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How Informal Approaches and Terminology Can Influence the Formal Training of Professionals

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Abstract: Youth workers across the United Kingdom utilise varied terminology when referring to the professional practice of youth work, in both formal and informal spaces. A lack of formal approaches to terminology across the youth work sector is having a detrimental impact on the way in which youth work is both taught and perceived by stakeholders outside of the sector. Consequently, this article strives to build upon previous research exploring professional maturity in youth work, focusing on the role that informal language and terminology, standardised or not, might play in the formal training and development of youth work practitioners. This is achieved within the context of professionalism in youth work, wherein consideration is given to youth work in bottom-up (social change movements) and top-down (university accreditation and government recognition) approaches.

Keywords: informal; formal; training; terminology; language; professional; youth work

1. Introduction

Research suggests that youth workers in the United Kingdom (UK) are utilising expansive and divergent language when expressing what they believe constitutes professional practice in youth work (Williams & Richardson, 2024). Consequently, we aim to explore how professionals apply formal language and its impact on the training and development of practitioners. Although this research is focused on youth workers, it could be applicable to other professional contexts. A standardised, formal professional language can be utilised to present an equally formal professional identity. A professional identity portrays a competent individual perceived as ‘senior’ to a volunteer and equal to professionals from other sectors. Yet professional youth workers have often discussed feeling undervalued when engaged in working with other professionals, (e.g., social workers) (Colvin et al., 2020; Veigel, 2020; Sutcliffe, 2021). Youth work training is diverse in its shaping of professional identity as it is influenced by contextual factors in both informal and formal environments and contexts. For example, youth workers might specialise in working with young people in hospital settings or in detached work in public spaces. Additionally, youth work training is impacted by nationalities with different formal policy drivers, the diverse backgrounds of individual workers and a multitude of varying personal, social and cultural factors. Professional language alongside knowledge pertaining to specialist areas could lead to an exciting and diverse sector, but it can also result in internal competitiveness over who might be considered more professional and worthy of funding (Doyle, 2012; de St Croix, 2018).

Research previously conducted found that there is a lack of consistency in the terminology utilised across the youth work sector in the UK, particularly related to professionalism (Williams & Richardson, 2024). The previous research findings illustrated that practitioners



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could be stating the same word, but that word could be underpinned by completely different rationales, ideologies and histories. These misunderstandings have the potential to impact the profession of youth work, as well as communities, young people, funders and policy makers. This is especially the case as youth work practitioners often move between different contexts and places of employment and work across formal and informal spaces. This article, therefore, utilises the critical discourse analysis framework (Fairclough, 2010) to explore the power of language in the training and practice of professional youth workers and how this could potentially impact on practice and how youth work is viewed by itself and other professions.

The article will reflect on how different terminology has been applied around qualification levels and their relevance to professionalism and seek to explore the ways in which youth work language is employed within the context of both social movements (informal) and professional (formal) spaces. Following this, the article will lead on to a summary of the role of government endorsement in conferring a recognition of professionalism and the impact that this has for those delivering training. Importantly, then, the concept of power will be unpacked and related to professional practice. Finally, examples of the diverse ways in which values are interpreted and applied across the youth work sector will be presented to further elucidate the critical role of power.

2. Materials and Methods

This paper builds upon data that were previously collected by the authors, who aimed to investigate how youth workers in the field defined 'Professional Maturity' in youth work and explore if this concept had any impact on practice. This previous research was not focused on professional language. However, the authors found surprising diversity in terminology use. Thus, we are returning to the data and to the existing literature to explore the role that language plays in the development of professionalism and whether this could have an impact on training. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) is applied to help us explore the social and political context of language, recognise how power dynamics are used in language, terminology and meaning making, to recognise how ideologies have impacted on the development of professional language

The previous research sample accepted participants that had practised youth work in the UK and held a Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) youth work qualification. The JNC qualification means that workers have completed a course that was approved by the professional bodies for youth work in the UK. Of the respondents, 60% held a level six qualification; 37% held a level seven qualification; and 3% held a level two qualification. The respondents were involved in several areas of practice, including voluntary sector services, places of worship and local and national agencies, as well as health-based services. The results generated present a wide view of the field and of workers engaged in non-traditional youth workspaces. The previous study was conducted in the UK through questionnaires with fifty-one respondents and a semi-structured focus group comprising five respondents. This approach to data collection enabled the authors to identify key patterns whilst still providing space for respondents to speak to their own experiences. Respondents involved in the questionnaire were welcome to engage in the semi-structured focus group but there was no expectation of this. The focus group process allowed for wider discussion, as well as a slower and more reflective approach to the development of a professional maturity model (Williams & Richardson, 2024), and consideration of its potential impact on youth work practice. A thematic analysis was conducted which led to identifying key themes. The thematic areas generated were The Chameleon, Attributes, Professional Transference, Professional Values, Beyond Self and Qualifications. Some of

these themes are explored in this paper, supported by secondary research, in relation to use of language, use of terminology and application.

3. Results and Discussion

In the research data, we found that JNC youth workers used similar 'language', such as that relating to professional values, ethics, anti-oppressive practice and reflection, but the application and understanding of the terminology were variable across individuals. This paper explores how language has been professionalised, and whether professionalism is defined and applied. Following this, the significance of qualification language, the role that social movements have played in applying language and the underpinning power that affects how words are adopted will be discussed.

3.1. Development of Standardised Professional Language

Academically, professionalism is widely defined. For example, a professional is defined by [Trevithick \(2012\)](#) as an individual with skills, knowledge and experience. Additionally, a professional is generally thought to have achieved a formally recognisable qualification which states that the individual meets core requirements ([Cullen & Gendreau, 2007](#); [Scanlon, 2011](#); [Mockler, 2020](#)). This proposition relating to professionalism can be juxtaposed to an individual's history, values and approach to work ([Carminati & Heliot, 2021](#); [Hamama-Raz et al., 2022](#)). As a result, practical experience and a qualification are not always in harmony with one another. Applying critical discourse analysis ([Fairclough, 2010](#)), the term 'professional' is not only defined within a profession but can be impacted by other outsider perspectives such as the informal viewpoints of the general public and formal government institutions. There has been a lack of understanding of youth work practice by other professions ([Sonneveld et al., 2020](#); [Marshall & Waring, 2021](#)). The general public are often suggested to have widespread misconceptions of youth work largely based on the idea that it is solely recreational and diversionary ([Pope, 2016](#)), whereas government bodies have viewed professional youth work as encompassing work to improve "outcomes for children and young people, safeguarding and child protection" as well as early intervention programmes ([LGA, 2019](#), p. 1). The [Department of Education \(2011\)](#) promoted professional youth work formally as "a distinctive educational approach that can be used to facilitate the process of personal and social development" (p. 7). However, currently within the UK, youth work sits in the Department for Culture, Media and Sports ([DCMS, 2022](#)), where it has been recognised that "thousands of youth workers and volunteers make a tremendous difference to young people's lives through building trusted relationships and create opportunities for them to thrive" ([Huddleston, 2021](#), para. 4). Interestingly, there is currently a conflation of the roles of youth workers and volunteers. [Petkovic \(2022\)](#) comments that more research is needed to understand the "challenges related to the recognition and quality implementation of volunteer-based youth work" (p. 5). This role of volunteering in youth work practice may also relate to the tension in professionalising youth work where professionalisation is perceived as detracting from the sector's bottom-up social justice agenda ([Williams & Richardson, 2024](#)). Youth workers can often be lost in the competing definitions, and expected outcomes, of youth work ([de St Croix & Doherty, 2021](#)). Despite this, youth work practitioners maintain the view that they have the ability to develop trusting, respectful and voluntary relationships with young people ([Hatton, 2022](#)). In the primary research conducted by the authors, it was evidenced that youth workers seek formal standardisation of practice in an ever-changing profession. The aspects of standardisation emphasised the use of a shared language and terminology such as 'professional values', 'boundaries' and 'principles'. However, the data suggested that these were applied differently. The summary above highlights that professionalism is a term that is used

across work sectors, but that professionalism can be interpreted differently dependent on its specific context. Expectations of work outcomes and the professionalism demonstrated in delivery of outcomes may come informally from public opinion individual drives and formally through professional regulation. Yet the expectations will equally be viewed from different individuals' personal experience, such as that gained through diverse cultures, beliefs and upbringing (Fu et al., 2004; Atilas et al., 2017; Otaye-Ebede et al., 2020). Therefore, the concept of professionalism can foster different expectations whilst also demanding higher levels of competency.

3.2. Terminology Used Around Qualifications

The National Youth Agency (NYA) is the national body for youth work in England. Whilst there might be numerous professionals working with young people, the NYA (no date) asserts that youth work is a distinct practice because "only in youth work is it the choice of the young person to engage with the professional" (para. 1). On the NYA website, the term 'professional' is linked to having a level six or above qualification that has JNC recognition.

"You can gain professional youth worker status by studying an undergraduate or postgraduate programme which is endorsed by the NYA and conferring professional youth worker status as recognised by the JNC".

(NYA, 2023)

Equally, Education and Training Standards (ETS) Wales, the professional body for youth work in Wales, comments,

"ETS Wales professionally endorses programmes of training for Youth Workers to ensure they are of a suitably high quality, relevant to the needs of employers, youth workers themselves and the young people they work with. It undertakes this work on behalf of the Joint Negotiating Committee for Youth & Community Workers". (ETS Wales, 2024)

The emphasis here in their statement is on the professionalism of ETS Wales but equally states that level 6 is professional youth work status.

North/South Education and Training Standards (NSETS), which covers North and South Ireland, comments,

"While National Occupational Standard for Youth Work (NOS) have no official status in Ireland they are compatible with current youth work policy and practice throughout the island and have been taken into account in the preparation of the NSETS criteria and procedures". (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2024)

Here, there is a difference in policy and practice, and, although they comment on the shared connection of policy and standards, the lack of formal 'official status' could lead to potential conflict and application in practice.

The professional body for community and youth work in Scotland is the Community Learning and Development Standards Council (CLD). The CLD uses the term 'professional' for degree and post-graduate studies, commenting that

"A professional CLD Practitioner must take responsibility for ensuring they gain the opportunity and exposure to enhance their own skills". (CLD Standards Council for Scotland, 2024)

Here, there is clear emphasis on what a professional should be actively involved in. In addition, CLD Scotland also includes a competent practitioner framework that combines competences, ethics and practice.

For all professional awarding bodies, the level two and three qualifications do not have the term ‘professional’ attached. The awarding bodies imply that professional status can only be achieved at level six or above. These examples show that professionalism is defined and connected to qualifications. There is an implication that professionalism only comes from a formal qualification and not from informal qualities, attributes and skills. Additionally, there is a suggestion that professionalism is a single state achieved at the point of graduation as opposed to a developing concept throughout an individual’s work life. In the data previously collected, level-two-qualified youth workers asserted their understanding of professionalism and saw themselves as equally professional as higher-level-qualified youth workers, stating the NOS as evidence for their claim. Therefore, practitioners informally self-identify as professional whilst utilising the formal language of professionalism to justify their identity. This illustrates how the interpretation and limited application of standardised professional language could lead to confusion.

Qualifications appeared to be perceived by respondents as a largely positive influence on their professional identity. One respondent stated that a qualification was useful to help them “learn the context of where their work sits” (Participant 5), linked to working with social workers and other professionals. Another respondent said that the “JNC qualification gave me the confidence to take ownership over being a professional” (Participant 17). Another claimed the qualification amplified their understanding of day-to-day practice. Although respondents stated that a qualification should be required for practice to be regarded as professional, it is noteworthy that there is no consistency in the language used around qualifications, for example, regarding the required level, type or title of the qualification that youth work professionals are expected to have.

These remarks represent a shared language but different applications, and there were informal assumptions made about what a qualification represented. In the data, the word ‘qualification’ was often presented alongside other additional words, such as

“Behaviour, knowledge, Values, Qualification”;

“Professional Qualification”;

“Traditional Values and Principles, Challenging Policy, Qualifications”;

“Experience and Qualification”;

“JNC Qualification”.

These examples highlight the diverse language used around qualifications. The examples illustrate that some aspects of professional youth work are positioned outside of a qualification, while others might consider a qualification to be an integral part of it. For example, behaviour is mentioned outside of the qualification, but others do not mention behaviour specifically at all. This could suggest that respondents consider a qualification as required to formulate certain professional behaviours. Furthermore, these examples highlight an assertion that a qualification is not the sole essence of professionalism but may be the early stages of professional development. This is perhaps suggestive that a formal qualification cannot produce ‘professionals’, but needs to be balanced alongside other core factors.

Within the UK, each devolved nation shares the same NOS, providing a formalised network for practitioners across the country. This approach is a step towards reducing the potential for diverse interpretations. Across the globe, some countries do not have a professional body endorsing youth work, upholding NOS, maintaining professional standards or validating training programmes, which arguably means that professional practice is interpreted and actioned differently across countries throughout the world. Different political wills, interpretations and government influence affect the understanding and application of youth work practice (Cooper, 2018; Kiilakoski, 2018). Different political, social

and professional pulls on practice and its outcomes could be linked to the unique history of youth work practice being applied in different places. For the UK, the development of professional youth work is rooted in a history of social movements, and this itself is crucial within debates related to the professionalisation of youth work practice.

3.3. Social Movements and the Development of Professional Language

Following the publication of the 'Albemarle Report' (formally titled 'The Youth Service in England and Wales') in 1960, recommendations for the delivery of youth services began to be implemented across England and Wales (Ministry of Education, 1960). Arguably, this report was the beginning of the youth service in England and Wales and the approach to youth work detailed in the report became an international model that was emulated by many other countries across the world (Nicholls, 2011). However, critiques of the Albemarle Report suggest that youth work had been taking place extensively, informally, prior to its publication and, additionally, that the report appeared to be centred on a largely deficit-based model (Muirhead, 2020). As far back as the eighteenth century, there were activities taking place that are purported to be the beginnings of youth work. For example, the Christian church's work on Sunday schools proliferated (M. Smith, 2013). Furthermore, during the eighteenth century, the idea of Ragged Schools emerged. Ragged Schools often had a local focus and endeavoured to meet the holistic needs of children in very deprived areas (M. Smith, 2013). A critical feature of Ragged Schools was that they would often take place informally, in any space that could be made available for free, such as covered railway arches, and were accessible to the young people that they served. Unlike the Sunday schools, the Ragged Schools were non-denominational, and Ragged Schools' primary focus was to serve the emotional, physical, social and economic needs of the young people. In 1844, the youth organisation entitled the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) began in London (YMCA, 2022). The initial inception of the YMCA was directed at young men, aimed largely at engaging them in Bible reading and the promotion of Christianity (YMCA, 2022). 'Lads Clubs' were emerging at the end of the nineteenth century, and often these provisions had a religious element too. This type of religion-based community engagement was entirely in keeping with the cultural traditions of that time. Following the initial opportunities for predominately boys and men, girls' clubs began in the late nineteenth century (M. Smith, 2013). The YMCA and Lads Clubs aided the development of youth work by designating specific spaces to meet the needs of young people at that time. Whilst many of the early examples of youth work in the UK stemmed from Christian-based activities, in the nineteenth century, youth workers began to be motivated by primarily social and political factors as well as religious factors. The distinct practice of youth work emerged in England from initiatives to support deprived communities and later as part of national programmes that offered opportunities to younger generations such as the Scouts and later the Girl Guides movement. M. Smith (2013) points out that, whilst some youth work schemes were derived from conservative views, others sought radical social change. These historical contributions illustrate the importance of informal and formal social and political dimensions to the development of the youth work sector alongside how the sector is viewed professionally. Therefore, it is evident that, even in these early inceptions of youth work, there were tensions between differing motivations, approaches and uses of language.

The diversity of approaches to professionalism and the terminology used around professionalism can be linked to the different experiences and influences of social movements. Social movements are often informal and can be defined as "a group of diffusely organised people or organisations striving toward a common goal relating to human society or social change" (Grinspun et al., 2022, p. 412). Youth work's history, embedded in social

movements, has promoted the development of critical thinking (Bamber & Murphy, 1999; Williams, 2018; NYA, 2023), to empower communities and young people to be active citizens in informal and formal spaces. Occasionally, this would have posited youth workers at odds with politicians and other forms of power in wider society. Youth workers have traditionally been keen supporters of social movements such as strikes and protests that challenge power injustice (de St Croix & Doherty, 2021). This grassroots approach instigated by communities and young people and supported by youth workers could potentially contest with professional recognition, especially when youth work might place itself against positions of power (Shukra et al., 2012; M. Smith, 2013; de St Croix, 2018). Arguably, youth work is distinguished by its informal approach to working with young people, aiming to embed political awareness, develop critical thinking and support young people to engage critically with their communities and surroundings (Batsleer, 2013; Sapin, 2013; de St Croix, 2018; Williams, 2018; Sonneveld et al., 2020; Kirshner, 2008; Uttamchandani, 2020). However, it is precisely due to the informal nature of youth work that it has often been perceived as a 'lesser' field of practice and considered, by some, as less professional (Cooper, 2012; Trimmer-Platman, 2014). This is despite clear evidence of the impact of youth work resulting in early safeguarding disclosures, reductions in criminal behaviour and support for young people's improved mental health (Modestino, 2019; de St Croix & Doherty, 2021; NYA, 2024; UK Youth, 2021). A model from Smith (as cited in Cooper, 2012) singles out the perspectives of professional youth work which are disputed across different political time periods. Within this model, there is a suggestion that youth work has evolved from being more closely linked to the informal social movement definition to now aligning with a more formal professional stance with state-backed outcomes and interventions (Belton, 2010). This history has led to a continual discussion about the professionalisation of practice versus the grassroots approach to practice. The idea of professionalising youth work has been one that has been discussed at length for a long time (Sercombe, 2004; Emslie, 2012; Nieminen, 2014). There are practitioners within the youth sector that fervently believe that youth work should be considered professional. Such proponents suggest that a professional and unified workforce could be better equipped, skilled and knowledgeable to best serve in their roles, and thus linked to better outcomes for young people and their communities.

Language and terminology are of key importance in professionalising the youth work sector. For example, formal terminology is important when describing the outcomes of youth work in a way that is understood and appreciated by governments (de St Croix, 2018). Better outcomes could suggest that professionalising the youth work sector might result in an increase in financial endorsements as well as other resources. Historically, concerns have been raised that the youth work sector cannot evidence its impact (House of Commons Education Committee, 2011), and steps have been made amongst professional bodies, practitioners and academics to provide a more solid evidence base for practice. However, youth work practitioners express concerns that professionalising youth work could run contrary to the perceived purpose of youth work. For example, if youth workers strive to centre young people's voices as part of their practice, in line with their purported values in youth work, then this could involve working outside of dominant systems as well as challenging power systems (Gharabaghi, 2014; O'Brien et al., 2018).

"As the sector attempts to professionalise it seems to be becoming less relevant and less vital, and I worry that what originally made youth work a distinct approach is being lost". (Participant 1)

This debate is cyclical and returns to the question of what is professional, top-down and directory or bottom-up and participatory. This arguably relates to the debate relating to youth work as a social movement. Bradford and Cullen (2014) suggest that professionalism is required to be recognised by top-down management, which, in turn, relates it

to bureaucracy and accountability. This can be seen through contemporary youth work settings, where there is already a presence in the professional jargon that emphasises the importance of interdisciplinary working as well as offering a service that represents value for money.

This is represented in one participant's comment:

"Youth Work has to be professionalised. Needs to be backed up with knowledge. Needs to be qualified. Otherwise, Youth Work will be dead in the water". (Participant 29)

Another participant added,

"Professionalism is critical to the credibility [of the youth work sector] and the best interest of the young person". (Participant 38)

The importance placed on these topics within the training of youth workers is suggestive of the sector's desire to be perceived equally alongside other professions that work with children and young people, such as social work. In the data previously collected, this was identified under the theme of The Chameleon and is discussed later in this article (Williams & Richardson, 2024).

3.4. Power

Arguably, considerations of professionalism must appreciate that it is underpinned by power relations (Thompson, 2006). Consequently, understanding power and the role that power plays in the debate on professionalism in relation to youth work is critical. The disquiet between youth work and social movements relates back to the challenge of deciding whether youth work exists within contemporary, formal power dynamics or should challenge and exist on the margins. Power from different contexts has challenged youth work as a profession, resulting in the youth sector being blighted by misunderstandings. There has been a longstanding stereotype of youth workers as individuals who simply play games with young people (Richardson, 2020). Many youth workers can provide stories that allude to such misunderstandings of the profession. Negative or incorrect misconceptions of the youth work profession are not only reserved for the general public. Social workers and other practitioners that work with children and young people have been documented as not understanding what youth work is and querying its professionalism (McCardle, 2014; Cooper, 2018).

Fairclough (2010) set out the critical discourse analysis framework to examine the use of power in linguistics. This framework allows the exploration of social power using language, potentially leading to discrimination. This critical attitude is approached in the following discussion to see how social and political power is used in the language of professional practice. Professional jargon is a prime example to be considered under Fairclough's (2010) framework, and this is often confusing and rooted in power dynamics. The approach that professionals, from all sectors, take to communication can be diverse. Different professions develop their own forms of formal and informal jargon, acronyms and specialist language as well as slang (Bhatia, 1993; Wolf, 1989). Professional language can be impacted upon by national backgrounds, cultures and religion (Liaw et al., 2013; Malyuga et al., 2018). Toseland and Spielberg (as cited in Trevithick et al., 2004) suggest that communication skills consist of concreteness, self-disclosure and potency but these skills are ultimately subjective and relational to individual professionals' positionality, culture and experience. Additionally, some of these skills could become dangerous if professional boundaries are not equally applied. As Fairclough (2013) points out, the power of formal and informal professional language and jargon from other sectors has impacted on the professionalisation of youth work. As a result, youth work practices require an active

reflective cycle about their own power involved in communication skills (Thompson, 2006; Sapin, 2013).

Professional language can be a powerful and helpful tool within professions, especially to speed up communication, but can additionally be utilised to present the image of a qualified and competent individual, to other professionals and to the public. Youth work professional language is received, interpreted and applied differently due to the varied contexts where youth work can take place. This was observed in the data of the previous research, which revealed a powerful key factor that made the application and understanding of professional language so diverse, which we termed The Chameleon. Youth workers have historically worked, and currently work, in an interprofessional manner alongside colleagues in other sectors. Throughout the data previously gathered, respondents stated that they were continuously having to adjust in different spaces and places. When they expressed this, the respondents included speaking multiple languages and using different forms of jargon to be equally understood by young people, managers, funders and other practitioners. This was often described as “wearing different hats” (Williams & Richardson, 2024). Consequently, relating language to the concept of The Chameleon, there is a strong suggestion that professional youth workers are subject to the power of other professionals’ jargon and yet have a power to adapt and respond using appropriate professional languages (as represented in Fairclough’s (2013) critical discourse analysis framework). However, the constant need to change to suit different professional contexts could change the way youth workers approach their own profession’s core values and language. The varied language that respondents stated they needed to be adept in using highlights a culture of adaptability and flexibility, specifically in the language required of the youth sector. While a diverse language base means practitioners can effectively work with other professionals, there is the added potential that this practice dilutes the core language needed for the stability of the profession. This can become especially prevalent when youth workers are line-managed by non-youth workers, for example social workers, who utilise a different professional language. This is an example of a power dynamic revealed when youth workers constantly need to adapt their language for other professions and not the other way around (Fairclough, 2013). Alongside this chameleon-like ability, there could be concerns regarding the insurmountable pressure that youth workers are facing within their employment environments (Keane, 2023). As well as demands related to chameleon-style professional conduct, heightened stress could also be cited as resulting from diminished financial support, being required to take on additional work and a lack of support from supervisors who might lack knowledge about professional youth work approaches. There are some arguments that suggest that this could be conceived of as cognitive fatigue (Uhlir et al., 2023). Arguably, cognitive fatigue could be mitigated if youth workers could utilise their chameleon-like skills and adapt language for different contexts whilst always being clear on the ‘universal’ meanings of terms. Some contestations suggest that the UK government’s role is to assert a definition of youth work as well as core definitions for key language used by the youth work sector. Arguably, there is a lack of consistency in defining youth work across organisations, sectors, nations and the globe (Williams et al., 2023). Language and terminology have been standardised, as shown earlier, through professional bodies and the NOS. However, the practical application of these is diverse and could be linked with youth workers’ chameleon-like skill set. The chameleon approach, alongside working with different agencies, policies and professionals, could lead to a diverse understanding and application of standardised terms. More research is needed in this area to explore potential implications of practice.

This debate could relate to the conflicting viewpoints of whether youth work should relate to the top-down perceived power of framing concepts as opposed to the potentially

diverse bottom-up utilisation of terms. There are broad expectations of what youth work should be and what outcomes youth work should generate, highlighting the informal nature of the terminology and language used in these instances. UK government institutions have a potentially powerful role in formally defining youth work and, consequently, assisting the youth work sector to be perceived more professionally. During COVID-19-related lockdowns, youth workers were formally given key worker status by the UK government and, as a result, youth work was seemingly being recognised as a profession.

Considering the topics of power, who has power and who does not have power, as well as what power institutions, policy and law hold, relates closely to the dominant values that are replicated in society. The purported values of youth work are often seen as the common dominator across the youth work sector (Council of Europe, 2023; NYA, 2023). Discussing values is an excellent way to illustrate the diversity of professional language within youth work and how it can be used informally whilst simultaneously being considered formal. The Council of Europe (2023) statement on youth work essentials suggests that youth work is value driven. This information states that youth work values can be divided across three key themes: values linked to personal development such as critical thinking, values linked to social development such as participation and citizenship and, lastly, ethical values such as human rights. The NYA (2024) suggests that “Youth work relationships are underpinned by youth work values” (p. 10). This demonstrates the difference in terminology being applied to the same professional language. Furthermore, the curriculum document argues that youth work principles are derived from foundational values.

Despite youth work values often being seen as the core aspect for youth work practice, a vast array of applications is used when considering values. Although the term ‘values’ itself remained constant throughout the data collected in our previous research, the language associated with values was always different. The word ‘values’ appeared over thirty times in the previous data collected and each time was presented with a different word associated with values. For example, one respondent spoke about aligning values with practice, another spoke about value-based boundaries, one discussed embodying values and another respondent discussed modelling values. The concept of values was an agreed formal necessity of practice, but how values were demonstrated was approached informally in the terminology with a lack of consistency. The lack of standardisation in the applications around values is problematic as it negatively affects the demonstration of these values. For example,

“Meeting the NOS and operating with a particular set of values”. (Participant 20)

“A professional works within the process of traditional values and principles”.
(Participant 3)

“The ability to hold onto youth work values”. (Participant 46)

“Working to those youth work values”. (Participant 35)

These examples suggest that the way practitioners engage with the concept of values is widely varied, and that values are viewed differently in their application, which could potentially lead to professional conflict.

The final aspect of power that this paper seeks to explore is the power held by practitioners. Youth work is a profession that toils in a space of continual praxis. Qualified JNC youth workers are encouraged to engage with theoretical perspectives and then to test and routinely reflect on these theories when in practice. Learning for youth work does not purely happen in a classroom (Ragoff et al., 2016; A. Smith & Seal, 2021; Nicholson, 2023). A vast amount of learning takes place in work-based scenarios. Students studying a level six JNC youth work degree course at university are expected to complete at least eight hundred hours of work placement practice over the three years of study. This emphasis

on practice informed through on-the-job training relates to the importance that is placed by practitioners on what we term professional transference (Williams & Richardson, 2024; Schwartz et al., 2005). We define professional transference as the process whereby a supervisor or manager passes on their youth work understanding and practice to the trainee or student (Williams & Richardson, 2024). Some aspects of practice are approached informally and some formally, through supervision, examples and critical practice. The key concern emerging from this approach regarding youth worker training is that it can be incredibly specific, not just to who the individual is that is involved in the transference but also to the context in which they are working. The practitioner in the leadership position can, possibly inadvertently, act as a gatekeeper of certain approaches, attitudes, languages and approaches to youth work while blocking others.

Throughout the data that were generated in the previous study, we found there was a continual theme of professional training for prospective youth workers. This involved sharing best practice (usually informal practice), engaging in group supervision (formal practice) and learning from others (both informally and formally). Several respondents discussed the importance of being able to articulate your role to other professionals. However, within the context of the field of youth work, this seemed to relax, as there was a perceived shared understanding of what youth work is, and assumptions made about what certain terms and phrases mean, showcasing the informal and formal approaches taken to the language and terminology of the profession.

In the youth work sector, there is often a language used that highlights the importance of key individuals in practitioners' professional development, suggesting that, whilst there is standardised language, one barrier to it being understood and applied universally could be the greater influence from managers and mentors. Participants spoke about hearing their mentor's/trainer's/supervisor's voices in various situations and contexts:

“My mentor, I guess, must have drummed into me at some point. . . you need to be there for the kids. That's the only thing that you need to do, is you need to be there for the kids, and that's the most important thing, and that's kinda stuck with me as an uncompromising thing since then”. (Participant 2)

“I think if you have a good supervision experience and it sticks with you then you become professional, mature”. (Participant 18)

4. Conclusions

This article illustrates how the formal standardised language of youth work is put into practice informally by practitioners due to their professional experience and background and influence from supervisors (Williams & Richardson, 2024). This accountability for implementation of standardised formal language in often informal approaches, as seen in the case of professional values, has contributed to the competing and at times challenging ways that youth work is perceived. In addition, this has been influenced by other professions' formal professional language, and formal government policy has impacted on informal and formal youth work practice. Definitions pertaining to professionalism specifically in relation to youth work have been contentious. The exploration of these topics here is based on the analysis of the data that emerged in a previous study. The discussion in this article aimed to assess whether the formal practical application of key terminology in the youth sector may be linked to the informal controversial topic of professionalisation. To tackle this quandary in a succinct manner, the topics of qualifications, social movements and power were explored in relation to their impact on the application of professional language within the youth work sector.

Initially, when exploring the role that qualifications play, it emerged that respondents did not believe that a qualification alone results in a practitioner being a professional youth

worker. The data suggested that qualifications should always be married with another quality, attribute or skill. Importantly, qualifications were presented as the beginning of a learning journey, not the end point whereby there could be professional recognition, as suggested in the subsequent model of professional maturity (Williams & Richardson, 2024). The previous research suggested that there is a fear that encouraging greater usage of professional jargon could result in elitist practice.

Further into the discussion, it was acknowledged that both social movements in the form of informal bottom-up initiatives and formal state-led operations have a powerful role in defining youth work. Therefore, influencing the language that the youth work sector utilises will involve collective discussion and action. However, informal approaches to terminology and language could promote the conflicting nature, and conflation of terms could often lead to confusion, conflict, misunderstanding and agendas that push in differing directions. Finally, but fundamentally, the impact of power must be acknowledged across different youth work contexts. This article emphasises that power has the potential to impact on how language and terminology are applied in a professional context and impact practice delivery. This exploration and discussion were directed by the input of youth workers currently working within the youth work sector in the UK. There was clearly the emergence of youth workers using the same language but applied with different meanings and in varying contexts. This highlighted that, even though the language was standardised, it was being applied to practice in a variety of ways. There is a core pillar of language that all youth work professionals use, but there needs to be greater awareness and application to provide a more consistent approach.

To do this effectively, youth workers need specific training on and development in working in a range of different contexts alongside wider experience of a range of varied settings beyond their initial training. Youth workers require a clear and consistent approach to language that they can utilise for employment in the youth work sector but will remain as integral even if they specialise in other capacities and work sectors. Consequently, youth work professionals require a skill set that enables them to communicate their professionalism and values within interprofessional work and with a wide range of audiences.

To allow the field to move forward, the authors would recommend the following:

- Governments should assert that a professional youth worker is someone who is level 6 or above JNC qualified and make youth work a protected title, similar to social work.
- Professional bodies of youth work should lobby governments to maintain a high standard of practice, challenge the difference between 'work with young people' and professional youth work and engage in grassroots support and development for volunteers and paid staff that promotes and supports the standardisation of practice according to the NOS.
- Any supervisors of youth work practice should obtain an additional qualification/certificate (i.e., a PGCert), to represent the knowledge of the sector and the skills of supervisory practice.
- Practitioners should engage in continual professional development that challenges the ideologies of professional practice and engage in critical discourse analysis to recognise abuses of power.

There is formal standardisation of professional language in the youth work sector, but it is not being applied universally. As a result, youth work practice looks different, practitioners respond variably and outcomes are difficult to measure. The tension between theory and practice is evident and can lead to conflict between practitioners within the youth sector as well as with other professionals. Consequently, unless practitioners recog-

nise, reflect and respond, by challenging delivery and engaging in evidence-based practice, the sector will continue to exist in a storm of confusion.

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