and trainers. The list of participants and the country of their university are provided in Table 1. These participants were academics and teachers from the universities that completed the survey detailed above. These were used to validate the findings of the survey and offer insights into the underlying purposes and teaching approaches used in different institutions across the participating countries. The participants were gathered in person for the purposes of collecting these qualitative narratives. This approach was informed by the narrative inquiry approaches (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) and by feminist research methodologies (Hesse-Biber, 2012). An open-ended participant interview style was adapted into a triadic interview structure, with one participant as speaker, one as interviewer, and one as observer/note-taker. Drawing on the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Corbally & O’Neill, 2014), the interviewing began with an open question encouraging the participant to respond to the topic of youth work education and how they came to be an educator. The framing of the question encouraged participants to respond in the form of a life story. Similarly, Tilsen (2018) describes youth work practice as a process in which dialogue enables participants to actively engage in “storying,” shaping and reshaping the narratives they live and interpret

(pp. 51–52). This emphasis on conversation mirrors the approach, where open narrative prompts allow participants to construct and frame their experiences on their own terms. The interviewer’s role was intentionally restrained, offering only non-verbal, positive feedback in order to minimise interruption and support the interviewee in generating their own narrative. This approach reflects the BNIM principle of beginning with a Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN), where participants shape the direction and content of their accounts without researcher-imposed framing (Wengraf, 2001; Corbally & O’Neill, 2014). As Brown (2010) suggests, stories are “data with a soul”, serving as a powerful means of understanding and interpreting complex human experiences. By using open narrative prompts, the approach created the conditions for educators working in socially complex contexts to frame their experiences on their own terms. It also resonates with feminist research perspectives that emphasise voice, reflexivity, and a disruption of hierarchical researcher–participant dynamics, possible power imbalances and highlighting how identity, social structures, and personal history shaped pedagogical practice (Letherby, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2012). The observer/note-taker role added an additional interpretive dimension, capturing interactional dynamics, and embodied elements of storytelling.

Table 1. List of participants.

Country	Participant Number	Participant Information
Australia	4	Male, early career teacher, youth worker
Australia	9	Male, senior academic
Estonia	3	Female, senior academic
Estonia	5	Female, lecturer
Estonia	6	Female, lecturer, youth worker
Croatia	7	Male, senior academic
Ireland	1	Female, lecturer
Ireland	2	Male, lecturer
Ireland	8	Female, early career teacher, youth worker
Ireland	10	Female, senior academic
Ireland	11	Male, lecturer, youth worker
North Macedonia	12	Female, senior academic

The method was applied across four triads. In general, the participants from each country were distributed across triads so that each group contained multiple national perspectives. Two triads were conducted after the face-to-face gathering to collect perspectives of participants who were not able to attend. Every participant had an opportunity to answer 4 questions:

- What makes you a youth work educator?
- What does the term diversity mean to you in the context of youth work? What do youth workers need to know or be able to do or how they are working with diverse groups of young people?
- Can you describe how you teach youth workers?
- Can you share some of the ideas, theories, theorists, and work that underpin and inspire your youth work teaching?

These questions generated reflections that illuminated the personal values, philosophies, pedagogical commitments, and theoretical orientations shaping their practice as educators.

2.4. Thematic Analysis—Deductive Approach

The research approach to the collection and thematic analysis (coding) of participant data is primarily deductive. Deductive research is a theory-driven approach (Hyde, 2000)

and uses an a priori framework of concepts based on a ‘pre-existing theory’ (Gale et al., 2013, p. 3), (e.g., a critical theory/frame) to drive the collection of data (i.e., questions/topic areas and the coding and analysis of data) (Crabtree & Miller, 2023).

In this sense deductive research is a theory-driven approach (Hyde, 2000) and provides the basis of the themes for the coding process (E. H. Bradley et al., 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Burnard et al., 2008). The deductive ‘framework’ is applied in the analysis in anticipation that certain core concepts/themes are already in the data, as an a priori assumption (E. H. Bradley et al., 2007; Thomas, 2006). These ‘assumptions’ are drawn from the existing literature on the topic and what is already known about the phenomenon of inquiry (e.g., Corney, 2004a, 2004b, Purcell et al., 2024). These assumptions are reflected in the research aims and research questions. The deductive approach assumes that certain core concepts will be found in the data based on prior knowledge of the literature on the topic (E. H. Bradley et al., 2007; Thomas, 2006).

These assumptions inform high-level themes that are reinforced, as Allen (2017) suggests, by researchers conducting thematic analysis who look for “recognizable reoccurring topics, ideas, or patterns (themes) occurring within the data” (p. 1756). As such, the data was examined using thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2011) involving identification of common concerns in the cohort. Initial themes were cross-checked with transcripts and field notes, and discussions about emerging themes were held by the research team. The final selection of themes informed by the a priori assumptions were based on frequency and relevance to the aims of the study (Guest et al., 2011).

3. Results

The following table (Table 2) provides an overview of the survey results. The numbers represent scores on a Likert scale rated 1–5, with 1 representing the least and 5 the most. If a value was not considered present it was rated 0. It has also been colour-coded to more easily highlight areas of agreement or divergence.

Table 2. Survey results. Survey key: AUS—Australia; CRO—Croatia; EM—Estonia (Masters); EB—Estonia (Bachelor); IM—Ireland (Masters); IB—Ireland (Bachelor); NM—North Macedonia.

Q1. To what extent are the following practice values taught explicitly in youth work education?	AUS	CRO	EM	EB	IM	IB	NM
Participation	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Empowerment	5	4	5	5	5	5	5
Equity/levelling up	4	2	3	4	5	5	4
Young People as Primary Consideration	5	5	5	5	5	5	4
Equal opportunity	4	2	4	5	5	5	3
Trust	3	3	5	5	5	5	3
Openness	1	4	5	5	5	5	4
Dialogical Relationship	3	5	5	5	5	5	3
Equal partnership	3	5	5	5	5	5	3
Q2. To what extent are the following practice methods taught explicitly in youth work education?	AUS	CRO	EM	EB	IM	IB	NM
Group Work	2	4	4	4	5	5	5
Counselling/active listening/mentoring	2	2	5	5	0	3	5
Case management/individual work	3	2	3	4	1	1	5
Cooperation and Collaboration/Networking	3	5	5	3	5	5	5
Community Development	4	5	4	2	5	5	4
Advocacy	4	5	5	4	5	5	3

Table 2. Cont.

Q2. To what extent are the following practice methods taught explicitly in youth work education?	AUS	CRO	EM	EB	IM	IB	NM
Social Change and Social Action	4	4	5	4	5	5	3
Management	3	1	5	3	5	5	3
Change and innovation	2	4	5	3	5	5	4
Q3. To what extent are the following theoretical approaches taught explicitly in youth work education?	AUS	CRO	EM	EB	IM	IB	NM
Strengths-based	4	3	5	5	5	5	4
Trauma informed practice	4	1	3	1	3	3	5
Collaborative/boundary spanning	2	3	4	2	5	5	4
Ecological/Non-anthropocentric	2	1	2	1	4	4	3
Non-discriminatory/anti-oppressive	5	4	4	3	5	5	3
Holistic/place based/contextual	4	5	4	4	5	5	3
Critical/transformational liberatory	3	5	4	1	5	5	3
Welfare and social control	3	3	2	1	5	5	5
Organic/grounded	3	4	1	1	5	5	4
Participatory/youth-led	5	5	5	5	5	5	4
Access/equity/inclusion	4	2	5	5	5	5	4
Rights-based	5	3	4	4	5	5	4
Class/structural/sociological analysis	3	2	3	4	5	5	4
Organisational theories	2	2	5	2	3	3	4
Q4. To what extent are the following educational methodologies used in youth work education?	AUS	CRO	EM	EB	IM	IB	NM
Social pedagogy	2	2	4	3	5	5	4
Consciousness raising and dialogic (Freirean and others)	5	3	4	3	5	5	3
Action and reflection (reflective practice)/boundary spanning	5	5	5	5	5	5	4
Adult education/andragogy	5	2	4	3	5	5	4
Competency-Based Training	3	5	5	5	5	5	5
Role modelling/mentoring	5	3	5	4	2	1	5
Values Clarification	3	4	5	4	5	5	5
Work integrated learning (on the job/field placement/practicum)	5	4	5	4	5	5	4
Informal/non-formal learning	2	5	5	5	5	5	4
Lifelong learning	3	5	5	4	5	5	5
Professional identity formation	5	4	5	5	5	5	5
Q5. To what extent do the following political, ideological and philosophical values underpin youth work curriculum development?	AUS	CRO	EM	EB	IM	IB	NM
Social Justice	5	5	4	4	5	5	5
Young people as disadvantaged	4	5	2	1	0	3	5
Marxism	3	1	1	1	5	5	3
Socialism	2	1	1	1	5	5	3
Feminism	5	3	4	2	5	5	3
Anti-Conservatism	4	5	3	2	5	5	3
Anti-economic rationalism	3	1	1	1	5	5	3
Judeo-Christianity	2	1	1	1	2	2	3
Human Rights	5	3	4	4	5	5	5

Table 2. Cont.

Q5. To what extent do the following political, ideological and philosophical values underpin youth work curriculum development?	AUS	CRO	EM	EB	IM	IB	NM
Anarchism	3	1	1	1	3	3	3
Peace and Non-Violence	2	4	2	2	5	5	5
Tolerance/acceptance/inclusion	4	4	5	5	5	5	5
Liberal individualism	2	1	2	2	1	1	4
Anti-Nuclear	1	2	1	1	2	2	3
Environmentalism and Climate Justice	2	2	2	2	5	5	3
Functionalism	3	4	3	2	1	1	3
Critical theory	4	0	3	2	5	5	3
Decolonial theory	2	1	1	1	4	4	3
Social democracy	3	4	4	0	4	4	4
Nationalism	0	1	2	2	1	1	3
Social constructivism	4	3	5	3	5	5	5
Post-modernism	2	2	5	2	3	3	3
Q6. To what extent are the following themes taught to youth workers in order to work with young people from particular groups/communities/margins/subcultures?	AUS	CRO	EM	EB	IM	IB	NM
Ethnic/cultural/language minorities	5	1	3	5	5	5	5
LGBTQIA+	5	1	3	5	5	5	4
Disabled	5	1	3	5	3	3	5
Young People with mental health conditions	5	4	3	5	5	5	5
First Nations/Aboriginal	5	1	1	1	1	1	2
Diverse faith/religious/spiritual communities	3	1	2	2	2	2	3
Young People experiencing homelessness	5	1	1	1	5	5	4
Foster Care/Out of home care	4	1	1	1	4	3	5
Young People with AOD misuse	5	1	2	2	5	5	3
Youth Criminal Justice	5	1	2	2	5	5	3
Young people who are unemployed/underemployment precarious	3	4	0	3	5	5	5
Gender	3	4	3	2	5	5	4
Young People experiencing family breakdown/violence	3	1	1	2	4	4	5
Young people vulnerable to gangs/criminal activity	3	1	1	2	4	4	4
Poverty/class analysis	5	1	3	2	5	5	5
Young People vulnerable to radicalisation/political extremism	2	4	3	2	5	5	5
Young people in rural or remote areas	3	1	3	2	5	5	5

3.1. Survey Analysis

The first key finding is that there is broad agreement on many of the values that underpin the five courses across each of the countries. There was a strong focus on young people as the primary consideration, their participation in society, and their empowerment. There was general agreement on practices such as advocacy, social change, and networking. Theoretical approaches such as social justice, anti-oppressive, strengths-based, holistic, and human rights were all considered important. Consciousness raising, reflective practice, work-integrated learning, and professional identity formation were universally considered important educational practices.

In other areas, there were more varied responses. One area that elicited different perspectives was the topic of equity. There was a spirited debate about whether youth work as a social justice pursuit meant equality of opportunity and access, or equity of outcome, or positive discrimination to address social exclusion. This was also reflected in some courses' commitment to more radical traditions of youth work, including a focus on Marxism, feminism, anti-economic rationalism, anarchism, decolonial theory, and critical theory. Generally, these approaches were favoured by the courses in the Irish and Australian contexts, as opposed to Estonia, Croatia, and North Macedonia. As the participants discussed this, it was identified that this reflects the historical contexts of these countries. The former USSR communist countries were understandably more reticent to embrace theoretical concepts such as Marxism that had previously been associated with the ideology of oppressive regimes. This historical context also shed light on why these countries were more likely to embrace nationalism in their courses, as these countries re-asserted their national identities upon independence from the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

Another source of debate and difference among responses was the influence of theoretical concepts from other disciplines. For some courses, concepts like trauma-informed care and therapeutic approaches were useful for youth workers to understand and draw upon in their practice. Other participants preferred to assert the disciplinary distinctiveness of youth work in terms of a pedagogical approach, as opposed to welfarist or therapeutic practices such as case management associated with professions such as counselling and social work.

Finally, participants reflected that their responses often revealed tensions between their courses' overtly stated values and what was taught in their courses. For some the process revealed areas that they thought were important to be taught, but not currently present in their courses. In this respect, it was identified by participants that participating in the research project had significantly shaped their views of their courses and the future development of youth work education in their universities.

3.2. Interview Data

Six key themes emerged from the interview data.

Theme 1: Personal Commitment

The first theme that emerged across the responses was the 'personal' nature of people's connection to youth work education. As one participant noted,

"What makes me a youth work educator is mostly the passion and strong belief in youth work. I do believe it works. I do believe it has benefits. I do believe that ... it's a separate field." Participant 6

Many participants responded to the question "what makes you a youth work educator?" with biographical stories about their entry into the youth work profession and reflected that there was an emotional connection to teaching in this discipline. The following is an example:

"The first thing is my own experience as being a participant in youth work first and foremost ... And so the feeling I had was a very positive feeling, a very good feeling. I know now of course that really what that is, is the values of youth work, empowerment, inclusion, participation. I didn't realise that back then, but what I did know was that it felt good." Participant 11

Theme 2: Occupational Commitment

Participants reflected a second 'occupational' theme describing their professional commitment to youth works as a sense of calling or vocation to the profession, and to its

development through education and research. This commitment was also present in the process of the interviews, with participants sitting and sharing with each other. As one participant noted,

"I'm a youth work educator vocationally. Vocationally in the sense of because I care about young people, but also because I care about the education of youth workers. Yes, it's a vocation." Participant 4

Theme 3: Values Commitment

The third overarching theme that emerged was a commitment to the 'values' underpinning youth work education. These values were evident in what participants reported about their curriculum, their methods, and their interactions with students and the university systems that they work in. For example, participants mentioned theorists of inequality, decolonisation, intersectionality, critical theory, and feminist pedagogy.

These values reflect those noted in the literature review and the survey. But the participants also reflected that these were values that were consistent with their personal values.

"I'm deeply connected to this work because I believe in it. Not just in what it does for young people, but in what it represents: a commitment to equity, participation, and social justice. These aren't just theoretical principles." Participant 12

Theme 4: Social Pedagogy (informal and non-formal education)

A fourth theme was the role of what was described broadly as 'social pedagogy' in youth work education. Participants reflected that social pedagogy (often expressed as informal or non-formal education) is both the content of youth work education and the method. Thus, they reported various informal and non-formal education methods in their teaching practice, such as flattening power dynamics, dialogical approaches, and classroom geography:

"I use youth work methodology. I use non-formal methods quite a lot and in comparison with colleagues who are much more focused on content, I'm much more focused on the process." Participant 7

Participants recognised 'critical' forms of social pedagogy that challenge power dynamics in classrooms such as student-centred learning, and the necessity of "*practicing what they preached*" about social pedagogy in their teaching practice. This was reflected in the theoretical sources they mentioned such as Freire's critical pedagogy. However, as discussed in the section above, the particular theorists of social pedagogy nominated by participants was reflective of the historical context of their setting. For example, the critical pedagogic theories of Paulo Freire (seen by participants as located within the broad discipline of social pedagogy—see [Corney et al., 2024](#)) were prominent in both Ireland and Australia, reflecting the influence of the British youth work tradition in Australia ([Cooper, 2018](#)), and in the Irish context, linked to Liberation Theology and emancipatory community work ideals ([Cooper et al., 2024](#)). In contrast, Estonian participants did not draw as overtly on the critical pedagogy of Freire, because they perceived it to be too closely linked to the Marxist ideologies of the former USSR. As one Estonian participant noted:

"I have used Freire in teaching, [but] we don't use much Freire. Sometimes I wonder if this is a protest [post-USSR]. Or maybe subconscious protest, although we use Freire's ideas, like dialogical learning, all the ideas are there, but it's just not so much [overtly] on Freire." Participant 3

Estonian universities also have a standalone tradition of teaching programmes focussed on 'social pedagogy' as an academic discipline that is distinct from the teaching

of youth work, so Estonian participants tended to use the language of ‘informal’ or ‘non-formal’ education to distinguish their youth work approach from other disciplines in their university.

Theme 5: Social Justice

Reflecting on educating youth workers to work with diverse young people, ‘social justice’ emerged as the fifth key theme. While participants had various views on what constituted social justice, they agreed that achieving social justice was a primary purpose of youth work. For example, one participant said

“I look at youth work through a very critical lens. So for me, youth work is about tackling social injustices and promoting equality or equity.” Participant 2

In relation to achieving social justice, participants reflected on the need to engage youth workers in a structural analysis of society to prevent the problematising of so-called ‘diverse’ young people. As another participant said

“The principles of community work and youth work guide my teaching . . . it’s grounded in the values . . . so a critical, structural social analysis is the basis of everything for me.”

Participant 1

This was also reflected in the various ‘critical’ theorists that were cited as important to youth work. Participants discussed the need to respect young people’s human rights and taking strengths-based approaches, and recognising that diversity was experienced intersectionally. They encouraged their students to engage dialogically in Freirean reflective practice, to be curious, and respectful of diversity.

Theme 6: Relationship Building

Finally, the participants spoke about the important theme of ‘relationship building’ in youth work education. This reflected their commitment to relational social pedagogic methods, as well as modelling youth work practice in the classroom. This relationship building also helped enable reflective practice and identity formation of youth work students.

Participants also reflected that participating in this research process was an opportunity for the development of their own pedagogic practice. As one participant noted,

“Youth work, at its core, is relational. So I approach education in the same way. I make space for trust, for safety, for dialogue. I try to create a learning environment where students feel they can bring their whole selves—their uncertainties, their ideas, their lived experiences. That’s how youth work functions too. It meets young people where they are. As an educator, I strive to do the same.” Participant 8

4. Discussion and Implications

In analysing the themes from the quantitative and qualitative data in the context of the literature, four key ideas emerge, with implications for youth work education, particularly for working with diverse young people.

The first is the affirmation that youth work, theory and practice is grounded broadly in social and critical pedagogic traditions. The participants affirmed the conceptual pedagogic definition of youth work from Corney et al. (2024) that “non-formal education, framed by human rights, appears to offer definitional common ground for youth work practice globally” (p. 1). However, as noted above, this can take different forms based on cultural context. Participants from Ireland and Australia grounded their expression of social pedagogy in the critical pedagogy of Freire (1972). In the case of the Irish this was primarily through Liberation Theology and in Australia through the informal education traditions of British-influenced youth work (Cooper, 2012; C. Bradley et al., 2024; C. Bradley et al., 2025).

In contrast, Eastern Europeans drew more closely from the social pedagogic concepts associated with Nordic and Scandinavian folk school traditions (Lövgren & Nordvall, 2017), as well the reticence to overtly embrace the more explicit Marxist roots of critical pedagogy found in Freire. However, youth work educators from a variety of backgrounds can agree on the emancipatory principles of critical pedagogy and their use in youth work education—such as person-centred learning, flattening power dynamics, dialogical approaches, and education for empowerment and broad social justice commitments. This is important for educators not just in the content of their courses but in their own pedagogical methods.

The second finding of this research is that the educators shared an understanding of youth work as values-driven, expressed as ‘a social justice project’, and how that is represented in youth work courses. Amongst the participants there was a general agreement that a primary purpose of youth work is to enable social justice, especially in the context of working with intersectional young people from diverse backgrounds who may experience social exclusion. This is broadly reflective of the literature (Howell, 2021; McMahon et al., 2024), and it is necessary to state, given the pressures that youth workers face by neoliberal governments to engage in service delivery, case management and other welfarist aims of the state (Giroux et al., 2015; Corney, 2019).

For some participants there was a fear that the youth work sector may be instrumentalised, shifting practitioners’ focus toward predetermined outcomes and promoting a deficit-oriented view of young people, reflecting neoliberal and market-based pressures (Howard, 2022; Hogan et al., 2021; McMahon, 2018). If youth work is to challenge injustice, it must be outspoken. For Bradford (2010), youth work is “concerned with ‘empowering’ young people, helping them to develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to become active participants in society, rather than its passive victims” (pp. 60–61). Rather than viewing young people through a deficit lens as a problem to be managed, or as being vulnerable and at risk, a social justice youth work position considers young people as being “socially aware, critically minded and highly capable” (Cooper, 2012, pp. 56–57), and that the task of youth work is to work with young people to empower these qualities to transform their worlds. Taking a social justice position in youth work provides the space and opportunity not only for young people to be ‘creators, not consumers’ (Smith, 1982) but also for young people and youth workers to become ‘co-creators’ in ways that are mutually empowering (Reynolds Conlon, 2025).

One area identified by this study warranting further attention is the need to build consensus about the theoretical approaches and frameworks for exploring the concept of social injustice in youth work courses. Whilst there is a general agreement about youth work as a relational, empowering practice, courses hold different perspectives on how to understand the causes of social injustice (for example, structural and class-based poverty). Exploring further what is meant by ‘social injustice’ in youth work is a recommendation of the study.

A third implication of the study is the relationship of ‘professionalisation’ of youth work as a nascent emerging profession and the development of the body of knowledge particularly in regard to identifiable professional practices. As such, ‘reflective practice’ was identified as a professional practice important to both youth work educators’ and youth work students, and to youth work practitioners. Reflective practice was identified as a way for ‘professionals’ to understand their own personal backgrounds and subsequent values and the potential influence of these on their practice. As noted above, youth work is a values-driven profession (Maunders, 1990; Corney, 2004a; Purcell et al., 2024); thus youth workers’ personal experiences and values will inform their youth work practice (Cottrell, 2008, p. 36). Buchroth and Parkin (2010) argue that reflective practice is “the mark of being a ‘professional’ as opposed to being a ‘technician’” (p. 19). Therefore, this study

notes the importance of enabling reflective practice for the professionalisation process and that this concept extends to youth work educators. We suggest that the same demands of reflexivity and personal examination that benefit youth workers in their practice (Sercombe, 2018) may assist educators too. Bessant (2009) noted that “youth work educators, and practitioners, rarely in a written form capture, record or reflect on their own practice” and thus “there is insufficient systematic recording of and reflection on good practice” (p. 67). Educators must reflect on their own teaching practices to ensure they meet the needs of diverse students (Ranahan et al., 2015, p. 528). Jones (2025) examined the experiences of youth work educators attempting to implement social pedagogical practices in higher education and found that by engaging with a ‘community of practice’ that facilitated ‘reflective learning’, educators had chances to ‘check-in’ and engage with their project in the context of difficult environments (p. 3). As such a further finding is the usefulness of peer-based ‘communities of practice’ that allow youth workers and educators to engage in reflective practice in the manner of Trelfa and Telfer’s (2014) framework; that is, a reflective practitioner is something you need to *be*, not just something you *do*. This finding has implications for the professionalisation of youth work that is germane for both educators and practitioners. For youth work professionals to engage in effective ‘praxis’, they must model and be reflective practitioners.

Finally, it is important to note that the influence of neoliberal capitalism and free-market, economic rationalist government funding policy has changed the nature and purpose of the university. As Giroux (2010, p. 715) states plainly,

“... higher education, once conceptualized as a public good, has been reduced to a private good. Universities are now largely defined through the corporate demand that they provide the skills, knowledge, and credentials to build a workforce.”

This means that debate and discussion about values in education, pedagogy, curriculum, the role of a teacher and relationship to a student, and the power of education as a social good, what Giroux (2010) would call a “...deeply civic, political, and moral practice” (p. 715), is being reduced and its arguments silenced in favour of a pragmatic, for-profit, free-market-driven approach (Corney, 2019). As such, this research confirms the importance of youth work as a unique discipline with its own body of knowledge, distinct values and subsequent education. Whilst participants noted that they drew on various interdisciplinary techniques (community work, group work, trauma-informed approaches, etc.), the distinctive aims and methods of youth work are to be emphasised. This is important at this time when the teaching of a ‘values-driven’ youth work curriculum is under scrutiny in the academy.

It is critical to note in the neoliberal context of higher education that youth work courses face significant pressures. Corney (2019) and Seal and Smith (2019) have outlined the current neoliberal context in which higher education institutions are working and the slow move of the university from publicly funded institution towards privatised and for-profit business models. This has further obscured the debate around best practice provision, as youth work educators and trainers have had to fight their institutions to survive neoliberal challenges to economic viability of courses based on ‘business cases’ founded on minimum enrolment numbers and employment outcomes of graduates and other institutional performance indicators of the neoliberal university (Norris, 2024, pp. 241–242). Batsleer (2021, p. 645) asserts that youth worker education in the academy is a “site of contestation” and resistance, where its commitment to anti-oppressive practices contradicts the capitalist market-driven aims of the modern university and hence attracts scrutiny. In the present environment, many youth work educators are fighting to keep courses and programmes alive, or at least distinct from other disciplines in the threat of mergers (Corney, 2019). Thus, there is a need for educators and professional youth work bodies, more

broadly, to resist mergers and genericisation and assert the disciplinary distinctiveness of youth work and the necessity of specific youth work education (C. Bradley et al., 2024).

To conclude, this research finds that youth work is a values-driven professional practice, and its education is grounded in human rights and social and critical pedagogic approaches. This research examined how these concepts were expressed across five national contexts, and the approaches that educators in those countries took in the education of youth workers, particularly in relation to work with diverse young people. These bounds necessarily limit the application of the findings beyond that sphere, including non-university training spaces, such as vocational or other non-accredited training. Further research is required to examine those areas, as well as the experiences in other countries, including the Global South. Further research into teaching and classroom practices in these contexts is recommended to provide insight into how values and theoretical approaches apply to best practice. Finally, research into the perspectives and reflections of youth work students and graduates into their experiences of youth work education and training, the underpinning values and pedagogies, and the relationship to their professional practice would also expand the field of knowledge and build upon the findings of this research.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

PD4D	Professional Development for Diversity
USSR	United Soviet Socialist Republic
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
UN	United Nations
BNIM	Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method
SQUIN	Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative

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