

## MOVING TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO YOUTH WORK EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** This article will discuss a working model of an integrated approach to youth work, developed in the context of the new graduate program at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Considering an array of competing and contradictory conceptual frameworks that inform youth work, this model proposes blending diverse traditions while incorporating both community youth-development approaches and clinical models of intervention. Illustrated as a tree, we identify guiding principles: a developmental perspective, an ecosystemic approach, collaborative relationships, a rights-based approach, and the ethical and reflexive principle. Implementing an integrative model of pre-service training requires consideration of how teaching and learning are carried out in the program. Experiential learning activities, collaborative evaluation, a realignment of the teacher and learner roles, and the challenges of applying an integrated approach are examined.

**Keywords:** youth work, child and youth care, pre-service education, graduate education

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Young people's lives are increasingly complex. Globalization, an uncertain socio-economic climate, and new developments in technology have changed the developmental context for adolescents (Kehily, 2007). For example, young people today are engaged in digital spaces and may face new challenges, such as cyber-bullying and sexting (Korenis & Billick, 2014; Smith et al., 2008). In the face of high unemployment they spend longer periods in post-secondary education, which leads to an extended transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). More mental health concerns are diagnosed amongst young people today, and suicide rates are high (Pelkonen & Marttunen, 2003; Shaw, Fernandes, & Rao, 2005). Incipient efforts to recognize young people as citizens in the community and encourage youth participation in a variety of forums, such as in policy development or as research collaborators, provide opportunities for young people to engage in their communities in new ways (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014). The context of adolescent development has thus shifted and consequently requires new and diverse ways of educating youth work professionals in pre-service youth work<sup>1</sup>. In particular, there is a need for an educated workforce whose members bring a high level of theoretical and applied knowledge of current research to their interventions in work with young people.

While there is a well-established network of college programs to train child and youth care professionals and youth workers across Canada (Charles & Garfat, 2009), there are few university programs and even fewer graduate programs specific to youth work (Shek & Wai, 2008). However, a shift in the legislative context in many provinces has resulted in a renewed preoccupation with quality control and a call for licensing and accreditation (Stuart et al., 2012). University programs are needed to prepare youth workers who can take on leadership roles, as supervisors, program managers, and policy-makers. Designing advanced educational programs becomes a daunting task given the increasing array of conceptual frameworks, often mutually incompatible or contradictory, that informs youth work (Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan, & Noam, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to present an integrative approach to youth work education that draws on the diverse strengths of clinical, psychoeducational, and community-based approaches to best meet the complex demands of serving young people in the present day. In the first section, we provide a rationale for an integrated approach via the critical exploration of dichotomies that have characterized the literature of youth work and the allied helping professions. The second section presents our proposed model of integrative youth work education, which draws on clinical, psychoeducational, and community-based understandings of practice with young people. We then define the principles that guide the development of the program. Lastly, in the context of teaching and learning in the program, we identify the implementation and integration challenges

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<sup>1</sup> We are using the term “youth work” as an overarching term to describe the professional fields of child and youth care, youth work, and youth studies. The focus of our paper is presenting a model of education. As such, it is not the intent of our paper to discuss and delineate the specific differences between these fields of study and practice.

that must be addressed if a youth work program that will ultimately respond to the needs of young people today is to be developed.

### **Building on Limitations of Discourses in the Literature**

An integrated approach to youth work stems from an analysis of the limitations of the binary positions that have dominated the literature of youth work, as well as the helping professions more generally. Below we provide a brief review of these opposing discourses that have served as conceptual frameworks for intervention with young people: health versus illness; prevention versus treatment; and protection versus participation. For each we discuss the inadequacy of monolithic approaches, and the need to view the positions taken by these discourses as part of a continuum, rather than as discrete points.

#### ***Health versus Illness***

Health and illness are often viewed as conceptual opposites (Sadegh-Zadeh, 2000). Historically, health has often been characterized as no more than an absence of illness. Sadegh-Zadeh (2000) suggests that this “naive normalism” perspective on health is pervasive in medical schools where “health is normality and diseases are abnormalities” (p. 606). The concept of health can evoke a range of disagreements, as it may involve medical, social, economic, or spiritual components (Larson, 1999).

Several scholars propose instead a wellness model that considers the multiple influences and contexts in which “health” is experienced (Xenakis, 2010). A wellness model focuses on health promotion and “progress toward higher functioning, energy, comfort, and integration of mind, body, and spirit” (Larson, 1999, p. 125). Lindsey (2008) further suggests that a concept of health *within* illness helps practitioners focus more on an individual’s capacities than on problems or deficits.

Youth work practice – especially in North America – has typically reconstructed a dichotomous view of health and illness such that youth work is a service only offered to either high-risk youth or young people meeting certain criteria of illness, such as conduct disorder or depression. For example, suicide risk assessment in youth work demonstrates the health–illness dichotomy whereby youth are only served or referred to crisis supports if deemed “high risk” according to a set of predetermined questions (Ranahan, 2011). Yet suicide risk (or illness) is fluid, dynamic, and a “messy problem” (White, 2012) that depends in part on time and context. As such, responding to suicidality in youth also requires other approaches, such as the application of relational knowledge (Ranahan, 2013) and life-affirming activities (Kouri & White, 2014). Thus there is a need to expand youth services “beyond a single-problem behaviour focus [i.e., illness] and for considering program effects on a range of positive and problem behaviours [i.e., wellness]”, including the need for “interventions that involve several social domains” (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004, p. 101). The traditional dichotomy between health and illness is thus misleading for youth work practice; what is

required instead is a holistic view of youth development and wellness across different domains or contexts.

### ***Prevention versus Treatment***

A second dichotomy that has traditionally influenced approaches with youth is the positioning of prevention efforts as separate from treatment initiatives. Prevention science as an emerging framework in youth work (Society for Prevention Research, 2004) has often been presented as conceptually distinct from treatment. Rather than focus on high-risk populations and efforts to reverse dysfunction, prevention strives to build resilience in young people generally. Prevention, whether universal (Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartain, 1999) or targeted for youth who are seen as at risk (Ungar, 2005), engages with communities in creating optimal conditions for young people, and operates according to principles of social justice. This approach mitigates the risk of stigmatizing and pathologizing young people, which is more likely to occur when the focus is on treatment (Hinshaw, 2005).

Critics of the preventative approach have expressed the concern that placing too great an emphasis on prevention can be misleading. Ignoring the existence of disorder can have devastating consequences for families and communities. Once negative behaviours are internalized over time, however, treatment efforts often do not succeed (Mann-Feder, 1996; McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2007). Ultimately, there is evidence to support the benefits of both prevention and treatment (Weisz, Sandler, Durlak, & Anton, 2005). Approaches that consider prevention and treatment as complementary options are most likely to be effective.

### ***Protection versus Participation***

A third, related debate is that between the proponents of participation and those advocating protection as central to work with youth (Adams & Chandler, 2004; Dumbrill, 2003). Systems of care for young people, in an attempt to ensure acceptable quality of life for all youth, have tended to operate in ways that emphasize protection (Dupuis & Mann-Feder, 2013). Youth protection legislation in Canada, for example, stresses the vulnerability of children and youth and the need for expert intervention, but the young people themselves often have little say in determining their best interests.

However well-intentioned, the emphasis on protection can lead to a paternalistic and top-down approach, a perspective that accords with the longstanding view that children are inherently vulnerable and lack agency (Lansdown, 2005). Protection by its very nature can be disempowering and even coercive, resulting in decisions that can be detrimental to young people's well-being. On the other hand, there has been an increasing emphasis on community-based and rights-based approaches to working with young people, which stress the right to participation and the development of a youth voice as a necessary component of responsive and empowering systems of program and service delivery (Perkins, Borden, & Villarruel, 2001). Young people are negotiating an increasingly complex transition to adulthood, and managing a world that is largely unknown to adults, and so need to be involved as active agents in decisions affecting their lives. As actors, young people can contribute to their communities, and youth work can

become part of creating supportive opportunities. Balancing protection and participation concerns is integral to implementing the fundamental rights set forth in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lansdown, 2005). Agencies that deal with youth and families have been working to make the shift from controller to partner (Adams & Chandler, 2004).

### ***Getting Beyond Debate***

There have been recent efforts to get beyond these debates, especially in relation to the growing influence of strength-based approaches to youth work with all young people, regardless of their level of disadvantage (Kaplan, Skolnik, & Turnbull, 2009). One thing seems clear: given the complexity of current times and the challenges faced by young people today, finding solutions requires creativity, versatility, and flexibility. Rigid adherence to one approach to the exclusion of the other must limit the capacity to be effective. One of the most time-honoured findings of developmental science is that “goodness of fit” is an important precondition for strategies that improve adjustment in young people (Redding & Britner, 2000). Unduly favouring prevention over treatment, and participation over protection, or concentrating only on high-risk populations while ignoring the concerns of normative groups, deprives youth workers of a diversified and flexible tool kit.

### **Moving Towards an Integrative Youth Work Approach**

Responding to the current context of youth work education, the divisive debates in the literature, and the present-day challenges young people face, requires an approach that incorporates multiple perspectives and the exercise of many practical skills that youth workers can utilize across a broad range of clinical and community-based settings. Furthermore, youth work pedagogy must reflect the nuances and challenges that workers will encounter in their future practice.

In this section, we introduce a working model of an integrative youth work approach that is guiding curriculum development in our Graduate Diploma in Youth Work program at Concordia University. The Diploma, which was initiated in 2014, was designed to prepare students for a range of professional roles working with youth. It was developed in response to a need expressed by the Anglophone youth-serving agencies in Montreal and the local colleges that provide certificate programs. In addition, legislation passed in Quebec, Canada, in 2009 (Government of Quebec, 2009) requires that youth workers pursue graduate education and be licensed as professionals before they can perform the full range of functions required in certain job titles in the public sector, especially those at a supervisory or managerial level. Thus, the Graduate Diploma in Youth Work at Concordia University was developed in consultation with local agencies whose mandates ranged from residential and foster care to family preservation and counselling for youth in the community.

Using an illustrative image, we will first outline the various elements of the model and then present the guiding principles, which draw upon theories and perspectives from psychoeducational, community-based, and clinical understandings. After presenting our

integrative model for educating youth workers, we discuss the features and challenges of teaching and learning within the program.

### *An Overview of the Model*

Illustrations can be useful in depicting the intersections of perspectives, theories, principles, and practice that are woven into an integrative youth work education program. Illustrations that have been used to represent practice by youth work scholars include the web in White's (2007) praxis-oriented approach to child and youth care, and the onion in Ferguson's (1991) depiction of an interactive model of child and youth care education.

In the collaborative discussions that resulted in the development of our integrative model, we were drawn to the image of a tree with its roots (see Figure 1), which seemed to represent the linkages between our existing knowledges and our emerging ideas for youth work education. While a tree may be considered from several separate aspects (e.g., roots, ground, branches, leaves), each element relies on and is interwoven with the next part. The nourishment obtained by the roots from the ground influences the development and health of the branches and leaves.

An integrative model of education requires acknowledging the interconnectedness of each part or element. A tree also represents growth and ongoing development, which requires sustenance and a suitable climate. We anticipate revisiting and revitalizing the approach as we learn with our students over the coming years; thus, new roots may need to be established, new branches launched, and new skills produced as we learn from implementing the program.

As our understanding currently stands, the roots represent the theories we draw upon that inform the discipline of youth work. For the purpose of our integrative approach, this consists of developmental and psycho-educational theories, community youth development theory, and clinical theories about the nature of resilience, risk, and psychopathology.

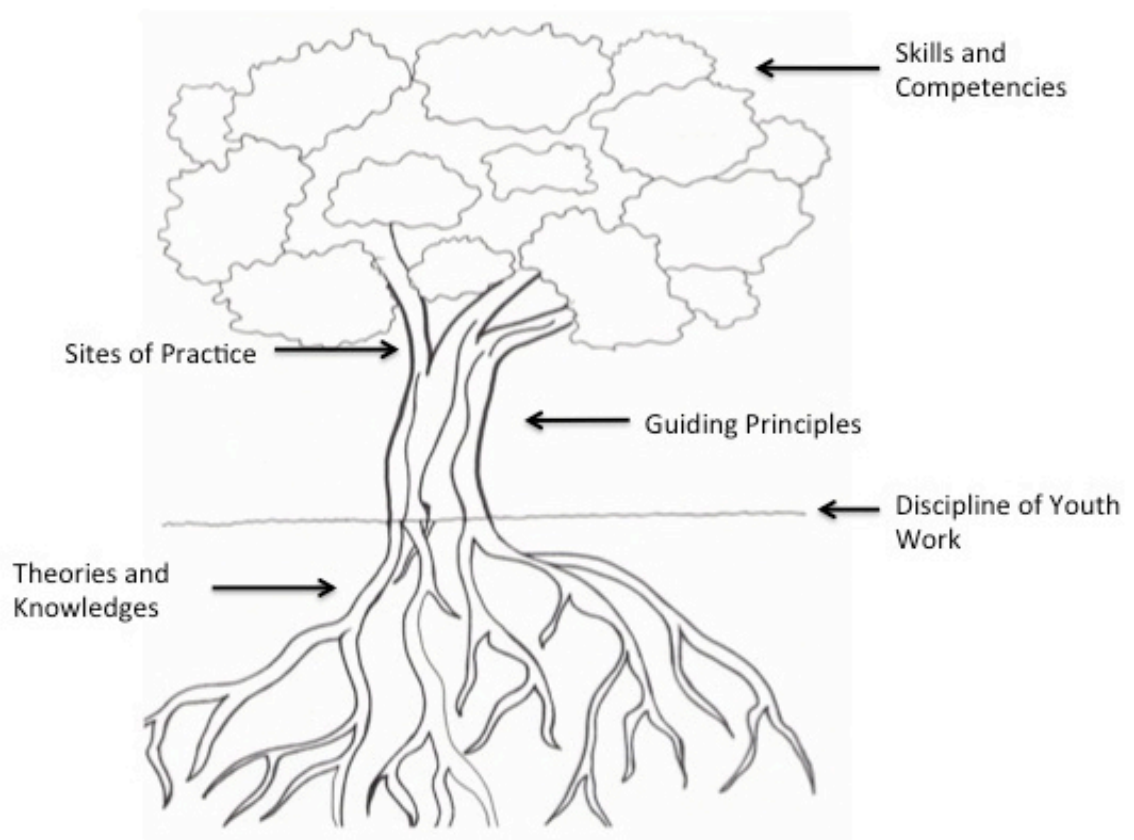


Figure 1. An integrative model of youth work education.

The ground represents the scope of the discipline of youth work that may be realized under different forms (e.g., child and youth care, youth development) and adapted to the needs of individual nations and circumstances. The ground binds the discipline and, consequently, the profession, together.

The tree trunk represents guiding principles that are specific to our integrative approach to youth work education. As presented below, the principles that have emerged as central to our model are the need for: (a) a developmental perspective (knowledge about lifespan); (b) an ecosystemic approach (consideration of contexts); (c) collaborative relationships (how we work with youth); (d) a rights-based approach (one that recognizes right-holders and duty-bearers); and (e) ethics and reflexivity (work that is informed by codes and critical application).

The tree branches illustrate the range of practice contexts in which youth workers are engaged (e.g., residential, community programs, schools, child welfare), and the leaves symbolize the practical skills that youth workers use as part of their work with young people, families, colleagues, and organizations. For example, these would include skills in communication, documentation, and the application of intervention strategies, as well as the vital capacities to develop relationships and foster favourable environments.

### ***The Theories that Inform an Integrative Approach***

Youth work can be enriched by the adoption of a range of approaches to support growth and change in young people. Theories as diverse as psychodynamic theory, behaviour modification, cognitive behaviour modification, and reality therapy have come in and out of favour in the literature, as have a range of specialized models of residential care (James, 2011). Decades of outcome research in other helping professions, such as counselling and psychotherapy, have amply demonstrated that no one approach is best for all, and that skillful integration is vital in human services work. This recognition has been made in social work, where “[t]he case for integration is simply that it is in effect a form of malpractice to approach the client within one theoretical perspective when it is scientifically known that the truth is more complex and the therapeutic options are broader than those encompassed by any one theory” (Wakefield & Baer, 2008, p. 23).

### ***The Discipline of Youth Work***

The ground holds the roots and tree in place yet certain types of soil give rise to different types of growth. Spence (2008) suggests that there has been difficulty “in reaching any lasting consensus about what youth work *is*” as funding bodies and political agendas require youth workers to conform to the intellectual fashion of the day (p. 5). White (2011) posits that absolute definitions of youth work or child and youth care should be resisted; yet it must be acknowledged that there are common elements in what constitutes the discipline (or ground) of youth work. In Ireland and the United Kingdom, youth work has tended to involve informal education where the curriculum is based on enhancing young people’s personal and social development as they engage in voluntary relationships with youth workers who respond flexibly to youth’s needs (Davies, 2010; Harland & Morgan, 2006; Merton et al., 2004; Spence, 2008). In North America, less emphasis has been placed on the educational and voluntary elements of youth work practice, and more on the importance of relationships, professional self-awareness, and the use of self in practice (Fewster, 1990; Krueger, 2011). For example, Freeman (2013) offers the following definition of youth work:

Developing relationships and creating environments that engage young people and promote the optimal development of their capacity as human beings is the center of child and youth care. (p. 100)

The importance of youth work practice occurring in the context of the young person’s daily life, or “lifespace”, is also a key feature found in the North American literature (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2011).

In Quebec, youth work has its roots in “psycho-education”. Youth workers in the province with specialized training in this unique approach are referred to as “educateurs”, symbolizing the emphasis on re-education in practice with young people (Arseneault, Begin, Bluteau, & Pronovost, 2012). Many of the features of psycho-education are similar to those found elsewhere in North American youth work literature. The notion of practice occurring within the lifespace of a young person, as described in psycho-education literature, is a case in point. Arseneault and colleagues (2012) note that “all forms of psychoeducative intervention are carried out within an individual’s everyday life



setting and within a pre-determined context” (p. 4). Further, the use of self in practice is understood in psycho-education as the “human component of intervention” with the psychoeducator bringing “his or her own personal history, strengths and weaknesses” (p. 5). Thus the discipline of youth work, or the ground of the tree in our integrative model, nourishes the notion of youth work as educative, voluntary, and relational, where practice occurs in the everyday lives and contexts of young people towards the goal of promoting optimal development.

### ***Guiding Principles***

As stated above, the guiding principles in our model are a developmental perspective, an ecosystemic approach, collaborative relationships, a rights-based approach, and ethics and reflexivity. The trunk of the tree, fuelled by its roots and nourished by the soil of the discipline of youth work, represents these principles.

***A developmental perspective.*** Youth work’s earliest origins reflect the importance of developmentally-informed methodologies for working with young people. Historians note that the birth of youth work coincides with the discovery of childhood as a distinct life stage, which brought with it a recognition of changing issues and needs at different points in the lifespan (Charles & Gabor, 2006). Henry Maier (1987), one of the founding theoreticians of North American youth work, noted that, “Helping professionals need to relate to and work with children and adolescents as developing beings” (p. 1). Basing youth work practice on notions of development means that at the heart of every interaction, there is an appreciation of individual differences and levels of readiness. Rather than imposing rigid norms, youth work that takes developmental knowledge into account can promote individualization. Developmentally informed practice strives to create age-appropriate contexts for optimal development while cultivating the potential of each young person based on realistic expectations. As stated by Phelan (2008) “It is only through ... truly understanding the world from the youth’s developmental perspective, that strengths and skills become visible” (p. 74).

***An ecosystemic approach.*** The ecosystemic principle considers that youth are shaped by their environment. As identified by Bronfenbrenner (2005), several systems impact a young person’s development; most immediately, the microsystem, which includes the activities and relationships closest to the young person and with which a young person has direct contact. The surrounding layer, the mesosystem, refers to the connections and interactions between two or more elements in the microsystem. Lastly, there is the macrosystem, which deals with society’s ideologies, including culture, social, economic, and political ideologies. The macrosystem indirectly impacts the young person.

An ecosystemic principle also considers development to be interactive and transactional (Sameroff, 2010), taking into account the interconnectedness between individual and context. Young people are not only influenced by their environment, but actively involved in their own development, constructing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and understandings in response to their situation. This in turn can modify their environment. A young person’s development is not an innate pathway that can be traced linearly as a function of the attainment of some specific stage of development (Hutchby & Moran-

Ellis, 1998). Rather, it results from a complex interplay of each individual's unique characteristics with the environment. Interventions with young people should focus on both internal and external factors as well as the interaction between them.

***The collaborative relationship.*** The notion of relationship has held a primary position in youth work literature. Phrases such as “relationship-based work, having relationships, doing relationships, being in relationship, and relational practice” are common in youth work discourse (Gharabaghi, 2014, p. 6). Relationship has been defined as a youth worker's “job” (Martin, 2002, p. 116), as “the glue that holds our work together” (Rodd & Stewart, 2009, p. 4), as the intervention itself (Stuart, 2009), and as the overall general purpose of youth work practice (Krueger, 2005). Youth workers use a relational model of practice to engage young people (Johnson, Buckley, Crane, & Leebeck, 2013) and describe such engagement as “being with” (Ranahan, 2013) or “being there” (Batsleer, 2008), whereby youth workers are active participants in the relationship. Further, some scholars have not shied away from discussing love in youth work practice (see Smith, 2011; Ranahan, 2000) or focusing on the youth worker's self in relationship with the young person (Garfat, 2008).

The youth work relationship is further delineated by the collaborative nature of the engagement. Collaboration is crucial as youth voluntarily enter the relationship and have the opportunity to shape the work, participate in the decisions, and be involved in the youth work process (Harland & Morgan, 2006). Drawing on principles of youth development, the relationship between the youth and the youth worker includes “building on assets to promote social competence, encouraging youth voice, and empowering [youth] to make positive changes” (Bradshaw, Brown, & Hamilton, 2008, p. 211). Youth freely enter and end relationships with youth workers as they choose, and youth workers must be flexible and creative in finding solutions to the challenges faced by young people (Harland & Morgan, 2006). Youth workers need to actively minimize the imbalance of power and authority in adult–youth relationships (Davies, 2010). Discourse in child and youth care and youth work literature has shifted from working *for* to working *with* those served, emphasizing the principle of collaboration (Hoskins, 2011).

Further, the collaborative element in our model also draws attention to the need for youth workers to act as partners with each other and in their interactions with professionals from other disciplines. Findings reported by Schneider-Munoz (2000) suggest that when youth workers take a *collaborative* caregiving approach, young people's development and progress in social growth is supported. Collaboration has been defined as “[a]n active and ongoing partnership, often between people of diverse backgrounds, who work together to solve problems or provide services and share experiences” (Hammick, Freeth, Goodsman, & Copperman, 2009, p. 205). While we recognize that more research is needed on the benefits of interprofessional collaboration in [youth work] practice (Morrison & Glenny, 2014), the values of togetherness, partnership, and sharing are key elements of our collaborative principle in the integrative model of youth work education.

***A rights-based approach.*** This approach entails abiding by human rights principles, including those identified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Integral to a rights-based approach is acknowledging that young people are rights-holders, and that those in positions of responsibility (including state and non-state actors) have a duty to recognize and enable these rights. With regard to implementing programs for young people, four dimensions have been considered central to the approach (Blanchet-Cohen & Bedeaux, 2014; UNICEF, 2004):

1. Universality and equality: the requirement to apply programs holistically to all young people, regardless of gender or ethnicity.
2. Participation: recognizing program recipients as subjects of their own rights, placing an obligation on duty-bearers to give due consideration to young people's views.
3. Collaboration: stakeholders work together to effectively form an intersectoral response to the political and social context of issues instead of developing narrow sectoral programming.
4. Accountability: duty-bearers have obligations to act in the best interests of young people.

In addressing key systematic obstacles that prevent people from exercising their rights, a rights-based approach marks a shift away from needs-based and welfarist approaches to youth intervention. It is also consistent with a strength-based approach to interventions, rather than a deficit-based approach that emphasizes people's deficiencies. A rights-based approach has been found to be more effective and empowering for young people regardless of the level of intervention (Ife, 2009).

***The need for ethics and reflexivity.*** The ethical and reflexive principle considers the interplay between professional and personal identities, roles, and values of youth workers. The topics of reflexivity and ethical practice are frequently taken up in literature pertaining to the helping professions including youth work (Freeman, 2013; Gharabaghi, 2008). Ethics may be primarily discussed in regards to professional codes of ethics, as in Mattingly's description (1995) of the process leading to the draft of a code of ethics for child and youth care practice in North America. This code of ethics has served in part to further the delineation of child and youth care as a "profession" (Krueger, 2002). In Quebec, psychoeducators also have to abide by the code of ethics for their profession in order to be licensed.

In addition to local legal requirements, we recognize that our understanding of ethics needs to extend "from codes, conduct, and cases to include commitment, character and context" (Banks, 2009, p. 5). Banks posits that *commitment* refers to being mindful of the professional and personal motivations, values, and passions that draw individuals to youth work. *Character* requires youth workers to self-examine who they are professionally as well as personally. *Context* necessitates the youth worker's acknowledgement of the web of relationships, politics, policies, responsibilities, perceptions, and emotions involved in youth work practice. Due to the relational, complex nature of youth work, practice can be viewed as subjective (Roberts, 2009).

Emotionality is inherent in youth work practice, and “[t]he assumption that we can separate off our emotional from our rational, our personal from our professional selves is a modernist conceit” (Smith, 2011, p. 190). As such, reflective practice is indispensable to youth work; being ethical and being reflexive go hand-in-hand: “A code needs to encourage youth workers to think ethically through whatever situations they face, and to talk together about them, and to give them the tools to do that” (Sercombe, 2010, p. 58). In our approach to youth work education, the capacity to critically evaluate the impact of one’s interventions is an additional dimension of reflexivity. In this way, the skills required to function as a “scientist-practitioner” are indispensable in that field-based problems are dealt with “... by validating practice-generated knowledge through testing ... reapplying and reassessing them” (VanderVen, 1993, p. 276). Part of the ethical responsibility of well-educated youth workers is to evaluate the impact of their interventions.

### ***The Practice Contexts and Skills Needed in Youth Work***

The branches in the model of integrative youth work education represent the various sites of youth work practice. Sites of practice may include residential care, foster homes, family preservation, hospitals, schools, youth centres, child welfare, and government or community organizations offering youth services or programs. The latter range from highly structured programs (e.g., YMCAs and camp programs) to looser, youth-led organizations, including social entrepreneurship initiatives (Blanchet-Cohen & Cook, 2014) that take place in more informal settings. In these varied contexts, youth workers encounter young people whose histories may include involvement in criminal activity or the sex-trade, experiences of abuse or neglect, mental health concerns, or disruptions in parent–youth attachment. In order to contribute to the development and well-being of these young people, youth workers creatively employ a variety of skills. For example, youth workers are required to be person-centred, supportive, and flexible in their approach, and to use a range of listening and influencing skills (Harland & Morgan, 2006). Further, youth workers need to use these skills to engage young people and develop relationships with those who may not have family or social supports (Johnson et al., 2013).

The Association for Child and Youth Care Practice identifies five domains of competencies: professionalism, cultural and human diversity, applied human development, relationship and communication, and developmental practice methods (Mattingly, Stuart, & VanderVen, 2010). An integrated model further emphasizes the need to engage in systems-level work (Mann-Feder & Litner, 2004) and to develop the skills to work at the individual, group, and organizational levels. This is needed to foster social interactions and group activities, as well as to create favourable environments for youth empowerment (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014). Strategic boundary spanning, role-changing, and systems-level interventions are particularly relevant to the goal of responding to the complexity of young people’s lives in empowering ways. Thus, skills required in youth work practice are diverse and dependent on the sites of practice, the contexts of engagement, and the complexities of emergent and dynamic practice (Fusco, 2013).

### ***Teaching and Learning Within the Youth Work Program***

Youth work education needs to prepare students with both “theoretical and practice knowledge and abilities” (Bessant, 2007, p. 47) and develop “reflexive, critically conscious, praxis-oriented practitioners” (White, 2007, p. 242). Teaching and learning in an integrated approach should parallel the characteristics of practice (Shaw & Trites, 2013). Educators model skills such as effective engagement and advocacy. Ward (2013) explains that congruency between teaching approaches and expected learner outcomes is important:

[I]f I wanted [child and youth care] students to emulate a responsive, strength based approach that recognized signs of resilience in children in practice, I needed to ensure that the teaching principles I was employing in my relationships with students and within the classroom experience, were congruent with this way of thinking. (p. 53)

Experiential learning activities, such as case-based approaches, offer “meaningful pedagogical encounters in the classroom” that provide teachers and learners the opportunity to grapple with the complexities of practice (Sanrud & Ranahan, 2012, p. 234). As such learning activities unfold in the classroom, educators demonstrate critical thinking, problem solving, facilitation, and advocacy in processing the learning activity with the students. It is through this modelling of youth work skills that the complexities and characteristics of youth work practice are “made explicit” (Shaw & Trites, 2013, p. 13).

Modelling youth work skills also requires educators to design activities that meet the learning needs of the students. Just as it is necessary for youth workers to assess their interventions, ensuring that they are responsive to the unique needs of the youth, family, or community, pedagogical approaches must also consider the diverse group of learners present in the classroom. Creative learning activities where students engage in authentic helping experiences stimulate the learner’s capacity to understand, empathize, and connect to a youth’s experience of being “helped”. In 2012, Ranahan et al. described a learning activity in which child and youth care students were engaged as helpee and helper in a class assignment. The assignment was designed to support students’ understanding of the experience of being helped, including feeling vulnerable, exposed, accepted, and understood, while also appreciating the complexities of being a helper. As helpers, students faced the challenges of completing case files, and being present, reflexive, and engaged even in times of uncertainty and anxiety. Ranahan et al. suggest youth work education requires opportunities for students to take risks, to commit to a learning process rather than an isolated task or assignment, and to engage in embodied learning activities that evoke emotional, physical, and psychological experiences.

An integrated approach to youth work education that encompasses principles of rights-based approaches, reflexivity, and collaborative relationships must also realign the teacher–learner role. Thus the youth work program draws on the notions of empowerment within critical literacy theory. McDaniel (2004) posits that empowerment shifts the teacher–learner roles whereby “teachers learn and learners teach” (p. 474). This

approach moves beyond the “banking” model of education (Mayo, 2004, p. 44), such that knowledge is not simply transmitted from teachers to learners, but co-created through collaboration (Gee, 2007). Further, through a shifting of roles and a collaborative learning approach in the classroom, students feel empowered to fully engage in the learning experience by adopting a critical stance instead of simple compliance. Students begin to understand and be aware of “the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 65). Students are encouraged to question, critique, and analyze their learning experience and relationships with educators in the program in a reflexive manner. For example, students are provided with an opportunity to process their learning experiences in the program at the close of each semester in an open format. This provides new learning for educators and results in shifts and modifications to the youth work program, which consequently becomes a co-constructed program.

Implementing a graduate-level education program that reflects an integrated approach to youth work will also require paying attention to sequencing, and the proper quantity and balance of practice and theory. VanderVen (1993) has pointed out that effective integration of theory and practice is central. She called for a reciprocal process whereby one “begins with experience, which is then conceptualized into practice theory, then ‘from the top down’ which relates this theory to other relevant empirical knowledge and theories, and then applies this new theory to determine to what degree it is effective” (p. 274). Engaging with theory and practice in a continuous way will prepare students to become responsive and intentional practitioners (Buchroth & Parkin, 2010). Experiential learning to process and inform theoretical knowledge will optimize student learning, reflecting the vision of classic thinkers in education such as John Dewey, David Kolb, and Kurt Lewin (Mann-Feder & Litner, 2004).

We are also aware that the integration of a range of theories and intervention methodologies requires more than just familiarity with the various approaches. Integrative programs in the human services work towards clearly articulating the ways in which a range of approaches are linked and blended. As documented in other disciplines, various methods of integration are available to the practitioner: eclecticism (where several theories are blended intentionally); theoretical integration (where one theoretical approach forms the basis for incorporating useful elements of other theories); or technical eclecticism (where a range of techniques from different theoretical orientations are employed) (Castonguay & Goldfried, 1994). In our case, we are creating assignments and activities that will require our youth work students to explore various approaches to integration. We also are planning shared assignments across courses so that links between diverse content areas can be made explicit and form the basis for this exploration.

Consistent with other professional programs, our graduate program emphasizes internships as central for students to apply theoretical knowledge to youth work practice, and acquire skills in a real-world context. We are developing relationships with a range of youth-serving organizations, which serve both normative and at-risk populations, provide prevention or treatment, and intervene with both groups and individuals. One challenge is that sites for internships will reflect the current field and the range of

approaches represented locally, but may not allow for students to learn about the approach to youth work that we are developing. Therefore it will be critical to work with sites that have the breadth and depth to support our vision as well as the openness to explore ways of adopting a more integrated approach to youth work in their organizations. A similar point can be made with respect to licensing requirements that may not necessarily reflect an integrated approach. In practice, this translates into entry requirements that may be unidimensional, so that the scope of our curriculum could be difficult to fit into current criteria for licensing. A challenge will be to work with the licensing bodies to change the criteria so that these new approaches are recognized.

### **Future Directions**

As Bessant (2012) stated:

Youth work students need to be exposed to all the various types of knowledge ... to recognize the value of the various interests that inform their work and the work of others, as well as the different kinds of research drawing respectively on the empirico-positive, hermeneutic and critical traditions. This matters if we are interested in reflective practice. (p. 62)

We have developed an integrative approach to pre-service youth work education to prepare practitioners to be informed, reflexive professionals who are able to respond to the complexities of current-day youth work practice. Our integrative model of youth work education endeavours to balance the competing dichotomies present in the literature, such as prevention versus treatment, by moving beyond debate and integrating knowledges from various domains. Drawing on clinical, psycho-educational, and community-based approaches, and considering a global and local understanding of the discipline of youth work, we identified key principles that guide our integrative approach to education and the contexts and skills required for effective practice. In order to reflect on this experience and contribute to the field of youth work more generally, it will be important to evaluate our program using different methods, both to assess student learning and the outcomes of their training in the long term. We are currently examining diverse approaches to program evaluation so that both qualitative and quantitative data can assist us in refining and improving our integrative approach to youth work education and in sharing this knowledge with our academic colleagues in the future.

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