Children and Youth Services Review 35 (2013) 1698–1704

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

In a different mindset: Critical youth work with marginalized youth

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 18 November 2012
Received in revised form 19 July 2013
Accepted 20 July 2013
Available online 27 July 2013

Keywords:
Youth work
Marginalized youth
Critical theory
Detached work

ABSTRACT

Critical youth work is based on a dual focus, on individual psychosocial development on the one hand, and collective critical consciousness and the promotion of social justice on the other. Although in practice, critical youth work is gaining popularity as an alternative to person-centered youth work, the theoretical and empirical literature has not kept pace. This paper proposes a theory based practice model that expands the vocabulary of critical youth work. The model is grounded in the work of an innovative Israeli intervention program for marginalized youth and in poststructuralist theories. The model comprised of a three dimensions: the streets as a physical and political place, the use of counter narrative, and the role the youth workers take as social capital agents.

1. Introduction

The term "youth at risk" has become very popular in policy discourse in many countries including the United States (Spring, 2010), the United Kingdom (Case, 2006; Scottish Government, 2010), Australia (Te Riele, 2006), New Zealand (Whatman, Schagen, Vaughan, & Lander, 2010) and Israel (Schmid, 2007), as well as with international organizations (e.g. World Bank, 2008). However, the use of this term often blurs the distinction between the personal attributes of young people (Wyn & White, 1997) and the social ills that shape their lives, such as poverty and oppression. These social ills are considered merely as individual risk factors. At the same time as the complex ways in which inequality is distilled into identity and everyday experiences and behavior are overlooked. In contrast to "youth at risk", the phrase "marginalized youth" is used as a political term to focus on what is wrong with the social economic and cultural structures, i.e. inequality and oppression, rather than on what is wrong with youth (Te Riele, 2006).

The terminology of marginalization – as opposed to that of risk – invites analysis of oppression as an everyday process embedded in asymmetric power relations (Prilleltensky, Prilleltensky, & Voorhee, 2008), unquestioned social norms and representations, supported by psychological, social and cultural stereotypes and the structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies (Deutsch, 2011).

Coming from this perspective critical youth work is based on a dual focus, on individual psychosocial development on the one hand, and collective critical consciousness and the promotion of social justice (Watts & Flanagan, 2007) on the other. The basic assumption underpinning this approach is that the wellbeing and risk behavior of young people is linked to social exclusion, oppression, limited resources and role models, and the extent to which young people feel connected and recognized (Sharland, 2006; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999).

Although critical youth work is gaining popularity as an approach for practice, the theoretical and empirical literature has not kept pace. Based on the in-depth analysis of an innovative program for marginalized youth, and on the work of Foucault (1984) and Bourdieu (1986, 1990), this article presents a theory-based practice model of critical youth work. This model proposes new possibilities for working with youth, whom person-centered services struggled to engage. The article commences with a discussion on critical youth work as an alternative to person-centered youth work and a brief introduction to the current state of youth work in Israel. Then, we describe in detail an innovative Israeli street based program for marginalized youth, *Brosh Acher* (*In a Different Mindset*). We conceptualize the program's critical philosophy through three dimensions of "action". The first defines the physical and political position of the intervention; the second is based on narrative work; and the third conceptualizes the youth workers as social capital agents. In the discussion, we ground the program's model in poststructuralist theories and discuss the practical implications and limitations of this particular model.

1.1. Person-centered youth work and critical youth work

Throughout the preceding decades, significant professional resources, programs and policy have been invested into decreasing risk behaviors among marginalized youth and promoting social inclusion: in the United States (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2007), the United Kingdom (Bentley & Gurumurthy, 1999; Davies, 2005), the European Union (Coussée, Roets, & De Bie, 2009) as well as in Israel (Schmid, 2007). Nevertheless, a comprehensive

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.07.010

literature review of programs for youth in the United States shows that although a high percentage of the youth population participate in youth programs, marginalized youth – from families with lower incomes, and youth from ethnic minority groups – had less access to these programs (Benson & Saito, 2001). Other scholars based in Europe and Australia also found that youth programs concentrate on youth who exhibit normative behavior, or on youth who exhibit a greater potential for change due to their low level of involvement in behaviors that potentially place them at risk (Bentley & Gurumurthy, 1999; Te Riele, 2006). Coussée (2008) argues that "Youth work that works is not accessible and accessible youth work doesn't work" (p.8).

Several barriers restrict the accessibility of youth work for marginalized youth, among these the highly demanding nature of the work and the complex knowledge and skills required from youth workers (Johnston, MacDonald, Mason, Ridley, & Webster, 2000). However, critical analysis points to inherent contradictions in youth work, with a neo-liberal ideology serving as the main barrier to successful youth work. It has been argued that youth work has undergone processes of individualization and criminalization that have transformed engagement to individualized case-management, emphasizing functions of control, monitoring and coercive disciplinary techniques (Jeffs & Smith, 2002; Karabanow & Rains, 1997). This is evident in the popularity of the person-centered approach in current youth work, which has contributed to a situation in which 85% of all interventions directed at children and adolescents targeted individuals rather than their environment (Durlak & Wells, 1997). The focus on accountability is another focus of the neo-liberal policy that changed the more holistic, flexible and long-term youth work carried out in the streets (Crimmens et al., 2004; Pitts, 2001) to short term work delivered in "safe" spaces like offices and focused on set targets and restrictive outcomes (Coussée, 2008; Spence, 2004). Thus, despite the humanistic roots of person-centered youth work, its a-political nature contributes to ignoring the multilayered nature of lives in the margins, and does not present opportunities for engaging marginalized youth in resistance to oppression (Cooper, 2012).

It is argued by a number of scholars that context minimization error i.e. downplaying enduring contextual factors (Prilleltensky et al., 2008), ignoring the underlying structural causes of the oppressive status quo and the treatment of youth as *the* problem (Watts & Flanagan, 2007) limit the capacity of youth work to reach out to the young people most in need of the support it can offer.

As opposed to person-centered youth work, critical youth work implies a social justice and social change approach to youth work (Davies, 2005), utilizing professional resources to advocate for structural change and to organize populations to achieve their own liberation within society through the development of a critical consciousness or sociopolitical development (Diemer & Hsieh, 2008) i.e. "the psychological process that leads to and supports social and political action" (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; p. 256).

In this article, we aim to contribute toward developing and strengthening critical youth work by drawing upon the work of Foucault (1984) and Bourdieu (1986, 1990) to offer a theory based practice model of successful, critical, political youth work.

1.2. The Israeli context

In Israel, socio-economic gaps are strongly linked to ethnicity and geography (Cohen-Navot, Levi, & Gilad, 2008). Youth from ethnic minority groups, immigrant youth and youth living in poverty face accumulating circuits of dispossession, including restricted access to quality education (Cohen-Navot et al., 2008) and increasing levels of racism and negative contact with police. The growth in socio-economic inequality is linked to increased risk behavior and the deterioration in the mental and physical health of youth (Fine, Stoudt, Fox & Santos, 2010). Research in Israel, as elsewhere, shows that youth marginalization is associated with involvement with violence, unsafe sex practices and use of drugs and/or alcohol (Isralowitz, Shpiegel, Reznik, & Laytin, 2009; Schmid, 2007).

Awareness of the concept of marginalized youth started to develop in Israel during the 1960s. The objective of the first known intervention, in 1962, was to explore through action research the characteristics of "criminal street gangs" in Tel-Aviv – a major Israeli city – and to quantify the effectiveness of the American street club method for working with this population (Lahav, 1993: p. 4). During the 1970s, public awareness of marginalized urban youth increased as a result of activities of the Israeli Black Panthers' Movement. The Black Panthers initiated social protests blaming the government for the inferior socio economic status of specific immigrant groups, principally Mizrachi, Jews originating from Arab countries. Following the recommendation of a national committee for the allocation of more resources to the issue of marginalized children and youth, two new governmental services were established, and the "new" profession of youth work, with a specific emphasis on street youth work, was developed (Levy, 2003; Schmid, 2006).

The philosophy and work model based on the American experience, originated in the Chicago School (Sherer, 1989) and had also been implemented at this time in projects in the UK (Crimmens et al., 2004). According to this model, youth work emphasized principles of "reaching out", active efforts to make contact with the youth, and building close symmetrical relationships of empathy, love and authenticity (Levy, 2003; Sherer, 1989).

However, since the 1990s several processes, such as the evolving professionalism of youth work and the demanding nature of street work have influenced the decrease in street work in Israel. These processes were strengthened by structural changes, especially a dramatic decrease in government funding for youth work (Malka & Krumer-Nevo, in press).

Renewed interest in street youth work at the beginning of the 2000s was a response to the gradual increase in poverty rates among children and youth from the 1980s onwards, and the new waves of migration to Israel from the former USSR and Ethiopia during the 1990s. In 2003, the Israeli government initiated a national committee to explore the status of marginalized children and youth. The committee reported that approximately 330,000 children – representing 15% of all Israeli children and youth – lived at different levels of risk (Schmid, 2006). Of these, 150,000 were labeled as high-risk and in immediate and direct danger. The Schmid committee recommended the formulation of a national policy to respond to the needs of children and youth, the investment of resources and the initiation of new methods of work with marginalized children and youth (Schmid, 2006). This initiative has revitalized street youth work.

1.3. Berosh Acher — in a different mindset

In 2009, a collaboration of governmental ministries and NGO actualized a three-year pilot for working with marginalized youth disconnected from social or educational services. The pilot was implemented in four small-to-medium size towns in Israel with high poverty and high number of immigrants. The initiative was called *Berosh Acher*, which translates to 'In a Different Mindset', highlighting its alternative and radical subversive nature.

The program was designed to be an all-inclusive program for treating marginalized youth via street youth workers. The target population was defined as "immigrant youth having difficulties integrating in the social systems, pushed to the sidelines, joining up with street gangs where criminal behavior is common" (N.A., internal document).

The youth workers worked in pairs, a man and a woman. They stayed in the streets, hanging out in places where youth gathered during evenings and nights, and established contact with them. Through these relationships, the youth workers were supposed to help the youth decrease their involvement in risky activities, connect them with the