The Centre for Effective Services connects research, policy and practice to improve outcomes for communities, children and young people across the island of Ireland.

We work to influence policy and systems change; champion innovative service design and implementation; and build knowledge, skills and capacity for government departments, organisations, researchers and practitioners.

Part of a new generation of intermediary organisations, CES is a not-for-profit that helps communities, children and young people thrive.

Company number 451580
Charity number 19438 in Ireland.

© Centre for Effective Services, 2014
Authors

This Ideas in Action in Youth Work resource has been produced by Dr John Bamber (Centre for Effective Services) with the assistance of Dr Sam O’Brien-Olinger and Martina O’Brien (Graduate Interns, Centre for Effective Services).

Through their participation in a working group led by the City of Dublin Youth Service Board, the conception and development of this theory-practice resource benefitted significantly from contributions by:

- Mary Robb, Quality Standards Training and Resource Task Group
- Caroline Jones, City of Dublin Youth Service Board
- Mathew Seebach, Youth Work Ireland
- Amy Power, Independent consultant (formerly Department of Children and Youth Affairs)

Written feedback on the initial draft document was provided by:

- Graham Griffiths, Programme Leader, Youth and Community Development, Bradford College.
- Sam McCready, Senior Lecturer, School of Sociology and Applied Social Studies, University of Ulster.
- Professor Dale Blyth, Extension Professor, School of Social Work, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.
- Dr Sue Redmond, Manager, Best Practice Unit, Foróige.
- Siobhán Brennan, Senior Project Officer, National Youth Health Programme, National Youth Council of Ireland.
- Dr Roger Harrison, Open University (UK).

Verbal feedback was given by:

- Sue Wayman & Jo Trelfa, Senior Lecturers in Children, Young People and Communities, University College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth.
- Professor John Davis, Professor of Childhood Inclusion Education, Community and Society (ECS), University of Edinburgh.

*Our thanks to all.*
Foreword

In 2012, the Irish National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (NQSF) held a series of road shows. The purpose of these events was to connect the theory of youth work with the practice as it is experienced by those working in the field. At each event youth workers discussed a range of difficulties and issues they experienced, and it quickly became clear they had identified a gap that needed to be bridged.

With the support and assistance of local and international colleagues, and the valuable contributions of a working group led by the City of Dublin Youth Service Board, the Centre for Effective Services created this Ideas In Action In Youth Work resource. It has been designed in direct response to the needs identified by youth workers during the 2012 road shows. Its function is to help and support them in planning their work; to put that planning into practice; and to evaluate the results.

This section, In Theory explains the origins of the resource; who it is for; how it might best be used; and the approach taken to its development. A second document, In Practice, is action-oriented and provides models, practical guides and tool-kits, as well as links to articles and other resources.

Ideas in Action In Youth Work does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of all the theories underpinning youth work. Nor do we suggest that the theories and theorists featured here are definitive or uncontested. They have been selected from a range of many possible sources, solely for the specific purpose of assisting workers to develop their ability to strengthen the relationship between theory and practice.

In developing this resource, three underlying principles were applied. Firstly, that all materials and references are freely available online and can be accessed via the Centre for Effective Services website, www.effectiveservices.org. Secondly, that it is not a one-off programme: it is a support that is designed to be accessed as needed. And finally, that it is not static: over time it will be extended and improved upon in direct response to user feedback. Your views as users are important, we want to hear them. Ideas in Action In Youth Work was designed for your benefit and that of the young people you work with. Any views, comments, and suggestions should be addressed to Dr John Bamber: jbamber@effectiveservices.org.
Background to this Theory-Practice Resource
Background to this Theory-Practice Resource

In response to demand, the Centre for Effective Services developed this resource for use by Irish youth workers, and those who support these frontline practitioners. In Ireland, youth work is defined as (Youth Work Act, Ireland 2001):

*A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training, and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.*

The Irish National Youth Work Development Plan 2003–2007 indicates the wide range of activities involved in youth work. These include:

- Recreational and sporting activities, indoor/outdoor pursuits, uniformed and non-uniformed.
- Creative, artistic and cultural or language-based programmes and activities.
- Spiritual development programmes and activities.
- Programmes designed with specific groups of young people in mind (e.g. young women or men, those with disabilities, Travellers, or those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual).
- Issue-based activities (related to, for example, political education, justice and social awareness, the environment, development education).
- Activities and programmes concerned with welfare and well-being (health promotion, relationships and sexuality, stress management).
- Intercultural and international awareness activities and exchanges.
Youth work is delivered by paid professional as well as volunteer workers, with the latter very much in the majority. Youth workers are employed by a wide range of public and voluntary services spanning such fields as education, health and welfare. Although delivered by a range of providers, and through a variety of activities, youth work is characterised by a process that:

- Builds mutually trustful and respectful relationships with and between young people, into which they normally enter by choice.
- Occurs mainly but not exclusively in informal community-based settings.
- Works through purposeful practices tailored to the interests and concerns, needs, rights and responsibilities of young people, giving priority to how they identify and understand these.
- Seeks to build personal and social competencies and capacities.
- Favours active, experiential, group and collective learning over didactic and individualised forms, or predetermined curricula.
- Encourages young people to participate voluntarily where they are supported to work with adults in partnership.
- Provides opportunities that are fun, developmental, educative, challenging, supportive and creative, and are intended and designed to extend young people’s power over their own lives and within their wider society.
- Seeks to enable young people to clarify and embrace key features of their individual and collective identities in relation to class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability.
- Supports young people as they deal with difficulties, threats and risks which may impact in damaging ways on them, in their communities, and wider society.

Anyone working in this way would not be working ‘for’ or ‘on’ young people. Rather they would be working together with young people. The term ‘co-production’ captures the mutuality at the heart of the intended encounter between young person and worker.
What is it designed to do?

Ideas In Action In Youth Work has been designed to help practitioners to:

- Understand why people behave and think in certain ways.
- Question particular approaches and practices.
- Find ways to improve their work.
- Uncover the assumptions that they are making about their work.
- Imagine and explore alternative courses of action.
- Relate their own ideas to a wider set of theories and theorists.

It has been designed to support the [Irish National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (NQSF)](http://example.com), which was introduced in January 2011 by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs). The City of Dublin Youth Service Board has produced a valuable guide to the NQSF, which can be accessed [here](http://example.com).

The NQSF provides services and organisations with the opportunity to articulate their youth work practice through a shared language, which includes being able to describe the theoretical foundations that inform and guide the work. It also provides a structured framework for organisations to assess, indicate and enhance their work. The intention is to achieve a commonality and compatibility between youth work provision and the core principles and standards outlined in the NQSF. The core principles are:

1. **Young person-centred**: recognising the rights of young people and holding as central their active and voluntary participation.
2. **Committed to ensuring and promoting the safety and well-being of young people.**
3. **Educational and developmental.**
4. **Committed to ensuring and promoting equality and inclusiveness in all its dealings with young people and adults.**
5. **Dedicated to the provision of quality youth work and committed to continuous improvement.**
Why was it developed?
Ideas In Action In Youth Work came from a series of NQSF ‘road show’ events in Ireland in 2012. The road shows were about connecting evidence in youth work and the NQSF. At these events, youth workers communicated a number of difficulties and issues with making links between theory and practice. Commonly, they were unsure about the theoretical sources for the work, where such sources could be found, or how to use theory in ways that could relate to and underpin their work in a practical way. Our creation of this theory-practice resource is a response to their desire to strengthen the interplay between theory and practice.

Who is it for?
Ideas in Action In Youth Work is designed to cater for a diverse range of users including:

- **Practitioners**: in responding to the NQSF and seeking to improve their practice.
- **Line Managers**: in supporting front line workers to develop practice.
- **Education and Training Board Officers**: in assisting practitioners to fulfil the requirements of the NQSF.
- **Trainers**: in assisting workers to develop skills and knowledge.
- **Academics**: in teaching students about the links between theory and practice.
- **Students**: in developing their understanding of theory.
What is ‘theory’?

Theory is a word with many meanings. At the risk of over-simplification, it often refers to:

- **Explanations** or (more tentatively) possible explanations with respect to what is known about something.

- **Predictions** about why something will happen in a particular way, even if this is complex and not at all straightforward, as a result of certain actions.

- **Philosophical, ideological and political ideas** which provide a fundamental basis for practice (such as equality, justice and democracy).

- **Underlying principles** as a justification for doing something in a certain way (such as experiential learning, a bottom-up approach, a negotiated agenda, or empowerment).

- **The research and literature** that examines and discusses all of the above in relation to the field of practice.

This resource illustrates how sources drawn appropriately from relevant research and literature can provide a theoretical underpinning for practice.

In summarising a range of qualitative studies on the theory-practice relationship, Eraut (1997: 38) reports that:

*Good practitioners had an enormously complex and highly personal knowledge base, constructed from experience but used in a fairly intuitive way. Many traces of discipline-based knowledge could be found but not in their original form. Moreover, much of this complex knowledge base was tacit rather than explicit, so that practitioners could not readily articulate what they did or how they did it.*

More generally, Handy (1985) observes that human beings develop concepts to interpret reality. These concepts may be unconscious – beliefs, hunches, assumptions, and sometimes myths, stereotypes and superstitions. In his view, we need to understand the models in our mind because: *‘Such models, lurking in the unconscious, can be dangerous in the wrong place’* (1985: 16). In this case, it is important for practitioners to make tacit ideas and understandings explicit.

In work settings, youth workers might draw from theory when they are trying to explain the past, to understand the present, or to predict the future in order to have more influence over coming events and less interference from the unexpected. Practitioners have a tendency, however, to favour personal knowledge and experience.
How does it work?

Ideas In Action In Youth Work supports youth workers to strengthen the relationship between theory and practice by helping them to make explicit links between the NQSF core principles, key concepts and values in youth work, and their own actions. In relation to each of the five NQSF core principles, this resource provides a model or framework that helps workers to think about and develop their practice. Hyperlinks to other resources help to locate and consider relevant theorists and theories, or key concepts or values, and provide access guides and toolkits that support activity.

What is the best way to use it?

Ideas In Action In Youth Work is also based on the understanding that there are different approaches to learning and development. In the 1970s Honey and Mumford summarised these approaches in terms of four basic learning styles:

- **Activists**: prefer to complete a task, resolve a problem or address an issue.
- **Reflectors**: prefer to observe, and take time to think before responding.
- **Theorists**: prefer to understand and probe ideas.
- **Pragmatists**: prefer to see a clear connection between ideas and work.

Although there is a lively debate about the concept of learning styles, Ideas In Action In Youth Work advocates that people learn in different ways, even if these ways might sometimes be combined according to the demands of the situation.

Ideas In Action In Youth Work is also designed with a range of points of access. Some people will be relatively new to the content, whereas others will find it familiar. Its diversity of sources means all users will find something to suit their specific needs and entry point. For example, some will be particularly interested in the theoretical issues, whereas others may want to focus on the ‘hands-on’ aspects.
Ideas in Action: A Rationale
Competing views about youth work theory

There are different and often competing views as to the fundamental purpose of youth work (Murphy: 1999). In their review of the training of adults who volunteer to work with young people, Butters and Newell (1978) provided a seminal framework for thinking about purpose in youth work. This framework traces three major approaches in terms of: character-building (focusing on moral development); social education (involving cultural adjustment, personal development, and empowerment) and self-emancipation (involving social change). The authors posit a ‘critical’ break between what they portray as three significantly different ways of working with young people. The premise is that different kinds of practice flow from different ideological perspectives, in other words from different philosophical or political convictions.

Table 1 provides a much simplified overview of their schema.

For other overarching formulations informing youth work practice, see Hurley and Treacey (1993) and Cooper (2012). Frameworks can help practitioners to examine, articulate and adopt an orientation to the work. In doing so, they can help youth workers to reflect on what has occurred, and what might need to be done going forward. Crucially, frameworks bring an overall coherence to the fundamental values that underpin youth work such as democracy, justice, and equality.

All such frameworks have their weaknesses. The Butters and Newell framework has been criticised for presenting the three approaches as historically sequential; or as if they are clear-cut in the realities of practice (Smith, 1988; Bamber and Murphy, 1999). As Smith argues (1998), while it is possible to paint the character-building approach as reactionary, it is neither useful nor necessary to reject the emphasis on moral and personal development associated with it.
Youth work as empowerment

A useful starting point is to simplify and recast the elements in the Butters and Newell schema in terms of a developmental process. As Merton et al, state (Youth Affairs Unit, 2004: 5):

*There is widespread consensus that youth work’s core purpose is the personal and social development of young people, provided through informal education.*

Williamson (1995: 12) expresses this purpose in a dynamic way:

*There is a developmental process in all youth work practice, starting with a focus on the individual, evolving into group formation, consolidation and growth, and perhaps culminating in the group effecting change for itself in one way or another.*

Depending on the situation, youth workers will move between all the elements in the process as appropriate, and in such a way that individuals can be supported to come together in groups to pursue common interests, or to deal with self-identified problems and issues. Such group activity can lead to collective actions to bring about desired changes, for example in personal and communal circumstances, service provision, or ultimately in social and economic conditions. As Williamson says, there may well be no collective action without the formative, personal development stage.
The concept of **empowerment** is widely used to explain the purpose and the process of youth work. Because it refers to a way of working with young people (process), as well as to the intended results of that work (outcomes), it can be elaborated as a **theory of change**. A theory of change sets out why and how interventions can be expected to lead to desired changes in outcomes for individuals, groups, and social circumstances. Because so many variables determine actual outcomes, specific youth work interventions cannot be held responsible for population level changes. The same would be true even if it was possible in some way simultaneously to put together and add up all the interventions under the general heading of *youth work*, which of course it is not. However, a theory-change approach helps to explain what even the smallest of interventions can contribute to personal development, and also to wider policy priorities.

Table 2 provides an overview of empowerment in youth work as a theory of change.

### Socially useful theory

Empowerment is more likely when workers are clear about concepts such as experiential learning, participation, rights and social action (*In Practice* shows how these and other key terms are used). The late Jean Anyon has argued that theoretical understanding is not primarily derived from reference to other theories but from the dialogue between values, vision or goals and current activities (*Anyon, 1994: 129-130*). For Anyon, such understandings are neither totalizing and seamless (attempting to be the whole ‘answer’ or explanation for a situation), nor are they ad hoc and only applicable to one locale or one situation (having no relevance to anything or anyone else). The point is to connect local activity to wider societal constraints so that people can see a way forward instead of being overwhelmed by the idea of trying to ‘change society’. Anyon calls this **socially useful theory**. Youth workers adopting this approach:

- Connect personal problems to social issues.
- Analyse individual and local situations within a wider socio-economic context.
- Develop theoretical understanding in the resolution of practice issues and problems.
- Draw from research and literature to inform practice.
- Address the socially divisive imbalance of power in society.
- Embody the fundamental values of democracy, justice and equality.
Table 2: **EMPOWERMENT IN YOUTH WORK AS A THEORY OF CHANGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development in these ways</th>
<th>Leads to desired changes in these areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUAL</td>
<td>Knowledge, skills, behaviours, attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In turn, individual development can help groups to become more effective. When groups increase the capacity to support members and to achieve their goals, they also enable individual growth and development.

GROUP

Capacity of a group to communicate, identify problems and issues, and take action to resolve these where appropriate

Enhanced capacity in terms of:

- Participatory decision-making
- Identification of sub-goals and tasks
- Ability to review progress
- Ability to provide positive feedback and support
- Legitimisation of the expression of feelings
- Fostering relationships
- Exercising leadership
- Challenging conventional power relations in groups

Enhanced capacity in terms of participation in:

- Networks
- Collaborations
- Engagement with local, regional, national structures
- Campaigns
- Task groups
- Consultations
- Planning and decision-making
- Decision-making, engagement with policy and decision-makers
- Micro environmental projects

Enhancing individual and group capacities can help young people to make the most of opportunities and experiences, and address issues or to contribute to social change initiatives. Good quality youth work also supports young people to engage in change efforts. When they do so, young people can learn from the experience and the results and can grow as individuals or in their collective capacity to work together.

SOCIAL

Situations, circumstances and conditions that influence, determine or disadvantage young people (e.g. young women, LGBT young people, those from migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds, those in certain economically disadvantaged and socially marginalised geographical areas)

- Safer communities
- Improved service delivery with better access for disadvantaged groups
- Services are better informed and more effective
- Planning and decision-making are better informed at all levels
- Opportunities are more equally distributed
- Reduction in discriminatory practices
- Reduction in crime
- Improvement in social standing of groups
Theorising

In the above account of socially useful theory, it is possible to see at least two different uses of theory. One is to explain why something happens, and the other is to suggest ways of bringing about desired changes. The former can be called explanatory theory, and the latter change theory. When practitioners are referring to ideological commitments, or under-pinning principles, and drawing from the research and literature to explain why something does or should happen (explanatory theory), or to come up with ways of bringing about desired changes in specific situations (change theory), they can be said to be ‘theorising’.

According to Carr and Kemmis (1994: 205-206), the primary goal of theorising is not the refinement of concepts but effective action.

It is ‘activist’ in the sense that it engages them in taking action on the basis of their critical self-reflection, but it is prudent in the sense that it creates change at the rate at which it is justified by reflection and feasible for the participants in the process. It is not critical enough or radical enough for some: it only produces reform at a rate at which it is practically achievable, not at the rate that some would like; and it produces less radical change than some would like, though it does produce changes in concrete practices, understandings and situations which earn the commitment of practitioners in their own self-reflection.

It is important to understand that a focus on concrete activity, or recourse to ‘middle order’ theory, is not to deflect attention away from fundamental purposes. To take Anyon’s line, it is about working out fundamental purpose in a particular context and setting. From this perspective youth work is not a failure, or practice somehow ‘lesser’, if emancipation is not achieved in some totalising society-wide sense. Good quality youth work can support work with young people in specific situations in ways that contribute meaningfully to an ultimate goal such as emancipation. What is required can be usefully considered in terms of an evidence-informed approach.
An evidence-informed approach

An evidence-informed approach ‘helps people and organisations make well-informed decisions by putting the best available evidence at the heart of practice development and service delivery’ (Nutley, 2010). Acting in an evidence-informed way involves:

- Sifting information gleaned from research and other sources.
- Weighing reliability and relevance.
- Synthesising and interpreting meaning.
- Identifying actions applicable to the realities of practice.
- Systematically applying objective criteria to inform planning and decision-making.
- Remaining open-minded and willing to question accepted orthodoxies.

It is important to appreciate that such an approach is not confined to professional activity. As Schorr writes in relation to community development (2003: 10):

*Communities will be able to act most effectively when they can combine local wisdom and their understanding of local circumstances with accumulated knowledge, drawn from research, theory, and practice, about what has worked elsewhere, what is working now, and what appears promising.*

The list below shows the range of possible sources that can inform understandings of youth work practice.

- Research (primary research, commissioned research, or publications in academic journals).
- Grey literature (reports from government and other sources such as think tanks).
- Consultation (with young people, peers, experts, to better understand issues or practices).
- Theory (often derived from research, opinion pieces, books, and more widely from disciplines such as psychology and economics).
- Independent evaluation (carried out by people external to practice, according to widely accepted standards and procedures).
- Internal monitoring and self-evaluation (routine data gathering, analysis of the data, reviews of the work, evaluation according to standards but conducted by, for example, a staff team on their own work).
- Policy (often constructed through research and consultation processes).
- Practice wisdom (accumulated knowledge that finds expression in benchmark statements, guidelines, manuals and so on, but is often implicit).

Each source offers access to different but equally valuable knowledge. No single source is paramount or conclusive but all can be accessed as workers think about how best to approach particular situations and problems. The key issue, however, is about how workers, individually and collectively,
are able to access and draw selectively and appropriately from this array of sources, as they attempt to deal with issues in practice settings. This is about critically reflective practice.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is not about the application of ‘correct’ theoretical knowledge, or knowledge derived from independent research, as though either of these is of a higher order than the others. Instead, in line with Anyon’s concept of socially useful theory, reflective practice involves making judgements about what is necessary in response to the needs of each situation.

The work of Schon (1930-1997) and Kolb has been highly influential in promoting the idea of reflective practice. Together they point to the centrality of a learning cycle involving the following elements:

1. Learning and development begins with the need to take action in the practice situation, sometimes in a proactive way and sometimes in a responsive way.

2. The action often involves established or habitual ways of thinking and acting, which are ingrained and come into play automatically. If left at this there may be some reinforcement to these ways of thinking and acting but no development.

3. A new approach is required when habitual ways of thinking and acting no longer appear to be adequate. Breaking out of habits to find new ways of operating often means paying more attention to sources which have been under-valued or under-developed.

4. Information from these sources is put together and synthesized in support of possible courses of action. Here the capacity of practitioners to engage in constructive dialogue and to work collaboratively towards solutions is critical.

5. Action is taken based on the new understanding.

6. The action taken has some impact on the situation (for better or worse) and the whole process starts again.

7. As practitioners become more conscious of the learning process and more skilled in its application, all activity is seen as part of a continuing cycle of learning and development.

Obviously the process described above is somewhat idealised, and is often highly constrained in the realities of work situations due, for instance, to increasingly top-down management approaches. Harrison (2003), for example, observes that:

The introduction of quality standards and various forms of work-planning and outcome auditing, together with continuing pressures to increase productivity, are tending to limit the scope for professional autonomy. If practitioners are increasingly subject to measurement against externally imposed standards of performance, in what ways can they be said to be a profession and able to act on the basis of autonomous judgement?
It is widely known that practitioners are more likely to draw from practice wisdom. Conversely, as Spence (2007) observes from research in Ireland, they are less likely to engage with other sources of evidence and in particular they are less likely to engage with theory.

While it is important to acknowledge such pressures, it is also necessary to affirm the need for autonomy within professional judgement-making, as workers are more often than not confronted with fast moving and complex situations, where outcomes are unpredictable and the ‘correct’ approach is not known from the start.

Figure 2 above shows the range of possible sources that can inform understandings of youth work and support practice. Each source offers access to different but equally valuable knowledge and each can be accessed as appropriate, as workers decide how best to approach particular situations, problems and issues.
Critically reflective practice

Practice is enhanced when the learning cycle is undertaken in a conscious and deliberate way. This means accessing the full range of sources of evidence and by explicit consideration of ideological perspectives, as well as theoretical underpinnings. When all of these elements come together, practice is critical and reflective.

Figure 3 above shows the relationship between the elements involved in critically reflective practice. Through this cycle of thinking, acting and reflecting, practitioners can become clearer about and better communicate the reasons for their work, what they hope it will achieve, and what skills and activities are needed to reach their goals.

When purpose, activities and intended outcomes are linked together in a conscious way, it becomes a theory of change, setting out why and how interventions can be expected to lead to desired changes in outcomes for individuals, groups, and social circumstances. The learning cycle can then be seen as a constant process of testing the theory of change.
The following hypothetical case study illustrates how a team of youth workers might draw from an array of sources in response to a new policy initiative.

**Team X responds to a new policy initiative**

In responding to a new policy initiative, team X would seek to critically reflect on their work by making explicit and drawing from accumulated practice wisdom – their own and the work of others. This kind of wisdom is often implicit but there are also many cases in which it has been captured; for example, best practice manuals, ethical frameworks and other guides. They would also try to locate independent research that is relevant to their area or topic, for instance in journals and books. What they are seeking to achieve would be informed by consultation with young people, who would help to establish the nature or extent of the need, issue or opportunity, and what is to be done in response.

Their thinking might also be strengthened by appropriate theoretical sources such as learning theory or community development theory. If an evaluation of their work has been conducted, or if an external assessment has been made, for example, through a formal inspection, then this information is also available. Similarly, the workers may have systems in place to monitor and gather data about their work, and there may have been in-house self-evaluations to draw upon. They may also access the often web-based and easily accessible ‘grey literature’, which contains unpublished sources, government reports, materials and resources that offer valuable information about experience in different parts of the world, or about practices, strategies, resources and materials that have been found to be useful.
Theoretical Underpinnings
Theoretical Underpinnings

Illustrative sources

Having explained the rationale, we now turn to a small sample of the theoretical sources that can usefully be drawn upon to inform youth work practice. Our aim in this is to support and inform the dialogue between values and current practice, as practitioners seek to understand situations and to bring about desired change. With reference to the concept of empowerment, these sources can be grouped broadly under the three headings of personal, group and societal development. The sources should be seen as illustrative rather than definitive.

The reason for caution is that all theory is partial: being necessarily focused on ‘this’ particular issue, problem or situation rather than ‘that’. Theory is in a continuing process of development and refinement. Particular theories and theorists can sometimes be out of favour and at other times be more prominent. In any case, theoretical development occurs due to the essentially contested nature of theory, in that there are claims and counter claims regarding how it is produced, whether the research methodology is sound or flawed, or if the argument is robust or weak. There are always questions about the extent to which this or that theory accommodates or ignores different views and perspectives that are also thought to merit attention. This contestation occurs within disciplines, such as psychology, and between disciplines, for example between psychological and sociological perspectives.

Given the conditional and contested nature of theory, it might seem as if there are no reliable sources, but this would be too simplistic. While the caveats and qualifications should always be borne in mind, specific theories can be drawn upon in the knowledge that there are always other ways to think about an issue or problem. Good practice is to access theories and to test out their usefulness in particular situations. Insight can also be deepened, or a broader or more complex understanding gained, by availing of a range of theories. This general rule applies whether the reference is to explanatory or change theory, or to any particular theorist.

Practitioners have to start somewhere and with something. Table 3 below presents relevant theoretical disciplines with associated theorists and key concepts. It should be stressed that the work of many theorists can come under one or more categories. The ones featured have the merit of being well known, and having been subject to significant scrutiny and criticism, have stood the test of time in terms of durability. For these reasons, and despite being partial, limited or flawed in some respects, these sources can provide a valuable theoretical underpinning for youth work practice. The small sample selected is illustrative and not meant to be in any way authoritative, definitive or complete.

The hyperlinks in Table 3 are to a selection of websites created by, and catering for, diverse groups. As well as providing explanations regarding the theory/theorist, the websites also serve to introduce users of this resource to a worldwide system of knowledge and debate that goes well beyond the confines of youth work. In addition to the hyperlinks below, the In Practice resource provides a short introduction to each of the key theorists.
Table 3: POTENTIAL SOURCES OF THEORY IN YOUTH WORK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal development (includes): The development of critical thinking skills, acquiring or enhancing new practical skills, learning to plan and to set goals, or more broadly learning to learn, or to question and develop values and beliefs.</th>
<th>Relevant Theoretical Area</th>
<th>Theory or Theorist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developmental psychology Human development Human interaction Learning theory Education theory Non-formal education</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dewey – Experiential learning Kolb – Learning cycle Bruner – Discovery learning Rogers – Core conditions Mezirow – Critical reflection Maslow – Hierarchy of needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group development (includes): The development of interpersonal and communication skills, awareness of and respect for others, capacity for leadership, capacity for participatory decision-making, ability to identify sub-goals and tasks, capacity to follow through and to review progress.</td>
<td>Social psychology Social groupwork Pedagogy Leadership</td>
<td>Vygotsky – Socio-cultural learning Bandura – Reciprocal determinism Revans – Action learning Tuckman – Group stages Habermas – Communicative action Anyon – Socially useful theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social development (includes): The capacity to identify and to research issues or areas of interest, to understand social structures and power relations, develop defensible positions and put forward views, to develop strategies to address situations, to challenge, or to work with other groups, to address circumstances and conditions that influence, determine or disadvantage young people (e.g. young women, LGBT young people, black young people, poor young people in certain geographical areas).</td>
<td>Sociology Politics Community development Theories of equality and diversity Action research</td>
<td>Marx – Class conflict Gramsci – Hegemony Bourdieu – Habitus Foucault – Power/knowledge Freire – Conscientisation bell hooks – Engaged pedagogy Bronfenbrenner – Ecological systems</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The links to each of the key theorists in Table 3 range from fairly simple introductions, to sometimes very complex and detailed considerations of the topic. The hyperlinks lead to a further range of sources that include more contemporary research and researchers, writings and writers who provide ‘thought’ or ‘opinion-pieces’.
Continuing development of theory and practice

There is a rich and continuously growing debate about theory and its application to youth work, in different settings or for different purposes. This debate is vital to the health and development of the field. As Spence says (2007: 4):

>The creation of research-based, theoretically developed and practice-informed texts is necessary to the process of creating a discursive field in which the meanings, values and potential of youth work as professional activity might be effectively communicated.

Because of the wide ranging and detailed nature of the discourse, however, it is very difficult to pin down and capture. Something of its nature and scale can be seen in the list of journals and other sources provided by the Australian Clearing House for Youth Studies. It can also be seen in the following free online journals:

- Youth Studies Ireland Journal
- A Journal of Youth Work (Published in Scotland)
- Youth and Policy (Published in England)
- The Journal of Youth Development (Published in the USA)

An excellent space for people to explore the theory and practice of informal education, social action and lifelong learning, was established in 1995 at the YMCA George Williams College, London. It can be accessed here: infed.org

Another valuable place to access latest thinking, training, research and policy developments in relation to youth work is the European Union – Council of Europe Youth Partnership. The function of the partnership is to strengthen social inclusion, promote democracy and human rights, democratic citizenship and youth participation, and to foster intercultural dialogue and diversity.

Similarly, the European Youth Forum provides access to a wide range of news and resources. The Forum works to empower young people to participate actively in society and to improve their own lives by representing and advocating their needs and interest and those of their organisations. The Forum has three main goals: greater youth participation, stronger youth organisations, and increased youth autonomy and inclusion.

Consideration of key issues in youth work literature

There is a small but growing literature about youth work, which provides an important space for the discussion of key issues. This can be illustrated with writing from the UK. For example, in looking back at what she describes as the emergence, suppression and demise of work with girls and young women, Spence (2010) explains how women youth workers combined feminist theory, personal commitment and single-sex work to challenge prevailing male oriented ideas and provision. In her view the thrust of the work had petered out by the end of the 20th Century. This was due to a combination of factors including; reduced funding, top-down managerial approaches, and a tendency for the work to be subsumed under emerging professional frames that were more compensatory than political in intent.
Batsleer (2013) also writes about how youth work with girls and young women has taken inspiration from feminism and the women’s movement, focusing on the strength and potential of girls as beings in their own right, rather than as carriers of social problems. Her argument is that autonomous community-based projects can affirm young women’s lives and creativity and seek to challenge oppression.

Batsleer and Davies (2010) present a series of texts considering contemporary youth work in the light of (UK) government policy initiatives to help readers to develop their theoretical understanding and practice. The topics include youth work within integrated youth support services, targeting, developing global literacy and competence, and anti-racist work.

Ord (2012) presents a series of texts on issues in youth work management covering topics such as planning, supervision and evaluation. The book applies a historical and theoretical lens to these standard topics, while considering the ways in which management has become much more clearly identified with delivering government policy. The contributors assess the impact of such a development on youth work practice.

In her book on working with diversity, Soni (2011) explores definitions of identity and culture and aims to examine and demystify the language associated with diversity issues, such as ‘cross, inter and intra-cultural’, the nation state, class, ethnicity and race, and the links between these terms. The book examines theories and concepts that are relevant to developing an understanding of the impact and inter-play of power in multi-cultural communities.

International research

The wider discourse is increasingly informed by a growing body of research into the theory and practice of youth work. This has recently been captured in the publication of *Youth Work – a Systematic Map of the Research Literature*, written by the EPPI Centre, Social Research Unit at the Institute of Education in the University of London.

The map provides a unique resource for investigating the content of youth work, how it is delivered and how it is assessed in formal evaluations of its impact and by young people themselves. The map identifies 175 studies which provide empirical research evidence on the impact of youth work, 93 of which are evaluations of impact, on the lives of children and young people aged 10 – 24. It shows that a wide range of designs have been used to study the impact of youth work, with many collecting children and young people’s views through interviews and focus groups as part of case study and single group design methodologies. Most reports were either case study (32%) or cross sectional designs (15%), both collecting data at one point in time (e.g. after participation in youth work activities).

In addition to evaluations of impact, a significant proportion of the studies were also interested in investigating the factors contributing to the successful delivery of youth work activities, including views on engagement and participation, particularly from the perspectives of children and young people. There are also a number of studies concerned with the testing and development of evaluative methods, particularly those addressing the validity and reliability of personal development measurement resources.
Conclusion
Conclusion

Ideas In Action In Youth Work was designed in direct response to the needs of those working in the field. Because the majority of those delivering youth work services are volunteer workers, we recognise that there can be a significant gap between the theory behind their work and the practice as they experience it.

We created this two-part resource in order to effectively address both the practical requirements as well as identify the theoretical structures and beliefs underpinning them. Although In Theory has an identity as a stand-alone resource, we recommend that users will benefit most by using it in conjunction with the In Practice resource, which provides models, practical guides and toolkits, as well as links to articles and other resources. This resource helps, supports and guides practitioners to further their own understanding of what motivates the young people they work with. Because when they do so, they can unlock their own assumptions about their work and explore new or alternative courses of action.

Youth work is never static and the continuously growing debate about theory and its application to youth work is vital to the future health and development of the field. By creating Ideas In Action In Youth Work, the Centre for Effective Services is making a contribution to that debate.
References


