# Chapter 3

# Defining Professionalism

## 3.1 Introduction

It might be difficult to imagine from most perspectives how youth work, some of it undertaken by unpaid volunteers, might be considered professional. One would probably not, given the choice, visit an enthusiastic but unpaid, unqualified, part-time dentist, with no official regulation or recognition by other dentists, for root canal treatment, so why would one send or allow one's child to be looked after by an equally motivated, if relatively ignorant, educational and/or child care worker with only the claim of being a 'specialist'? How do you know that this person even had any background checks assuring that they are not a paedophile, drug dealer, someone connected to extremist organisations or child trafficking?

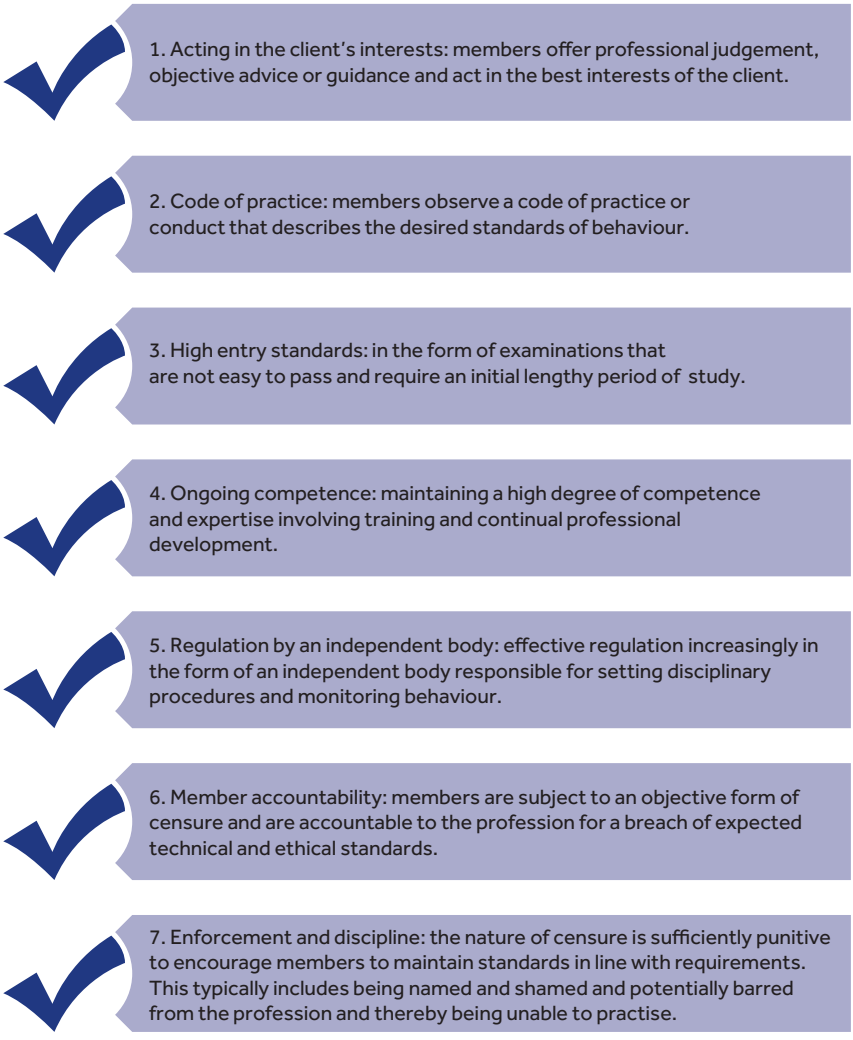
In fields like youth work, which is emerging as a distinct professional category in much of the Commonwealth, defining what professionalism is, is subject to a broad range of often critical debates. The perceived lack of conceptual clarity is also unhelpful. At the same time, outlining what a profession is, from a global, twenty-first century perspective, is not a straightforward task; there is no single, generally accepted definition of a 'profession'. The term has various meanings, ranging from the strict interpretation of traditional professions like medicine, law and accounting, to the very broad meaning of expertise and competency in any field – e.g. 'professional footballer', or 'professional plumber'.

Even in terms of established professions, for example teaching, defining what professionalism is, or means, is contested. Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) note the absence of consensus with regard to what professionalism means. Fox (1992, p. 2) has it that 'Professionalism means different things to different people' (as cited in Evans, 2008) and that it is doubtful if the notion or epithet 'professional' (or professionalism) has or will be used in only one definite way.

Professionalism according to Hoyle (2001) is connected to the improvement of the quality of service. Sockett (1996) and Evans (2008) argue that professionalism relates to quality of practice and a range of required skills and knowledge. In the literature relating to youth work, a good deal of attention has been devoted to its professionalisation, including the development of the practice of youth work. Because, as a field, youth work is not internationally recognised, its position as a profession or para-profession differs widely according to context (Eisikovitz and Beker, 2001).

The most common definitions approximate to that proposed by Langlands (2005): those occupations 'where a first degree, followed by a period of further study or professional training, is the normal entry route and where there is a professional body overseeing standards of entry to the profession'.

**Figure 3.1 Professional practice**




The contemporary notion of what it is to be professional has many roots and sources but, given its relatively early industrialisation, the influence of the United Kingdom (UK) on the definition of what it is to be professional has been significant in the Commonwealth context.

For all this, while there is a range of UK legislation that impacts on youth and youth work, and there are regional variations (Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Jersey, Guernsey and Gibraltar for instance); there is no specific, UK-wide Youth Work Act or similar legislation that specifically applies to the professionalisation of youth workers. As in other parts of the Commonwealth, there are polices that apply to young people and, as a consequence, some commitment to youth work. Indeed, Commonwealth member states in the global South have now begun according policy and legislative status to youth work, with concomitant criteria for professional practice, even though

implementation is still to take off comprehensively through State or youth-sector-driven initiatives. Conversations between practice advances in some parts of the Commonwealth, and policy advances in others can offer comprehensive solutions to professional practice in many of the member states studied for this survey.

## 3.2 Professional practice

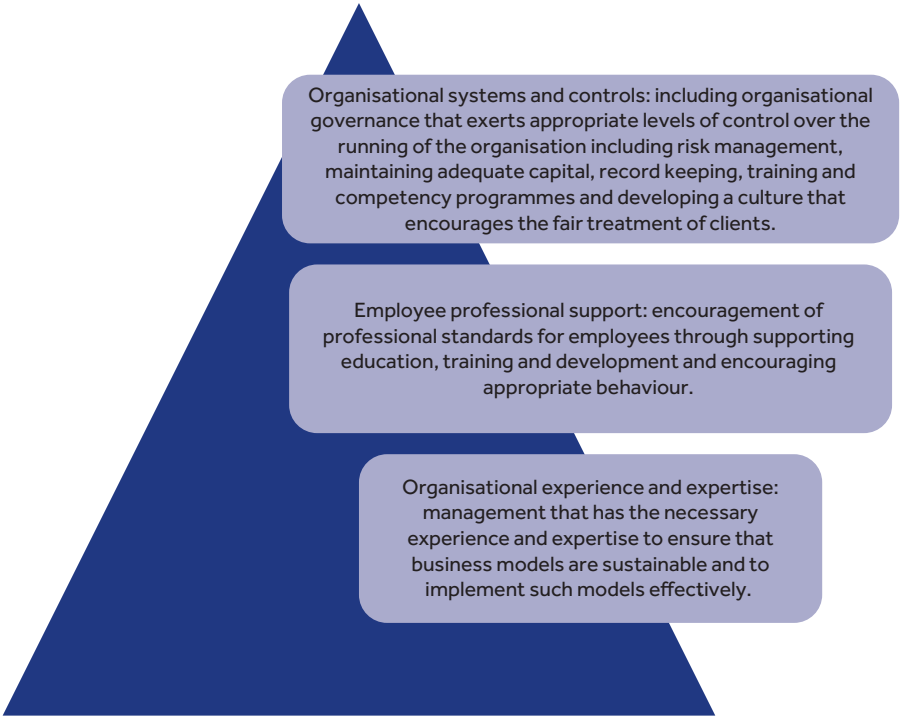
Deloitte undertook a comprehensive study of professionalism (Deloitte and Touche, 2007), which proposed that the following characteristics have traditionally been considered primary components of professionalism:

Where youth work is relatively well established, the occupation might be said to have most, if not all, of the above components. However, these are not ultimate criteria and interpretations of criteria might differ in different contexts. For example, entry standards (Principle 3) may be determined by non-examination methods, i.e. oral and written assessments.

## 3.3 Professionalism in organisations

These basic principles of professionalism apply on an individual level. But increasingly, organisations too need to demonstrate professionalism. This might include:

**Figure 3.2 Professionalism in organisations**



It is uncertain how many youth work organisations comply with the above, although many would strive to encompass these dimensions of organisational professionalism in their practice and operation.

There is no common **practised** foundation for professionalising youth work across Commonwealth member states in spite of the articulations of professional practice and professionalising processes encouraged by the Commonwealth's Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE) and other policy guides and the foundational principles set out in the Commonwealth Diploma in Youth Development Work.

This said, practice roles/expectations of practice reflect the standards of what is traditionally thought to be professional conduct/behaviour. Efforts to organise occupational associations such as youth workers' associations are connected to this, although such associations need to be more than debating/friends societies, having the ability to assure the quality and integrity of the profession, and if necessary sanction and bar members of the workforce so ensuring the protection of the service receiver, the young person.

Professional recognition is a two-way street; an occupation needs to act in a professional way, while wider (State) recognition underwrites this. As such, a mutually reinforcing process is required to define any occupation as a profession.

## 3.4 The baseline's criteria for assessing professionalism and outcomes

The baseline primarily covers eight key criteria which are considered integral to the professionalisation of the youth work sector. **Box 3.1** below outlines these criteria:

The establishment of the eight criteria **is geared towards transforming youth work cultures in order to provide positive experiences and enable the self-empowerment**

**Box 3.1 Criteria for professionalism**

*1. A collectively formulated and understood definition of youth work*

This refers to a distinct national/sectoral definition of youth work that informs policies, strategies and programmes that shape the culture and practice of youth work.

*2. Legislation and policy that recognises youth work as a profession*

This refers to State legislation and policy that provides a clear appreciation of, and underwrites, the professional status of youth work as a discrete, free-standing and distinct profession in its own right. This is distinct from more general youth policies, although these might implicate such recognition. The survey also tries to examine who was involved in shaping legislation and policy as translation of these to practice will depend on relevance, responsiveness and ownership.

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*3. Existence of professional associations*

This refers to the existence of active and representative associations of youth work practitioners. These are bodies that seek and/or have authority over the shape and development of the professional sphere in their context. They are gatekeepers to the profession, and wield influence over qualification and entry to the profession. They may also play a role in advising local and national government on youth work policy as the 'eyes and ears' of youth work on the ground. Fundamentally, they need to be democratically representative and made up of practitioners, or else they risk contradicting some of the central principles of youth work practice. As such they cannot logically be simply commercial or charitable research and/or support agencies.

*4. Competency standards, ethical standards and other practice regulators*

The dimension is concerned with how the proficiency of youth workers is established and maintained, both in terms of codes of conduct and how the standards of practice are developed and sustained. Ethical principles are understood not to be reliant on personal morality or academic judgement/opinion. Ethical regulation is laid down and reviewed by broad-based practitioner consultation and discussion. This is the outcome of the collective activity of youth workers within and across contexts, sharing and honing the delivery, efficiency and safety of their practice.

*5. A Qualifications pathway for youth workers from short courses*[1] *to PhD*

This element looks to identify professionally qualifying routes of entry into youth work. Because of the nature and widespread understanding of professional status in youth work, the basic standard of professional qualification might be taken as degree level and above. Short courses can, in the main, be understood as stepping stones to university entry or 'in-service' training for those already professionally qualified.

*6. Professional validation of youth work education and training*

This refers to the means, character and relevance of education and training. This requires the constant review of education and training for the relevance of this education to the needs of youth work practitioners in relation to the evolving needs of youth, and contexts that young people inhabit.

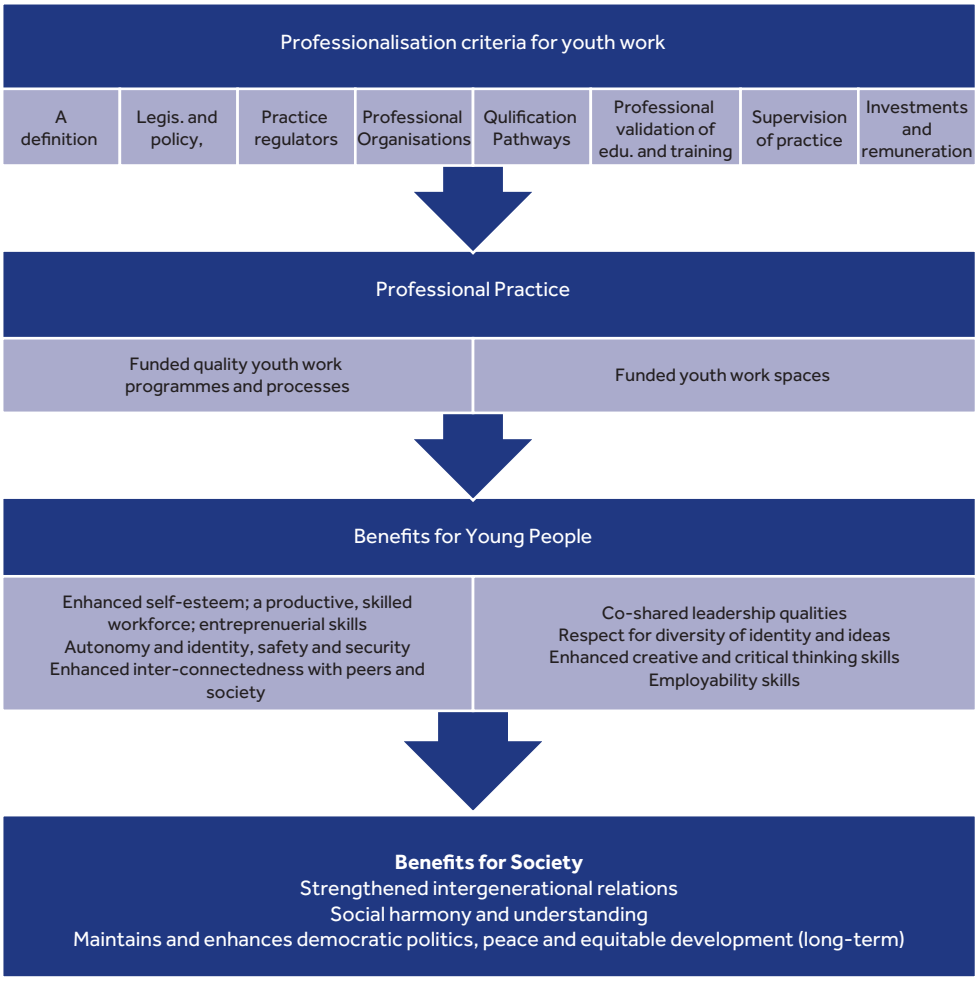
*7. Supervision of youth work practice*

A critical element of professionalisation is the means for professionals to be accountable and responsible practitioners. This logically involves the exploration and development of practice, and the ability to learn from such examination. At the same time, part of the obligation of a community of practice is support to fellow practitioners in a professional (organised and disciplined) manner. The process of supervision encompasses all of the above and is a widely recognised practice in many educational and care professions (most significantly globally in social work).

*8. Investment and remuneration*

This involves political will and financial and resource investment that underpins youth work as a professional response to the growth and empowerment of young people, in order that their contribution can be recognised and maximised at community, national and global levels.

**Figure 3.3 Benefits of professional youth work to young people and society**




**of young people**, and the criteria should not be seen as ends in themselves. The measure of success of professional youth work lies in this end goal. Whatever it takes to create systematic, positive cultures is what it takes to create professional youth work in your context.

Figure 3.3 helps articulate upwards from these criteria to a. their bearing on practice, b. benefits for young people, and finally c. for society. While investing in youth work in this way becomes a means of realising young people's rights to adequate support for self-empowerment, it also becomes a means of creating a more cohesive, equal society, in this way contributing to national and global development. The linkages and attributions of youth work to personal empowerment and therefore social development, would, of course, be less visible and direct, than, say, the impact of an immunisation programme, where health outcomes would be clear and direct. However, this does not make the impact any smaller.

These benefits to young people and society are often present, but they may be indirect, and are often hidden. Where robust research is conducted, however, these outcomes are being clearly demonstrated. For example, a study in the United Kingdom which assessed youth work projects with gangs found an over 70 per cent success rate (of these projects, as opposed to social work processes, or justice processes) 'in terms of diverting young people from criminal activity and reintegrating them with effective education and employment. No other intervention has been as effective.'[1] This is a distinct example that demonstrates to policy-makers the benefits of investing in youth work. We need to further build the case through quality research.

## 3.5 Professionalism exemplified

Of all the baseline's work to attempt to capture data, stories and facts around what professionalism is, the story told in Box 3.2, contributed to us by a youth worker in the United Kingdom, exemplifies how she makes professional decisions in youth work about her ethical/moral practice in relation to legislation and codes of conduct. This case study is also an example of the increasingly challenging circumstances in which youth workers engage with young people. While we all concede that youth work serves all young people, here is an example where a youth worker's professional capacities were stretched in an extreme context. Her reflection on her own dilemmas as a practitioner here is an extraordinary exemplification of what professional practice/reflection is.

**Box 3.2 Personal and professional conflict in youth work practice**

Sue Wallwork, youth worker, Cambridgeshire, United Kingdom

Conflict I can do, it's in my blood, conflict is comfortably nestled in my very soul and is present in my working day frequently. I think about the conflict that's present in my work life, but you see, from an early age, I had come into conflict with teachers, authority figures and generally society's critical views on why I 'refused' to reach their pre-designed 'full potential' for myself. So, for me, conflict was a negative, it drained you and made you a potential enemy to people due to your ability to use a voice and use it well.

When I entered the working world I initially conformed, desperate to let the internal conflict of emotions rest for a while, to fit into a world previously out of my reach and be accepted was greatly desired.

Reflectively, I'm aware of that short time when the years of low level oppression became too much to bear and I retreated for a short time. I wouldn't be where I'm now if that hidey hole still existed though. I created changes quickly once I thought about what I wanted in life rather than how to survive it. 'The awakening of critical consciousness leads the way to the expression of social discontent

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precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation' (Freire, 1970, p. 18).

I now see those clashes as professional discussions. Conflict in my professional practice is a normal event, I challenge schools, teachers, my own establishment daily and they challenge me. **Handled and approached professionally these are chances to expand your critical professional judgement and not conflicts**. I fear if you see these events as conflict you assume there needs to be a winner and that becomes a saviour complex.

So, conflict is brilliant; it's a chance to grow as a person and a professional, but there is a fine line we walk between of being professional when in fact we are working closely with clients who are unaccepting of authority's interference; thus creating a battle between being honest and being of any use is ever constant. Though the use of the word 'honest' is conflicting as we can only ever be an honest as our roles allow. That's when I start to think that maybe the conflict that troubles me, or has affected me in the past, **has not been as a professional but between my own values and those I hold as a professional.**

Values intermingle, they cross barriers and infuse into other values of acceptance or rejection. Then a young person who has raped three small children makes one think again. Things get a little confusing.

At the base of my own values is family, my children. Within that is my desire to ensure their safety by being protective with my actions. My base need is to give them the opportunity to thrive in their surroundings, to grow up without fear and to have no imaginary limitations of their abilities. In my work I want to ensure children are safe from harm. I do this by encouraging their parents to actively protect them while simultaneously building a child's ability to question their surroundings and strengthen their reliance to thrive 'despite' their hardships.

Realistically, my values are pretty positive; I seek to do no harm and that's as positive as you can get in the scheme of things. I like to think I am wise enough to know the difference between my values and other people's and I try very hard to never fall into a deficit model while working alongside others. **But like everything it's on a spectrum, a child who is injected with heroin or sold for a tenner needs intervention while a child who swears is not, in my opinion, yet my organisation would say they both are.**

Working with the young rapist I struggled with the thought that my professional **actions of accepting him as a young person might create an apparent acceptance of his behaviours.** No resolution was reachable because the situation was so conflicting, so, as a professional I focused on my intervention, but as a person I remained conflicted.

I completed all interactions and set out plans as I would have done with any young person; the reasoning was different though. I would normally meet young people weekly and seek to speak with parents, others, etc. to help widen my view on the situation. I would be interested in their voice and ensure they were the leader of their own changes. I am consciously aware of the possible influence I have over others because of my role, my strength and because of their current position. **I hold my personal values loosely while working, but they are still very much present. I do not expect others to share them, I monitor according to safeguarding legislation and I hold others' actions up against the law, but I do not hold them against my own ethics and values.** I seek the voice, encourage the words, and ensure I offer information to create opportunity to make informed choices.

**In the case of this young person I did not seek his voice. This was partly due to the impending court case, partly due to the role I was given and mostly because his words were something I didn't want to hear.** I was worried that I couldn't hide behind my professional attitude if he was to share with me any details of his behaviour or desires. Yet I attended every session and when I think back to the reason for this, **I remember I had promised myself that each child would get support no matter what. The fact he was a child still lay heavily within my reasoning to accept the case, because in my mind I was finding it hard to label him a sexual predator, but I also couldn't find in it my consciousness to label him as 'just' a child.** This was proving a large barrier as I believe I was trying to demonstrate acceptance towards a child while not accepting his actions and behaviours, and realistically I don't believe you can when it gets to a certain level.

Perhaps my hope was different in this situation so that altered my approach? Belton (2010, p. 27) noted that creating change, or wanting to, is a way of demonstrating a dislike for that person's values or their behaviours.

**My work is not about being right or wrong; it's about never settling with one answer for ever; discuss, explore, and ask questions of yourself.** Accept what you bring to the table is more than just your job role and question your ideas and inner values. Realistically I bring everything I am to my job, I just act out professional behaviours. However, when I assess dangers or accept blame I am vulnerable on many levels and not just a professional.

## Note

1 As youth work needs to call on a wide variety of skills and knowledge that are constantly in a state of flux, a range of short courses and programmes have been identified in this survey as directly and/or indirectly relevant to contexts of practice as defined by regional researchers.