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Ethical Practice in Professional Youth Work: Perspectives from Four Countries

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ABSTRACT

Ethical youth work is 'good' youth work but how do youth work practitioners collectively determine what is 'good'? This article presents findings from four-country surveys of youth workers' attitudes and understandings of what constitutes 'good', that is to say 'ethical' practice. The article presents the principles that youth workers say underpin ethical practice in Australia, Estonia, Iceland, and Ireland. The first three countries have well established Codes of Ethics and/or Practice and Professional Associations, while Ireland does not. A survey of youth work practitioners funded by Erasmus Plus, was conducted across the four countries (n = 405). A comparative analysis of data across countries revealed consensus around key characteristics of youth work practice such as the participation, empowerment, and safety of young people. These core principles form the basis of good and ethical action by practitioners. In countries which have codified these principles, these Codes were reported to be useful tools to support practitioners in their work. The survey further suggests that reflective practice is important in the application of ethical codes to concrete practice situations acting as a form of collective accountability and praxis. To conclude, we consider the implications of these findings for professionalism, and professionalisation in youth work nationally and internationally.

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Introduction

Youth work has traditionally been a voluntary or vocational commitment for many, but in recent decades youth work as an occupation has emerged as a paid practice performed by tertiary qualified practitioners. Regardless of the debates about youth work as an organised profession, the practice has, de facto, become increasingly professionalised in a range of countries and contexts (Corney 2021; Devlin 2012; Metz 2017; Williamson

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2020). Professionalism is framed as a key component of quality youth work (O'Donovan and Basarab 2020) which in turn highlights the importance of the commitment to ethical standards of practice (Cruess, Johnston, and Cruess 2004; D'Arcy 2016; Petkovic and Bárta 2020; Australian Council of Professions 2003). As part of the professionalisation process in many countries, Codes of Ethics and/or Practice (CEPs) have been developed (Corney 2021; Corney and Hoiles 2007; Evans 2015). Yet little is known about youth workers' attitudes to good practice and whether there is a consensus regarding the sorts of principles that should underpin ethical codes; how practitioners engage in ethical reflection and decision-making in practical ways day to day; or how CEPs are applied by youth workers in ethical reflection on practice.

This study sought to shed light on these issues and identify commonalities across four countries which can inform the development of the youth work profession internationally. The four countries have experienced long-term and purposeful cooperation, based on synergies built within Erasmus Plus projects and ongoing conversations on our common interests on youth work ethics and ethical conduct. A survey of youth work practitioners across the four countries (n = 405) was conducted, examining attitudes and understandings of ethical practice amongst youth workers in Australia, Estonia, Iceland and Ireland. The first three countries have an established Code of Ethics and/or Practice, while Ireland does not. This enabled an exploration of how youth workers engage in ethical practice across different historical and cultural contexts for the professionalisation of the sector. The study aims to contribute new knowledge and perspectives on what is 'good' and 'ethical' youth work practice which can inform local and national practice as well as ongoing international professionalisation efforts such as the Council of Europe's 2017 Recommendation on Youth Work and the Commonwealth of Nations Youth Program's agenda to professionalise youth work. The terms 'good' and 'ethical' youth work are used interchangeably in this article.

Professionalisation and ethical practice

The literature suggests that ethics, professionalisation and reflective practice are intimately linked concerns. The Australian Council of Professions defines a profession as 'a disciplined group of individuals who adhere to ethical standards' (2003). In many parts of the world, professionalisation of youth work is accompanied by the development of CEPs which aim to ensure consistency of practice and the integrity of the profession (Horn 2016). There is broad consensus in the literature that youth work is a values-based practice (Corney 2004a; Corney 2004b; Maunders 1990; Sapin 2013) and this is reflected in the axiological commitments of many CEPs. Typically developed by a body of practitioners, CEPs are based on the core values and principles of that profession and define that profession's ethical standards, guide workers in their implementation (Barwick 2006; Outten 1991) and 'serve as a focus for debate and discussion about ethical practice issues' (NYA 2004, 2). For Grogan (2004), developing such professional consensus is important because the ability of youth workers to advocate collectively for young people is diminished when a lack of professional coherence inhibits collective professional status amongst cognate social occupations. Similarly, Sercombe (2004; 2010) and Barwick (2006) suggest that CEPs allow practitioners to define their own professional standards, enhancing professional status so that youth workers can engage effectively in advocacy and inform youth policy. In relation to professionalisation Evans (2015) argues for compulsory government regulation

of youth work in contrast to Fox's (2019) ambivalence and evidence that regulation may not be in the best interests of young people. Evans (2015, 422) arguments were unconvincing as they did not address how 'a compulsory ethical code in youth work' in Australia would be enforced, without government regulated license to practice.

Metz (2017) notes critiques of youth work professionalisation's fostering of the elite character of an occupation and emphasising protocolisation, both of which 'hinder the open, equal and flexible attitude that is necessary for building relationships with young people' (4). Similarly, Hatton (2022) demonstrates how simplistic ethical protocols do not account for the youth worker's 'use of self' (De Saint Croix 2016; Jenkinson 2010) to build authentic and reciprocal relationships, requiring a more reflexive negotiation of boundaries between the personal and professional. In contrast to professions which operate in line with strict *a priori* protocols, Roberts (2009, 3) suggests that what makes youth work a 'profession' is that workers make autonomous value judgements in ambiguous circumstances or complex situations and where choices are not clear cut. Pointing to this 'layered, context-linked and relational character of [youth work] practice', Metz (2017) advances a strong critique of objective-rational professionalism which is grounded in Freidson's (2001) and Flyvbjerg's (2001) emphasis on discretionary scope and professional phronesis. Reflective practice thus emerges as a crucial strategy for practitioners adhering to a CEP, enabling them to maintain commitment to youth work values and professional integrity while also enabling professional autonomy (Banks 2010). Additionally, Horn (2016) suggests that professional development, professional supervision (reflection), and membership in a professional association can support youth workers practising under the rubric of a CEP.

Youth work associations can be viewed as communities of practice. The term ´community of practice` refers to people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared occupational domain. In addition to the ´domain` also ´community` and ´practice` are important: domain referring to the professional occupation, shared competencies, and expertise (not always recognised); community referring to the shared interests and activities within the domain and practice referring to the practitioners themselves. All three elements are always present, but the forms, formalisation, locations, recognition, visibility, and sizes of the communities may vary. Communities of practice, associations – professional and otherwise – are focussed on learning through reflection on practice (Wenger 1998; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015).

Country contexts

Youth work as a professional practice shares many similarities across the four countries participating in this study. They share common heritage, with its roots in voluntary organisations followed by moves towards state funding and delivery of services necessitating formal training programmes at a tertiary level, leading to professionalisation and the development of regulatory mechanisms to ensure 'good' practice such as codes of ethics, definitional statements and standards and relevant government legislation and professional associations.

Australia

Youth work in Australia has been influenced by British youth work traditions (Cooper 2018) and was a mostly voluntary sector up until the middle of the twentieth century.

After the Second World War government-funded youth services expanded alongside tertiary training courses and paid employment opportunities increased (Irving, Maunders, and Sherington 1995). Australia is a federation of state governments, with the state of Victoria having the longest association with professional youth work, with tertiary training of youth workers and fledgling professional associations having existed in various forms since the 1940s (Irving, Maunders, and Sherington 1995). In Victoria, a code of ethical practice was adopted by the youth sector in 2007 after extensive consultation with youth workers and youth service organisations (Corney 2021). It was then adopted by the Australian national professional association, Youth Workers Australia, and aims to guide and shape professional practice to ensure that it is ethical and safe for both youth workers and young people. The code is voluntary and is intended for qualified youth workers and those who work with young people without formal qualifications in youth work. Grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the code clearly focuses on the rights of young people, no matter their background or circumstance. The code contains Youth Work Principles that underpin what youth work aims to achieve, and Youth Work Practice Responsibilities to guide what youth workers do in practice. These principles and practice responsibilities were determined through collaboration and consultation between the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) and other members of the Victorian Youth Sector and, thus, reflect values inherent to the Australian youth work profession (Corney 2021).

Estonia

Estonia, along with the other Baltic States, was occupied by the Soviet Union and as a result youth work was influenced ideologically and at a standstill for several decades. Many of the specific types of youth work practised before occupation, such as voluntary youth organisations and camps, were carried on, but they were moulded to suit the communist ideology and message (Rannala and Allekand 2018). After regaining independence in 1991, there were many rapid changes and developments, which also included the rebirth of youth work. Today youth centres are the most well-known youth work institutions in Estonia, but youth work is also carried out in other environments such as schools, museums and other cultural establishments, public spaces, and digital environments. Main organisers of youth work by the state (Local Government Organization Act 1993; Youth Work Act 2010) are local governments – in this way youth work is close to the local community. Youth Work training programs are available at universities both at an undergraduate and postgraduate level and there is a growing professional organisation of youth workers in Estonia since its inception in 1999. The Occupational standard for youth work together with a code of ethics was adopted in 2006.

Iceland

In Iceland, the development of organised leisure and youth work activities went hand-in-hand with social development programs. Non-government organisations (NGOs) played a major role in that development and many of these voluntary-based programs and can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Gudmundson 2007). In the last decades state funded municipal youth work grew very rapidly and there are now municipal youth centres or after-school youth work activities provided for almost every young person in Iceland.

The first youth club in Iceland called *Tomstundaheimilid* was opened in Reykjavik in 1957 and the professional body known as the *Samfés*, the Association of Youth Clubs in Iceland was founded in1986. Most Youth Clubs in Iceland are current members of *Samfés*. The need for a professional association of youth workers was first formally discussed at the general meeting of *Samfés* in 2002.

The Association of Leisure and Youth Workers in Iceland (FFF) was founded on May 28, 2005 as an association of youth work professionals who work in the field of leisure on behalf of municipalities, e.g. in youth centres, after-school programs, leisure centres and departments of youth in municipalities. There had been discussions among youth workers about the need for a code of ethics since the 1990s but consensus on what to include could not be made until FFF was formally established. One of the first items on the agenda of the FFF's founding meeting was to adopt a code of ethics which was approved on May 28, 2005 (Félag fagfólks í frítímaþjónustu 2015).

Ireland

From its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, youth work in Ireland has been governed by the principle that young people's voluntary participation is the starting point of engagement, and adult volunteers play a vital role in provision of services which are provided by predominantly state funded voluntary organisations or NGOs. The 2001 Youth Work Act enshrines that voluntary principle in legislation. This 2001 act – one of the few in Europe specific to youth work – is somewhat technical and instrumental in its language, however it does, along with the three dimensions of voluntarism noted above, position youth work as both a universal and targeted educational practice with young people aged 10–25 (Devlin 2012). The policy context of Irish youth work has evolved rapidly in the years since the 2001 Act, focusing increasingly on reform and compliance (McMahon 2021).

Professional youth work emerged from the early 1970s onwards, though it was not until the mid-1980s when the State began to invest in what is now known as 'targeted' youth work, and that youth workers were employed in 'disadvantaged' youth projects. These developments coincided with the introduction of the first professional education and training programs in higher education. There are now six higher education institutions on the island of Ireland offering professional youth work education and training at undergraduate and post-graduate level, which are endorsed by the sectoral educational endorsement body, the North/South Education and Training Standards Committee for youth work (NSETS).

The National Youth Council of Ireland's 2012 study assessing the economic value of youth work suggests that some 383,000 people were engaged in youth work activities, along with 40,145 adult volunteers and some 1,397 paid staff. These figures are not definitive, highlighting that there is very little reliable information available on the profile of professional youth workers in Ireland, regarding numbers, qualification levels, and employment status. While Ireland does not yet have a code of ethics or professional association for youth workers it does have a framework for the inclusion of ethics in youth work education and training endorsed by the North/South Education and Training Standards Committee for Youth Work (D'Arcy 2016).

Methodology

This research adopted a survey approach to gather data on youth workers understanding of ethics and professionalism across four countries. The survey was designed to gather data on respondent's understandings and beliefs around youth work purposes and principles, youth work as a profession and youth workers experiences of codes of ethics/ethical practice. Ethical approval for the research was received on a country-by-country basis in accordance with the authors' institutional ethical research requirements. A total of 466 participants commenced the survey. Among these respondents, a total of 61 participants were excluded due to extensive missing data (>50 per cent completed). An analysis was conducted on the final sample of 405 participants (see Table 1). A total of 8.9 per cent (n = 36) of cases were included in the sample with missing data throughout (<50 per cent). The analysis was descriptive, with frequencies, means and standard deviations obtained to examine the patterns in respondent attitudes and opinions towards the professional standards of the youth work workforce. Chi-square analyses were also conducted to explore differences in responses across country, type of employment (paid or voluntary), length of experience in the role and educational background.

Table 1. Sample information.

Country distribution	Australia (n = 144, 35.6%)
	Iceland (n = 113, 28%)
	Estonia (n = 89, 22%)
	Ireland (n = 59, 14.6%)
Gender distribution	Female 292 (72%)
	Male 104 (25.6%)
	Non-binary 3 (0.7%)
	Prefer not to say 6 (1.5%)
Age distribution	25 years or less 54 (13.3%)
	26–35 years 162 (40%)
	36–45 years 107 (26%)
	46–55 years 54 (13%)
	56–69 years 26 (6.4%)
	70 or older 1 (0.2%)
Educational background	Qualification in Youth work or community work 239 (59.8%)
	Certificate 22 (5.4%)
	Diploma 32 (7.9%)
	Bachelor degree 144 (35.6%)
	Masters & Post Grad Dip 32 (7.9%)
	Other qualification not related to youth work 68 (20%), break down as follows:
	Certificate /Diploma 12 (2.9%)
	Bachelor degree 39 (9.6%)
	Masters 17 (4.2%)
	Doctorate 3 (0.7%)
Employment status	Fulltime 261 (64%)
	Part time 112 (28%)
	Casual 30 (7.4%)
	More than one youth work job (Paid youth work role) 50 (12.3%)
Years of practice	Under 1 year 19 (5%)
	1–5 years 130 (32%)
	6–10 years 98 (24.2%)
	11–15 years 63 (16%)
	16–20 years 48 (12%)
	20 + year 45 (11.1%)

Results

Aims and challenges for youth work

There was a broad convergence across the four countries when practitioners were asked to describe the aims of youth work practice, with minor variations accounted for by historical and cultural contexts. Respondents' qualitative understandings of youth workers' aims reflected their sense of an ethical core for good practice centred on enabling the human rights of young people through empowerment, participation, and social justice. Respondents emphasised the youth worker's role in creating a safe space for young people to flourish, to be heard and listened to in society, to develop skills, resilience, healthy boundaries and positive relationships. Irish respondents specifically emphasised the importance of the youth work relationship and stressed the social pedagogical nature of practice. However, the relational and pedagogic nature of practice was reflected across the data, with respondents describing what they do in terms such as 'building rapport', 'resourcing', 'supporting', 'mentoring and 'advocating for' young people (Table 2).

Respondents noted several key challenges for good practice. Excluding the perennial issue of funding which arose across countries, recognition of the profession by the state and parity of esteem with other social occupations were key issues. These issues impacted on the youth worker's ability to engage in inter-agency work and advocacy, as well as having implications for pay, conditions and job progression pathways. A further challenge noted in the research is that the sector has significant numbers of workers without a youth-work specific qualification.

The following Tables outline the results of the data followed by discussion.

Table 2. Levels of practitioner support for key ethical characteristics.

How important is it for youth work to enable …	N = (%)
Respect for young people	385 (95)
Participation for young people	384 (94.8)
Positive health and wellbeing	384 (94.8)
Positive transitions to adulthood	384 (94.8)
Independence	379 (93.6)
Safety for young people	377 (93)
Human rights for young people	376 (92.8)
Empowerment for young people	375 (92.6)
Connection to family and community	370 (91.4)
Social justice for young people	362 (89.4)
Cultural identity	340 (84.0)
Access to education	332 (82)
Twenty-first century skills	311 (76.7)
Civic engagement	293 (72.3)
Environmental sustainability	291 (71.9)

Attitude to key characteristics of ethical practice

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the characteristics of good youth work practice as set out in CEPs in Australia (Victoria), Estonia and Iceland. The survey reveals an overall consensus with a high level of agreement (>90 per cent) around several key characteristics, suggesting that despite contextual differences there

is an international coherence to good practice. 84.8 per cent of respondents endorsed young people's positive transitions, health, wellbeing, and participation as very important for youth work practice. Furthermore, respondents were clear in their belief that empowerment (92.6 per cent) and respect and young people's human rights (92.8 per cent) are very important for ethical youth work practice. This points to a core ethical commitment to support young people to flourish by developing and extending their capabilities and agency. High support for human rights (Table 3) appears to suggest that they provide practitioners with both a normative frame and practical framework to support young people to realise their full potential and contribute to society.

Characteristics which were less likely to be rated highly included twenty-first century skills, e.g. digital youth work (76.7 per cent), civic engagement (72.3 per cent) and environmental sustainability (71.9 per cent). The lower ranking of these emergent issues is puzzling given that they have significant impacts on young people's wellbeing, participation and transitions, all of which were rated highly by practitioners. This suggests a lag or disconnect between topical issues for young people, such as the environment, and youth workers response. This has important implications for ethical practice. If young people are concerned with issues such as the climate crisis, youth work has an ethical responsibility to accompany young people and address these.

A majority of participants responded positively to the question of the importance of human rights frameworks to youth work practice. When asked about key principles and practice frameworks through which ethical characteristics are operationalised, agreement remained high across the four countries (>80 per cent) for most categories. This again suggests coherence across countries about how ethics informs professional youth work practice, with practitioners across the four countries articulating a shared commitment to both being there (for young people) and being fair (supporting equality and inclusion). Amongst the highest ranked were acting with integrity and in the best interests of young people (89.4 per cent), equitable treatment of young people (87.7 per cent), inclusion and accessibility (87.4 per cent) and reliability to young people (86.9 per cent). With the exception of indigenous recognition (an issue with particular resonance for respondents from

Table 3. Levels of practitioner support for ethical principles and practice frameworks.

How important are the following principles & practice frameworks?	N = (%)
Acting with integrity and the best interests of young people	362 (89.4)
Treat young people equitably	355 (87.7)
Inclusion and accessibility	354 (87.4)
Being honest and transparent with young people	353 (87.1)
Reliability to young people	352 (86.9)
Consider the social context of young people	346 (85.4)
Partnership with young people	346 (85.4)
Anti-oppressive and non-discriminatory practices	345 (85.2)
Professional knowledge and skills	345 (85.2)
Professional self -care	343 (84.7)
Professional cooperation and collaboration	341 (84.2)
Respect the confidentiality of young people	341 (84.2)
Non-formal and informal learning methods	339 (83.7)
Protect the privacy of young people	339 (83.7)
Duty of care to young people	337 (83.2)
Voluntary participation of young people	329 (81.2)
Professional boundaries between youth workers and young people	317 (78.3)
Recognition of Indigenous people	185 (45.7)

the settler-colony of Australia), professional boundaries between youth workers and young people were the lowest scored principle, albeit at 78.3 per cent. While further research is needed to understand this, it may indicate a rejection of the perceived aloofness of objective-rational professionalism and protocolisation (Metz 2017) rather than a rejection of appropriate boundaries between practitioners and young people.

The responsibility to create and maintain boundaries is specifically addressed in the Australian CEP, while a specific reference to professional boundaries cannot be found in the Estonian code. In the Icelandic code there is a requirement for youth workers to act with professionalism, which could be interpreted to refer to these professional boundaries. Two principles which scored relatively lowly given their prominence in the practice literature were voluntary participation (81.2 per cent) and non-formal/informal education (83.7 per cent). However, there were significant variations between countries here, with Irish respondents rating them as very important (96.6 per cent and 98.3 per cent respectively), reflecting the centrality of these social pedagogic principles in Irish youth work history and their inclusion in the statutory definition of Irish youth work.

Professionalisation and ethical youth work

The professionalisation of youth work practice across the four countries has developed with local specificities in relation to various components such as CEPs, legislative frameworks, occupational standards and tertiary level education and training. Each of these components plays a role in supporting and developing ethical youth practice by resourcing and guiding practitioners. When asked to consider the components of a profession (Table 4), respondents ranked a CEP most highly (21.5 per cent). This was followed by relevant legislation (16.5 per cent) and specialised, formal training or education (12.1 per cent). 61.3 per cent of respondents in countries with ethical codes reported it to be highly relevant for practice, while 79.7 per cent of Irish workers (where there is no CEP) stated that they believed a code would be useful for professional practice. This suggests a high level of support for CEPs amongst practitioners, who recognised their benefits for practice while also acknowledging their limitations (Table 5). Respondents believed that CEPs are important for guiding practitioners in addressing ethical issues which arise in practice. 46.2 per cent of practitioners reported discussing ethical issues regularly in their workplace while 19.7 per cent reported occasionally discussing ethical issues with colleagues. For Irish workers without a code of practice, supervision (98.3 per cent) informal discussions with colleagues (91.5 per cent) and reflective practice (62.7 per cent) were key means of addressing ethical issues in the work. Interestingly

Table 4. Important components of youth work profession.

Important components of youth work profession	N = (%)
Code of ethical practice	87 (21.5)
Relevant legislation	66 (16.2)
Specialised, formal training or education	49 (12.1)
Occupational standards	42 (10.4)
Existence of professional accreditation	36 (8.9)
Pay and condition	35 (8.6)
Status/recognition in society	27 (6.7)
Occupational insurance	6 (1.5)

Table 5. Strengths and limitations of CEPs – extracts from responses.

Strengths of CEPs	Limitations of CEPs
· Accountability and equity. · It gives young people and the community confidence and consistency in our work. It sets clear expectations regarding acceptable and unacceptable work practices (accountability). · Invaluable, provides a framework that I expect all members of my team to abide by. · A guideline to refer to when unsure of something. · Help govern the sector and ensure that both staff and young people are safe. · No matter a young person's location or circumstances they should be able to access the same level of professionalism as other young people (regardless of location, circumstances and socio-economic status). · Guidance in your practice and outlining expectations. · Its basis in human rights means that it has legitimacy and is hard to argue with and works in the best interests of young people. · It is important to have a standardized and unified understanding of protocols in relation to integrity, honesty and professionalism. · People have different values, attitudes and therefore ethics might not be standard across the field. It is important for the health and safety of the young person and youth worker that we are all standing the right side of the same red line.	· It needs to be promoted, taught in youth work courses and adhered to by employers. · I feel the Code of Ethics needs to be reviewed to meet current trends, i.e. the use of social media to engage young people. · Organisations and programs that hire youth workers don't abide by the code, making it risky to follow it. · Currently it is not enforced or monitored. · They are general and I would hope that these are expectations of any social industry. · They aren't recognised by peak organisations like local governments that employ youth workers as the overarching guidelines to abide by, therefore sometimes can be hard to balance both priorities: organisation and young people. · Does not cater well to First Nations people. Not enough emphasis on culture that is meaningful. · Outdated practices at times and impacting moral compasses. · Needs more cultural competency and trauma informed practice.

too, Irish workers turned to other countries and professional codes to guide their work (55.9 per cent).

Professional identity and associations

In terms of professional identity, 67 per cent of workers feel connected or somewhat connected to the wider youth sector, rising to 71.4 per cent in the three countries with professional associations. This is despite only 36.1 per cent of respondents in the three countries reporting membership of a professional association, suggesting that their existence may promote sectoral solidarity amongst workers regardless of whether they are members. Ireland reported the lowest level of sectoral solidarity amongst workers, with 54 per cent feeling ambiguous or disconnected from the wider sector. Nonetheless, 78 per cent of Irish respondents stated they would join a professional association if it were possible, with none saying that they would not.

When asked about the purpose of a professional association, respondents considered that advocating to peak bodies and governments regarding youth work (77.3 per cent), sharing resources and information (74 per cent) and providing professional development and training opportunities (73.5 per cent) were key activities. In Ireland, advocacy for pay and conditions ranked extremely highly (94.9 per cent) compared to other countries (61.8 per cent).

Implications

In this section we consider the implications of our results for youth work professionalisation and the importance of communities of practice in enabling reflective practice

processes and collective accountability as crucial to ethical youth work, and to strengthening the occupational domain of good youth work practices. The results suggest a consensus around key characteristics of youth work as a profession. Participants' understandings of youth workers' aims and values reflect a core commitment to an ethical practice centred on enabling the human rights of young people through empowerment, participation, and social justice. This is consistent with much of the literature on professional youth work (De Saint Croix 2016; Cooper 2018; Corney et al. 2022;) Respondents also emphasised the importance of youth work creating safe spaces for young people to flourish and to be heard, to develop skills, resilience, enable healthy boundaries, positive transitions, and relationships, consistent with literature on youth work as a relational practice (Spence 1999; Sercombe 2010). The centrality to youth work of relational and pedagogic practices was reflected across the data, with respondents describing their day-to-day work as 'building rapport', 'resourcing', 'supporting', 'mentoring and 'advocating for' young people. These activities underscore the importance of social pedagogy (nonformal and in-formal education and learning) in work with young people and are consistent with a broad international consensus on the pedagogic nature of professional youth work (Corney et al. 2023). The implications of these findings suggest that within country specific codes of ethics, explicit reference to human rights, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) and reference to the social pedagogic nature of youth work, will be important for enabling and ensuring 'good' and 'ethical' youth work practice.

Furthermore, the pedagogic nature of youth work practice (Corney et al. 2023), distinguish it from allied professions such as welfare work or social work, particularly in their clinical and therapeutic forms. However, a tendency in policy and practice is to conflate these professions and to see professional youth work as the poor cousin of supposedly more established human service professions, or as 'social work with young people'. This simplistic characterisation is a mistake and one that does a disservice to both social work and youth work as professions with established practices and developed bodies of knowledge, as this research establishes – including separate tertiary level qualifications, codes of ethics and professional associations.

Respondents clearly articulate the practical application and usefulness of codes of ethical practice with those respondents who hold qualifications in youth work particularly describing the regular use of codes in their daily practice to assist them in ethical decision making. This application of codes in daily practice underscores the importance of 'reflective practice' as a professional development moderation tool for enabling 'collective accountability' (Bardach and Lesser 1996; Laschinger and Wong 1999). It further suggests the importance of professional networks and the importance of peer-based (Morrison and Halpern 2012) communities of youth work practitioners meeting together in a deliberate and organised manner to reflect on practice and to learn from one another. The use of reflective practice in human service professions as part of formal 'supervision' is well documented (McDermott 2020; Cole 2000; Thompson, Thompson, and Campling 1996). However, its use in youth work has not been widespread (Herman 2012; Emslie 2009) and the previous lack of organised professional networks or associations in coordinating professional supervision processes connected to ongoing professional registration or license to practice – as is the case in other human service professions (Davys and Beddoe 2020) – may be a contributing factor.

Nevertheless, the application of reflective practice using codes of ethics as a professional development tool is seen in youth work as educational, peer based and collaborative. This egalitarian rather than hierarchical or managerial application of codes is in contrast to the formal or clinical supervision requirements of allied professions (Morrison and Halpern 2012). As such, youth workers use of peer-led reflective practice based 'supervision' has more in common with critiques (Hair 2014) of the clinical and bureaucratic supervision practices of allied professions.

Youth workers' positive expectations towards organised peer-based association reflect their communal need of support for their professional development but at the same time the need for a stronger advocate for the occupational ´domain` of youth work in order to strengthen its professional recognition. This indicates the importance of both formal and informal peer-based youth work communities of practice. This research suggests that enabling the use of an organised peer based 'reflective practice' process in professional youth work is important in the application of ethical codes to concrete practice situations and enable 'collective accountability' in ethical practice. What remains an open question from this research is 'who is best placed to organise and ensure that reflective practice processes are incorporated into professional development within communities of youth work practitioners in jurisdictions without a formal code of ethics or a recognised professional association or other authoritative body? (such as in Ireland).

Conclusion – future directions

This article has presented the results of a survey of youth workers' attitudes and understandings of what constitutes good and ethical youth work practice from four different geographical contexts. Estonia, Iceland and Australia all have a well-established written Code of Ethics and/or Practice, while Ireland has a framework for teaching ethics to youth work students on professional programmes (D'Arcy 2016) but is yet to formulate a Code for practitioners. Furthermore, all participating countries except Ireland have some form of professional association. However, the majority of Irish youth workers surveyed did indicate that a Code of Ethics would be useful in their practice and while the Irish youth workers had the lowest levels of practitioner solidarity an overwhelming majority favour the establishment of a professional association.

The profession of youth work is distinct from other allied professions and has developed across the world within different cultural contexts, and its growth has been impacted by governments and other structural influences. Despite these differences, the survey revealed a general agreement of several key principles including human rights, participation, empowerment, social justice and the safety of young people as important for enabling good practice when working with young people. Having an agreed set of principles that guide ethical decision making also allow the youth workers to reflect on their practice in an organised way with colleagues and other youth workers consistent with youth works social pedagogic underpinnings.

The significant role of reflective practice in enabling good and ethical youth work cannot be understated. The article highlights the importance of professional peer accountability and the need for youth workers to collectively organise, establish professional peer-based supervision and development networks and communities of practice. Through these structures, practitioners can learn from one another through

reflection on the issues encountered in everyday practice using codes of ethics as a reflective tool in the process of ethical decision making. Further work is needed to build youth worker's professional identity within the distinct occupational domain of youth work and to consider the influential role professional associations can make in organising and promoting the implementation of good practice through codes of ethics.

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