Six Intervention Models of Youth Work (Theoretical)

Bessant et al (1998) described youth work as ‘engaging with young people in a professional relationship in which:

- the young person(s) are the primary constituency and the mandate given by them has priority
- the young person(s) are understood as social beings whose lives are shaped in negotiation with their social context
- the young person is dealt with holistically’.

Youth work practices (referred to in this paper as ‘intervention models’) attempt to incorporate this definition in a variety of ways. Understanding these models will help you to develop a theoretical framework that can be built upon. Knowledge of these models will also provide you with an essential suite of approaches to use within your work.

It is important to understand that there is no single, conclusive model of youth work. In practice, different components can be taken from a range of models and incorporated into a combined model, depending on personal values, agency guidelines, or the client’s issues.

A good place to start research into models of youth work intervention is the article Models of Youth Work Intervention by Trudi Cooper & Rob White (Youth Studies Australia, volume 3, number 4, pp 30–35, 1994). In this article the authors discuss their interpretation of intervention models based on their own practice methods and experiences.

Cooper and White argue that youth workers need to have a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve and the impact of the methods they use.

The authors describe their models as incomplete works in progress and draw from a variety of political values, ideologies, skills and practical orientations to develop the six models of intervention. These models are:

- the Treatment Model
- the Reform Model
- the Advocacy Model (Radical)
- the Advocacy Model (Non-Radical)
- the Empowerment Model (Radical)
- the Empowerment Model (Non-Radical).
The Treatment Model

The Treatment model defines young people as deviant, mad or deficient. They present a social threat to the community. Young people must be treated or made to conform to societal ‘norms’ to become productive members of society and if this is unsuccessful, action should be taken to protect society.

The model assumes that all members of society agree on acceptable standards of behaviour. The values that underpin this model are social conformity, distinctions between class structures and self-improvement through competition. The model ignores social justice.

The main motivation of this model is to promote good citizenship and conventional lifestyles. The interventions involved in the model require structured discipline and programs to limit anti-social behaviours and promote specific standards and values.

If you think back to historical perspective of youth work, you will see how this model was popular in Britain, as well as the early days of Australian colonisation.

In 2001 it could be argued that young offender (Juvenile Justice) programs are delivered using this framework. Young people who become part of the Juvenile Justice program, as a result of breaking the law and appearing before a Court, are often seen as misfits or deviants who must have their behaviour ‘re-shaped’ in order to fit into society.

The Reform Model

The Reform Model defines young people as being socially disadvantaged by their environment and upbringing. This in turn may make them social outcasts and cause them to inflict violent behaviour on themselves or others.

This model maintains that the values of society are acceptable and desirable but that some minor changes (reforms) may be necessary to improve conditions for disadvantaged groups. Supporters of this model believe that socio-environmental conditions affect people differently and individual coping skills will vary. Society will offer help to those who attempt to help themselves.

The motivations for intervention are primarily to ensure social stability by supporting and encouraging the process of equal participation of young people in the community. Extreme suffering is considered morally unacceptable in modern society and all citizens have a duty of care to help the unfairly disadvantaged. Society should provide education and training to enable the young person to compete in the job market.

Specific programs and services that target the needs of young people in education and training should be available. This should be coupled with personal development programs.

Under this model, youth workers require skills in motivation, rapport building and the ability to help young people identify their own needs. The disciplines mentioned within the framework are social psychology, group work and personal development skills, which promote and encourage successful outcomes for young people.
The Advocacy Model (Radical)

The Radical Advocacy Model defines young people as being marginalised by current society through inadequate basic rights or social protection. Young people are ill informed as to their rights and how to access them. Society is viewed under this model as fundamentally unjust in its laws and bureaucracy.

The role of the youth worker is to expose inequality and get rid of bureaucratic and legal biases which disempower the young. The motivation for intervention is based on transforming society towards the adoption of values of equality and social justice.

Interventions suggested are the development of group campaigns to promote and advocate the reform of institutional inequality. This is a human rights and social justice model of intervention. Youth workers need skills in campaigning, media and motivation and their role is to advocate on the behalf of individuals and groups for social change.

The Advocacy (Non-Radical)

The young person is defined in this model as having problems because they are ignorant of their rights. Furthermore, bureaucratic barriers prevent their access to knowledge and information. Society is viewed in this model as complex and bureaucratic in nature – either it cannot be changed or it is the task of others (besides the youth worker) to change it.

The underpinning values of this non-radical advocacy model are based on the belief that equality is present for those who have existing equality of opportunity and access to it. The youth worker’s role under this model is to assist the young person in acquiring whatever they deserve or are legally entitled to.

The youth worker should work to ensure that young people are aware of supports and entitlements and to work with bureaucracies so that young people achieve their rights.

Examples of interventions under this model are welfare rights groups, Citizens Advice Bureaus and Legal Aid.

The role of the youth worker is to maximise the young person’s ability to benefit under legal and institutional frameworks through advocacy and participation. Skills needed by the youth worker under this model are an understanding of welfare and legal rights, networking and relationship building with bureaucracy.
The Empowerment Model (Radical)

This model contends that institutions, which operate to protect the privileged or powerful, systematically disempower young people. Youth are seen as only one group disempowered under this framework.

Society is viewed as unjust and controlled by the elite or upper classes. The basic values of the model are that youth workers should help young people to address power imbalances in society without disempowering other disadvantaged groups.

Youth workers should not act as advocates for young people but rather help them to obtain the skills to act on their own. The model also suggests that institutions, such as the media and education, are responsible for the belief that existing social hierarchical structures are natural. It focuses on oppression of marginalised groups and believes that the hierarchical structures create personal blame and apathy towards change. Examples of interventions under this model are welfare rights groups, Citizens Advice Bureaus and Legal Aid.

The role of the youth worker is to maximise the young person’s ability to benefit under legal and institutional frameworks through advocacy and participation. Skills needed by the youth worker under this model are an understanding of welfare and legal rights, networking and relationship building with bureaucracy.

Young people should be encouraged to believe in themselves and identify oppressive factors so that they can overcome inequality. Workers should be aware of power imbalances and not assume a leadership role in the process.

The Empowerment Model (Non-Radical)

This model holds that young people don’t have enough control or power over their lives. Impacting on this is society’s view that young people need to be protected from themselves and others.

The core values framing the model are that young people need to be given more control over their lives and that they are capable of making independent decisions, providing adults allow them. It also states that empowerment can be achieved if the young person is assisted to become more powerful within whatever framework of values they individually choose.

The sole motivation is to help young people gain control over their lives. The interventions adopted are to take on a ‘laissez faire’ approach and allow young people to take their own action. Youth workers need to be supportive and motivational without interfering in the process and should be seen in the role of a friend.

While knowledge of these theoretical models is essential to the youth worker, there are other models of service delivery that are currently in practice. To find out more about these models, you may wish to explore Colleague’s Advice in the Youth Work Agency.