



What Do JNC Youth Workers Conceive of as ‘Professional Maturity’ in Youth Work Practice

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Abstract

This research set out to take a snapshot of what JNC practitioners in youth and community work defined as ‘Professional Maturity’ and to explore if this notion impacted on practice. To achieve this, the researchers worked with the Institute for youth work, to garner responses from practitioners in the youth work sector via an online questionnaire and an online semi-structured interview. In the inductive phenomenological approach taken to data analysis, some surprising patterns emerged that will require further exploration. The result of these findings has generated an ‘in the moment’ snapshot of ‘Professional Maturity’ for youth work in the shape of a model for practice that will still require critical examination. The data generated and the subsequent analysis highlights six themes: Qualification, Professional Transference, Attributes, Values, Beyond Self, and Chameleon. The key finding of this research has shown that Professional Maturity is an ever-evolving aspect of a youth workers journey rather than a final destination. However, research respondents did appear to have different expectations on what Professional Maturity should look like and how it affects individuals practice across the field.

Keywords Professional · Maturity · Youth work · Transference · Experience · Qualifications · Skills · Interprofessional

Introduction

This paper asserts that Professionalism and Maturity are both well researched when considered separately (Alexander 1948; Bradford 2007, Raiu et al. 2014). This research explored the idea of combining Professional and Maturity and examined

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what the field of youth work saw this to be. It is not the researcher's intention to suggest what Professional Maturity should mean universally, but to measure what the youth work field at the specific time of the research understood it to be.

Youth work is characterised by its pedagogical approach, based in 'informal and non-formal education and learning' practices both in the UK and beyond, working with young people and their communities. The profession is embedded in political awareness, developing critical thinking, and supporting young people to engage critically with their communities and surroundings (Sapin 2013; De St Croix and Doherty 2021; Rogers and Smith 2010; Batsleer 2013; Sonneveld et al. 2021; Williams 2018). However, it is due to the informal nature of youth work, that it has often been perceived as a 'lesser' field of practice and considered less professional (Cooper 2012; Trimmer-Platman 2014). This is despite clear evidence of good youth work, such as early safeguarding disclosures and reductions in criminal behaviour (De St Croix & Doherty 2021; Jay 2013; Modestino 2019; National Youth Agency 2021; UK Youth 2021). Discussions pertaining to professionalism in youth work can be contentious. For example, the data showed that occasionally, practitioners in youth work can experience conflicted spaces in relation to professionalism especially where youth work practitioners feel required to challenge colleagues to ensure that young people are kept central to every decision that is being made about them. It is the assertion of this research that the responsibility for professionalism in is often placed on individuals d on individuals rather than with societal structures that often dictate the dominant ideologies of what is considered professionalism.

To explore these concepts, online questionnaires were completed by practitioners that are JNC (National framework on pay for youth work) qualified as youth workers. Access to the sample was largely supported through the networks of the Institute for Youth Work (IYW). The IYW is a member organisation that supports practitioners in the youth work field. Due to its independence from academic or professional bodies, this network was viewed as a useful starting place. A follow-up online semi-structured interview was also delivered to consult on the initial findings from the questionnaire and generate a dialectic regarding a model of Professional Maturity and its practical application to youth work. These research activities took place during the COVID-19 pandemic which is a critical factor that influenced why the activities were delivered online. With the distribution of information through the IYW, the sample of youth work practitioners was drawn predominantly from the UK.

Both researchers are qualified and experienced youth workers. Both are involved in Higher Education (HE) training of youth workers. Together, we queried whether HE institutions prepare students to engage in youth work practice critically. Findings from this research propose that the nature of professionalism is not static, simply attained once qualified, but instead that individuals continue to grow and develop within their professionalism over unspecified periods of time. Within this research, practitioners would refer to their professionalism in direct relation to their length of service such as 'I've been involved for youth work for 25 years!'. We sought to investigate whether youth workers build their 'Professional Maturity' over time or not and importantly, if duration of youth work practice in turn impacts on their own development, their organisations, as well as the wider field of practice. We were conscious of the respondents' own backgrounds, experiences, and potential for bias.

Consequently, it was decided to take a phenomenological approach to the research. This approach allowed us to observe a specific moment within the field, avoiding placing preconceived concepts on respondents. Bryman (2012) asserts that a phenomenological approach informs a methodology that sets out to determine how people make sense of their worlds and that importantly that the researcher separates out their own preconceived ideas. To achieve this, we used questionnaires and a semi-structured interview to gather data from fifty-six respondents across the UK. The data was thematically analysed. Themes were generated that enabled us to produce a model describing what JNC youth workers consider as 'Professional Maturity'. This model has been relayed to practitioners in the youth sector to receive their feedback. The vast range of the data collected has raised other questions that will need exploring in future research.

'Professional Maturity' is not well represented in current youth work literature, although discussions on professional and maturity as separate entities does occur. Professionalism can be a varied concept across professions. The implementation of professional values into practice can be affected by an individual's positionality as well as whatever professional systems are in place such as supervision and mentoring (Corney 2004). Bradford (2007) argued that professionalism is linked to autonomy, especially in a marketized field linked to wider political and social discourses. Conversely, professionalism is arguably a social construct as it cannot be conceived of in isolation but requires other individuals who can be classed as more or less professional to measure one's own level of professionalism. Therefore, the concept of professionalism can generate a sense of superiority, which might be endorsed through 'qualifications' and 'length of experience'. Bradford and Cullen (2014) connect professionalism to 'top down' management by linking it to bureaucracy and accountability. This assertion would then suggest that professionalism is underpinned by power (Thompson 2002). In challenging power, practitioners in youth work fields can find themselves in a complex situation which could lead to an identity conflict, because youth workers are a source of power but also required to challenge power. It has been suggested that power can be managed through a framework of professional values that relate to accountability and the justification of actions (Roberts 2009; as cited in Rogers & Smith 2010; Thompson 2002). Within youth work, professionalism has been largely related to following a set of values that are considered unique to youth work (Metz 2017; Zubulake 2017). However, this requires the creation and importantly acceptance of a set of professional values, such as those which would be generated by professional bodies. If this were to be applied to youth work practice, then established professional values would need to be continually critically assessed to ensure that they are suitable. Whilst 'corporate' governance of professional values can exist, there are additional challenges posed by individual agency and the personal interpretation of professional values. For example, in this research it was highlighted that there is a lack of consistency across the language of professional values. A youth workers understanding of key terms such as 'Anti-Oppressive Practice' can differ significantly. Consequently, youth workers can develop a separate understanding of professionalism and how it is enacted. Practitioners' perspectives are influenced from a broad variety of factors such as their families, political connections, personal history, study, shared reflection, and

professional networks. Furthermore, wider social influences such as positionality, environment, and government agendas can also affect practitioners' interpretations (Batsleer 2013; Butcher 2003).

Gilchrist and Taylor (2022) have questioned whether youth work's sister profession of community development is a profession or a social movement. Historically, youth work has been consistently shaped by volunteers, activism, and even political conflicts (Brady et al. 2020; McGregor 2015). Whereas in modern times, practitioners are suggested to require 'specialist knowledge, sophisticated judgements and dedicated efforts' (Gilchrist and Taylor 2022, p.150). Arguably, this apparent specialising has been enacted for youth and community work to be recognised as equivalent to other professions. Gilchrist and Taylor (2022) conclude that if practice is not seen as professional then 'it will be seen as amateurish and an optional luxury rather than a necessary means for pursuing social advancement and well-being' (p.150). Therefore, according to this perspective, the need to appear professional is about being seen as 'of worth'. This would link back to power, where those who are viewed as professionals can also be considered as experts.

Maturity is equally contested as the term professionalism. In the mid-twentieth century, Alexander (1948, p. 1) wrote that maturity is 'when individual growth is completed, and the organism is ripe for propagation'. This sentiment, of individuality and a finished product, has more recently been supported by Riau et al. (2014, p. 803) who adds that maturity is 'accepting responsibility, making decisions independently of parents or other influences and become financially independent'. However, these assertions could be problematic, as they ignore the emotional, social, and cultural aspects of individuals' lives as these definitions focus on individual achievement. Maturity has been defined as an 'adult' attribute as it is linked to being critically aware, able to receive critical feedback, and independent. Yet arguably, the *process* of maturing should be more important as there is no end point with maturity (Hogan and Roberts 2004; Malina et al. 2004; Stenner and Marchall 1999). Stenner and Marchall (1999) suggest that adults engaging in supportive relationships are entering a period of immaturity as they rely on others and that this illustrates that they are not independent. However, when this concept of maturity is applied to young people, those young people who act independently might be viewed as simultaneously mature and immature. For example, a young person might express independence through their clothes, hair, and political engagement but some adults could view this behaviour as immature. This highlights the ideology of maturity and the power that this concept has over the actions of individuals, especially in relation to young people.

Coyle (2019) expands on the discussion of maturity linking it to criminology and suggesting that maturity is the absence of crime. This idea pertains that maturity is a state which a person can fall out of. This perspective on maturity queries what contexts would result in entering or exiting 'immaturity' and 'maturity'. Gash and Tichenor (2022) emphasise the political nature of maturity, suggesting that policy maker views of maturity are reflected in government policy making.

It is state or region, not maturity, that determines one person's legal authority to drive a car at fourteen or fifteen years of age, stay at home alone, or walk to school (Gash & Tichenor 2022, p. 57).

This argument reinforces the socially constructed nature of maturity whilst simultaneously linked to ideas of power and control. Maturity can be revealed as culturally complex.

As previously discussed, maturity and professionalism are complex and subject to a multitude of different definitions, applications, and enforcement. Maturity and professionalism have been shown to be culturally, socially, politically, and physically contested terms. Similarly, as is youth work (Davies 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that the term ‘Professional Maturity’ appeared to be less studied. Some limited literature has suggested that ‘Professional Maturity’ is related to choosing a career path (Ulusoy & Onen 2014). Within Nursing, McGee (2009, p. 45) showcased a model on ‘Professional Maturity’ (Fig 1) which pertains that ‘Professional Maturity’ cannot exist without engagement in formal higher education. In teaching the concept of professional maturity is more developed. Fielstra (1954, p. 190) stated that professional maturity was something that ‘every well-educated and well-trained teacher can develop... and he [or she] has an obligation to do so’. Fielstra (1954) suggested that professional maturity included aspects like, ‘faith in their worth’ and assuming responsibility for development. More recently Msila (2021) links professional maturity to responsibility and leadership.

‘Professional Maturity’ is an ideology that can be forced upon new workers within the creation of their professional identity. This application of Professional Maturity can link to both academic experience and applied practice. For example, some students on work-based placements can express an experience of feeling very overwhelmed. One factor that this could be attributed to might be the diverse experiences that students have undertaken before they have engaged in youth work training. The expectations (imagined or real) of staff, supervisors, course requirements, and young people on the developing practitioner could increase anxieties about demonstrating a professional identity. This can be particularly heightened in an inter-professional environment. Students from diverse backgrounds with mixed experiences

Fig. 1 Model of ‘Professional Maturity’ (McGee 2009)



and identities may experience different forms of oppression and consequently generate a broad range of approaches to respond. Students may also connect with different forms of support based on their previous lived experience. All these influences and factors can affect the development of professional identities (Light 1979; Miville et al. 2009; Sastrawan et al. 2021; Williams & Conroy 2022). Students may try to imitate their supervisors in practice, rather than challenge and develop current practice to not been seen as a threat and may not be skilled in change management (Atkins & Christensen 2001; Hayes 2000). In some contexts, the expectations enforced consciously and subconsciously, by supervisors and peer practitioners, to be 'professional' as well as mature, could result in a complicit and uncritical workforce. Consequently, students and early career practitioners may struggle to develop their own independent version of 'Professional Maturity'. Instead, they may try to be a version of a perceived 'good youth worker', rather than engage in critical practice.

The purpose of this research was to present a time specific picture of what the field currently considered Professional Maturity and its potential impact on youth work practice. A partnership approach was taken between the IYW and the University of Derby (UoD). This approach ensured that ethical and robust research was conducted alongside the ability to reach a wide range of youth workers. There was no funding involved in this research.

Research Process

The research aim was to ascertain what JNC qualified youth workers conceive of as Professional Maturity in youth work. The research sought to present the current perception of 'Professional Maturity' in youth work, so that future research could engage critically with the concept and wrestle with the impact on current practice. The phenomenological approach taken created space for respondents to express social and cultural aspects of their lived experience, which it is hoped has helped to minimise prejudice, and capture practitioners' experiences within a specific moment in time (Bryman 2012). We wanted to ascertain the current experiences and expectations of youth workers, rather than seek to experiment or add to their knowledge (Bartholomew et al. 2021; Mathotaarachchi & Thilakarathna 2021; Shorey & Ng 2022).

Both researchers are qualified youth workers and experienced practitioners. One has over twenty-five years of experience working with people of faith, refugees, and migrant communities. The other has over twenty years' experience mostly within Global Youth Work. One youth worker is qualified to level six and the other to level three. One is male and the other female. We were actively aware of positionality and sought to challenge each other to ensure that all conclusions presented in the data were not their own perspectives but that of the respondents. The authors utilised the reflective nature of youth work to unpin their approach, as well as reduce potential bias. We had regular meetings to address bias as much as possible. As the data from the respondents was collected and analysed there were some surprising outcomes and themes that emerged. The findings were presented back to respondents through a debriefing online event (Bukamal 2022; Hopkins et al. 2022). Feedback from this

debrief event suggested that researcher bias had not impacted on results, ensuring that the findings from this research echo that which the respondents provided.

A questionnaire and semi-structured interview were utilised as data collection tools. The online questionnaires, built using Microsoft Forms, allowed us to reach a wider participation pool. The study was kept to a UK focus. The aim of this research was pursued to highlight the contemporary and specific nature of youth work practice in the UK. The questionnaires enabled researchers to reach a large audience quickly, and to support the phenomenological approach of taking a snapshot, the questionnaires were only open for a three-week period. Potential respondents were informed of the forthcoming research through IYW networks which also include other influential youth work networks and organisations such as Regional Youth Work Units, the validation bodies and the Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work (PALYCW). The questionnaires asked responders to identify their level of qualification, but there was no physical check made by the researchers. The sample for this research was open to any practitioner with a youth work qualification (this included levels one to seven) and currently or had practiced youth work in the UK. However, only two level two qualified youth workers responded, and the rest of the sample were qualified to level six or seven. This may suggest a lack of engagement from those with lower-level youth work qualifications. The authors pondered whether this might be in relation to what youth workers with a lower-level qualification think about professionalism. This is the most significant factor affecting the sample which requires consideration especially as it has impacted upon the research conclusions.

Beyond the initial questions regarding level of qualification and place of work, all the questions were open-ended so that the respondents could provide the detail that they thought was relevant, aiming to avoid researchers' direction and bias (Manchaiah et al. 2021; Woolf & Edwards 2021). However, questionnaires:

Rest on the assumption of an unbroken chain of comprehension between the mind of the researcher... and the mind of the recipient and back again. (Einola & Alvesson 2020, p. 104).

We reflected that it might have been useful for respondents to have sight of all the upcoming questions at once. This was because some of the questions had a general focus, but respondents may have applied a specific youth work focus when answering these questions. The authors recognise that this could have resulted in blurring of the data. However, the findings presented to us by the respondents were collated without the authors imprinting their own understandings and labels. Consequently, the findings presented here are the voices of those youth workers that participated with a specific moment in time.

The semi-structured interview, conducted through Microsoft Teams, was co-hosted by both researchers. This was intended to reduce bias and encourage debate on the initial findings that were being presented. The semi-structured interview allowed for a deeper exploration of the questionnaire responses. However, the semi-structured interview relied on respondents' willingness to engage and share in the online space alongside other practitioners. This required skills in active listening and that the respondents were forthcoming within online group discussions.

A semi-structured approach was taken to guarantee that the discussion was given direction alongside space for exploration of ideas. We asked the same questions at the interviews as those which were asked on the questionnaire but added the McGee (2009) model of 'Professional Maturity' to stimulate debate on the use of a model to frame these ideas on professional maturity in youth work. This model was chosen due to its simple presentation and to provide a platform for debate, allowing participants to add any of their own models they applied to practice. The semi-structured interview created a space for the authors to query the model's application specifically to the youth work field (Cohen et al. 2018; Striepe 2020; Velardo & Elliott 2021).

Researchers asked the respondents to identify the area of their work such as voluntary sector organisation or a Local Authority, for any correlation between places of work and their ideas of 'Professional Maturity' to become apparent. The research compiled fifty-one responses to the questionnaires, and five individuals were interviewed in the semi-structured interview. It is unknown if respondents at the interview had also completed the questionnaire. Questions used in both research scenarios included asking, 'what is professionalism? What is maturity? What is 'Professional Maturity'? Does your idea of 'Professional Maturity' impact on your practice?'. The request for respondents was sent out widely through media across the UK and all the respondents answered all the questions fully.

Ethics was granted by the UoD, Health, and Social Care ethics committee. Due to the phenomenological approach, we expected a very low impact on the respondents that engaged. Despite this, support was offered from IYW to all respondents. Accessibility was considered regarding the development of the data tools. It was acknowledged that whilst the questionnaires were wide reaching, they may not have been fully accessible to all. Alternative methods of engagement with the questionnaires were made available on request. The semi-structured interview was conducted online and recorded using the secure facility available via Microsoft Teams. Respondents did not have access to the recording.

Following the collection of data through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview the authors completed the analysis that resulted in the generation of key thematic areas. The findings expressed here are based entirely on what was provided by the respondents. We actively strived to limit personal interpretation of the data provided (Clarke et al. 2015; Cohen et al. 2018; Lochmiller & Lester 2017) It is not the intention of the research to debate the outcomes, but rather to provide the current picture from practice.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis of the research findings created common themes where the majority of respondent perspectives could be grouped. A leading theme that emerged was the requirement for qualifications. Skills also transpired as a core theme that youth workers were expected to obtain to be considered 'Professionally Mature'. However, the range of skills was vast and some responses around skills were 'Attributes'. 'Values' emerged strongly as an additional core theme. A process of 'Professional

Transference' arose particularly in the narratives presented in the semi-structured interview. Additionally, the themes that this research is referring to as 'Beyond Self' and 'the Chameleon' emerged. Overall, the results reveal complex and demanding requirements being placed on youth workers for them to be perceived of as professionally mature. This section also provides a discussion regarding the findings, it is presented to be a picture of what the field suggested was professionally mature at the time of the collection of data. Future research and development are needed to more deeply explore the impact and changes from this moment in time.

Thematic Themes

Qualifications

One key distinguishing factor that the respondents suggested that a professionally mature youth worker required was a qualification. However, because the majority of the sample held a level six or above in youth work there may have been bias in their conviction on the importance of a qualification. Twelve respondents comment that qualifications are important but twenty-four state that qualifications are important for professionalism specifically in youth work. However, the respondents never said what qualification or level was required to be considered professional.

One respondent suggests that having a JNC qualification helped them in becoming more professional:

I feel like getting my JNC qualification gave me the confidence to take ownership over being a professional youth worker.

Questionnaire respondent #18.

The requirement for a qualification to be a professional youth worker did not go unchallenged. One respondent stipulated that a qualification should not have to be a requirement placed upon youth workers. Furthermore, another respondent queries whether youth workers are changing the essence of what youth work is by requiring a formal qualification. Information from the National Youth Agency (NYA) (National body for Youth Work in England) suggests that a youth worker can only be considered professional when they attain a level six/level seven qualification:

Professional Youth worker... to gain a professional level youth work qualification such as:

- BA (Hons): three years full time (and part time equivalent) – level 6.
- Graduate Diploma: two years full time – level 6.
- PG Dip: one year full time (and part time equivalent) – level 7.
- MA: one year (and part time equivalent) – level 7.

National Youth Agency (2023).

In this example from the National Youth Agency (2023), it is apparent that levels one, two, and three do not equate to being a professional. Therefore, there is a suggestion that professionalism can only be taught at university. However, a contrasting perspective evident within the data produced in this research suggests that ‘Professional Maturity’ for youth workers can be learnt in practice and by having an excellent supervisor. The data debates that university education is required to be perceived of as Professionally Mature in youth work.

Professional Transference

Often, respondents explained that ‘Professional Maturity’ could only be achieved when skills and experience were demonstrated and that these were often passed on by other workers. Consequently, we termed this process: ‘Professional Transference’. Respondents stated that they gained skills and experiences from a mentor which they now take pride in passing onto colleagues. This process of ‘Professional Transference’ emerged as a distinguishing feature of being a ‘Professionally Mature’ youth worker. However, there were a lot of contestations about what were the key skills required to attain ‘Professional Maturity’, a total of seventy different skills were named as essential (Table 1).

Length of experience was highlighted by respondents. However, respondents in this research suggested that the length of experience needed to be professionally mature could range from two to thirty years. Whilst skills and experience emerged as important, it was the process of passing on of skills and experience that was deemed to be critical. The respondents emphasised that youth work practice, is impacted on by ‘significant individuals’ in a practitioners training.

I think if you have a good supervision experience and it sticks with you then you become professional, mature.

Interviewee #3

Table 1 Most popular skills mentioned in the research

Top 10 skills	Number of mentions
Reflective	54
Understanding policy and procedures	24
Working cross sector	18
Communication	18
Anti-oppressive practice	17
Boundaries	13
Critical thinker	10
Challenge	9
Presentation	9
Personal and professional separation	8

The data illustrated that youth workers will often pivot their practice around the styles of working that they experienced during training and work-based placements. However, 'Professional Transference' has the potential to act as either a positive or negative gatekeeper, perpetuating a certain style of practice simply because it was conveyed in training could be critiqued for lacking criticality. There is a concern that what is transferred might be specific to certain settings and localities. Whilst it could be assumed that the JNC qualification in youth work should produce adaptable and flexible youth workers, 'Professional Transference' could produce practitioners that do not have transferable skills into different spaces and groups.

Bradford (2007) suggest that professionalism is associated with superiority whereby professionals are thought to be more superior because they have qualifications and experience. Whilst both qualifications and experience emerged in this research the responses were varied. Consequently, it cannot be guaranteed that the respondents believe that a level six/seven JNC qualification for youth work constitutes 'Professional Maturity'. McGee (2009) emphasised the importance of academia and qualifications in their model and research exploring 'Professional Maturity' in relation to nursing. Data from this research suggests a significant impact of trainers and supervisors on individuals' interpretation and presentation of Professional Maturity in youth work. Youth workers do not exist in isolation. This assertion counters previous research perspectives which suggest that functioning as an individual was important in being considered a professional. Rather, these findings suggest that it is considered critical to work alongside numerous stakeholders and colleagues to be considered Professionally Mature in youth work. The data presents that the 'Professionally Mature' youth worker gains the skills through gaining a youth work qualification and via 'Professional Transference'.

Attributes

There were a huge variety of additional attributes that the research viewed as non-teachable but were nonetheless seemingly expected from youth workers who could be deemed Professionally Mature, for example, to be thoughtful, confident, and honest. The authors agreed that the overarching term that encompassed this theme was 'Attributes' as this term incorporates the aspects which would emphasise the quality of character. When the attributes were similar, they were grouped. Ultimately, forty-two different attributes were identified as shown in Table 2.

Very little consistent terminology was utilised regarding 'Attributes'. The research findings suggest that there was an expectation that youth workers should encompass *all* of the 'Attributes'. Key challenges emerged within this thematic area of 'Attributes'. Firstly, that 'Attributes' would be difficult to teach as part of a qualification and secondly, that there appears to be a limited shared language.

Supervision was considered critical to developing 'Attributes' and this connects with the importance placed on 'Professional Transference'. It was argued by respondents that engaging in 'Professional Transference', resulted in being more professional and more mature. Respondents suggested that confidence grew through effective supervision. Consequently, a trend of unifying the 'Attributes' alongside

Table 2 Examples of attributes required to be considered ‘Professionally Mature’

Examples of the main attributes that were suggested are
Confidence
Committed
Honest
Reliable
Inspiring
Optimistic
Patient
Thoughtful
Kind
Willingness to learn
Polite
Fair

‘Professional Transference’ emerged as critical concepts. These research findings have queried whether gaining a qualification can be the sole indicator of ‘Professional Maturity’ in youth work.

Professional Values

Professional values were mentioned specifically and throughout the study both in the questionnaire and in the semi-structured interview. However, these values were never defined by the respondents. The limited shared language used when discussing youth work values often appeared to create confusion. For example, one respondent stated that to constitute a ‘Professionally Mature’ youth worker they would need to be “someone who *embodies* the youth work values”. Another suggested that professional values were something that needed to be *upheld*, one respondent argued that professional values *underpin* youth work practice. Yet another respondent suggested that professional values were to be *strived* for. Finally, another respondent described youth work values as a *driving force*. Only one respondent in this research commented that professional values should be critically examined.

The research findings query what youth work professional values actually are and whether they perform a standard role in the profession. Youth work professional bodies, youth work agencies, and local authorities, across different countries, all describe professional values differently (Williams et al. 2023). Yet it is advocated in the data that professional values are core to youth work practice. However, there is nothing within this data that defined what professional values are.

Whether professional values in youth work are universal or not needs to be questioned. Positionality and world view could fundamentally change which professional values are considered critical. Only one respondent commented that professional values need to be critically examined. There was no consistency or correlation in the language used around values suggesting there is no agreement on what professional

values are. Additionally, there was no suggestion made by the respondents on who would be the arbitrator of youth sector professional values.

Power should be explored in relation to reviewing whether individuals and agencies adhere to professional values. It was proposed within this data, that to be considered 'Professionally Mature', a youth worker was not to appear too managerial. The data suggested that a managerial persona would prevent the youth worker from meaningfully connecting with young people. This point relates to challenges explored previously in connection to power. Arguably, universal youth sector values would need to be agreed upon and then consequently would result in greater accountability of professional conduct.

The research data highlighted the lack of any consistent language. Values and power conflate when considering the dilemma facing youth workers and whether they want to adopt the topic of 'Professional Maturity' or not. Some youth workers feel less powerful than colleagues in other sectors. Respondents expressed a desire to be considered on an equal footing and have similar power. However, other youth workers purport that power should sit with young people not the practitioner. This returns to Gilchrist and Taylor (2022) who ask whether youth and community work is a profession or a social movement. Any further development of the concepts relating to 'Professional Maturity' in youth work would need to be mindful of power, accountability and transparency. The ideas suggested by Corney (2004) support the research findings that Professional Maturity in youth work is linked to 'values' as well as 'Professional Transference'.

Beyond Self

The term 'Beyond Self' grouped data that referred to practice which went beyond the individual. The authors assert that the concept of 'Beyond Self' involves seeking support from fellow professionals and those outside the field of youth work such as through interprofessional working. The concept also requires that youth workers can communicate their purpose and outcomes effectively to other professionals. Most of the respondents recognised the learning gained from interdisciplinary practice alongside an individual's responsibility to teach other professionals.

I think it is extremely hard to be a lone youth worker in a team of differently qualified professionals. I think we have to adapt and educate ourselves and others.
Questionnaire Respondent #48.

The data within the 'Beyond Self' category included political and environmental awareness that these topics can impact on young people and therefore on youth work practice. Numerous respondents mentioned the necessity of appreciating the 'Bigger Picture' but did not embellish on this point. We observed that every respondent that mentioned the 'Bigger Picture' came from a faith-based practice background. Consequently, there may have been spiritual connotations to the concept of 'Beyond Self'. However, this was not made explicitly clear through the data. 'Beyond Self' encourages youth workers to explore the wider consequences of youth work and acknowledge that youth work can exist within a multitude of spaces and places.

Chameleon

The respondents consistently mentioned the need for swift adaptability to manage different contexts and individuals. Often this process was described as the ability to engage with a service user as well as an external agency such as a funding body within a seamless flow. For example, one respondent stated that a Professionally Mature ‘youth worker should be able to illustrate “another image” when working in different spaces and with different stakeholders for example, in Local Authorities and when striving to access funding’.

It was suggested that a ‘Professionally Mature’ youth worker would embody ‘Chameleon’ like qualities.

Professional Maturity means that we [youth workers] can protect our authentic self and judge what is best within that role at that specific time i.e. for the young people/ youth service.

Questionnaire Respondent #21

Respondents argued that Professional Maturity was illustrated by being able to communicate effectively with all stake holders, advocate for service users and, when required, be able to challenge other professionals appropriately. A respondent stated that Professional Maturity in youth workers can be illustrated in that they can ‘use professional jargon whenever deemed necessary’. The term ‘Chameleon’ was first referenced in the semi-structured interview when a respondent was quoted as saying:

Professionally Mature Youth Workers can wear different hats. They can be chameleon like.

Semi-structured Interview Respondent #3

In the semi-structured interview, a respondent stated that a youth workers ability to do detached youth work was a litmus test of ‘Professional Maturity’ as this required effective and swift adaptability. Youth workers need the ability to discern different settings, professionals, and scenarios. The ‘Chameleon’ was stated by respondents to be crucial in being ‘Professionally Mature’.

‘Professional Maturity’ Model

With the analysis of the data, we developed the current perception of ‘Professional Maturity’ as presented by the field, portrayed within this model (Fig 2):

The thematic areas that arose from the data are expressed in the model as part of a spiral which has been generated to represent a youth workers journey within ‘Professional Maturity’. As a result of this spiral design, the authors hoped to express that all the thematic areas can be practiced simultaneously and can be consistently revisited upon—there is no start or finish space. The research findings suggest that young people, a commitment to Continual Professional Development (CPD) and reflective practice are central to all the major themes that emerged. For example, reflective practice and listening to young people might

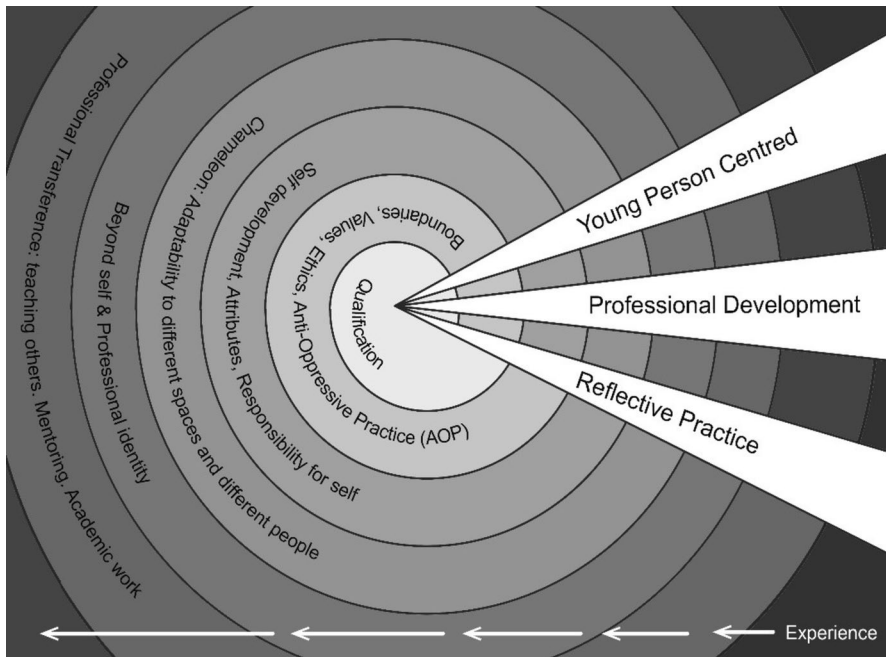


Fig. 2 Model of 'Professional Maturity'

result in the realisation that a qualification is required for professional development. The model is not intended to be viewed as linear. This is to assert that the journey of 'Professional Maturity' in youth work has no fixed beginning or end. The research data suggested that if youth workers are continually engaging with young people, in training and being reflective, then they will consistently re-engage with all the thematic areas, throughout their career.

Experience is located along the bottom of the model, which implies that experience grows throughout the professional journey. Maturity could be associated with length of experience. However, findings from this research argued that just because someone has many years of experience does not necessarily mean they will automatically be Professionally Mature. Despite this, there could be a correlation between experience and maturity.

This model is based on the data collected and will undoubtedly require further critical examination. The authors do propose that the model could be used as a supervisory tool as well as for reflection in training to promote critical discussion. However, it should be flagged that eleven respondents commented that the idea of 'Professional Maturity' had no impact on their practice. Additionally, whilst this model was built around youth work practice, it would be interesting to compare the application of this model to other fields, such as community development, social work, and education.

The model represents a snapshot of what the field have described as Professional Maturity. It has been the express intention of the researchers to avoid interpretation

of this information; however, the researchers were surprised that the data seemingly had information that was missing. For example, the data made no mention of a neo-liberalist agenda. Although some aspects of the data recognised different ways of working, there was no mention of how social policy and government agendas impacted on being professionally mature. Additionally, there was no mention of the role that professional bodies and groups play in defining Professional Maturity. The unique approach of youth work's pedagogy being based in informal and nonformal practice was also significantly missing. It may be that these concepts are so embedded in youth work practice that they were implicit in the participant discussions of Professional Maturity; however, they were not made explicit in the data. It is the hope of the researchers that this concept of Professional Maturity will be critiqued, debated, and developed so that Professional Maturity becomes a supportive key concept in youth work training and delivery.

Conclusion

Research exploring 'Professional' and 'Maturity' as separate has been conducted but there has been little exploring the two concepts together as 'Professional Maturity' within the field of youth and community work (Alexander 1948; Bradford 2007, Raiu et al. 2014). Therefore, this research has made extensive steps in capturing what the youth work field presents as 'Professional Maturity' specific. The concepts of Professional and Maturity have been shown to be social constructs. As social constructs these ideas are perpetually open to analysis and reconfiguring. Davies (2008) argues that youth work is a social construct and that it is particularly susceptible to change in relation to political, social, economic and environmental contexts. The data from this research suggests that every individual defines and measures maturity as well as professionalism subjectively. There appear to be preconceived and socially constructed ideas about what it means to be a professional and mature.

The data from this research has been presented by a model showing the current perception of 'Professional Maturity'. This model should be applied with a focus on process rather than a fixed end point. Whilst this model offers an approach to advancing the concept of 'Professional Maturity' informed by respondents working within the field, we are keen to highlight the requirement for Professional Maturity in youth work to be debated and developed much more. It was never the authors intention that the data from this research would generate a universal and fixed definition of Professional Maturity in youth work. Rather, the hope is that this research and its associated findings will stimulate a discussion within youth and community work that might ultimately advance the profession.

Critically, the research showed that there is no sense of a unified language being used by youth workers to express professionalism of the youth work sector. If the idea of 'Professional Maturity' is to be advanced with the field of youth work, then the application of standardised language must be explored.

What makes the idea of being a 'Professionally Mature' youth worker distinct appears to be the ability to be able to exist in multiple professional spaces, do it

well and crucially not burn out. Resilience, adaptability, the flexibility to overcome alongside the capacity to continue despite adversity were key alongside the main themes expressed in the model in constituting ‘Professional Maturity’ in youth work.

Whilst the data generated in this research has created a time specific insight into youth workers perspectives on Professional Maturity, we still believe that there are a variety of topics that have emerged that might require further exploration. Example recommendations for future research could include the following:

- The model needs to be applied to youth work practice for it to be critically examined.
- More research is needed to examine how ‘Professional Maturity’ is approached within the training and education of youth workers.
- If ‘Professional Transference’ was acknowledged as significant in the training of ‘Professionally Mature’ youth workers, then arguably the content and process need to be standardised.
- A lack of a unified language around professional values in youth work has been identified. Further research needs to explore what youth work values are and the way in which such values potentially impact on practice.
- Demands on practitioners to be considered professional have been shown to be significant. Therefore, the impact of this on the wellbeing of youth workers needs to be considered.

Author Contribution The article was written collaboratively, and authors contributed evenly to its production (50% each).

Declarations

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals This research involved human participants after ethical approval was obtained from the University of Derby. No harm was expected from the study, but participants could be signposted to relevant services to offer support should it be needed (Institute of Youth Work). All human participants were given introductory information, gave informed consent to be part of the study, and were fully debriefed after the study. This included how to withdraw from the study.

Informed Consent All participants gave full informed consent to be part of the study, and the informed consent gave details of their rights under GDPR processes, how to withdraw, and any potential of risk of harm. The informed consent information included details of researchers and other university staff should a complaint need to be made. This information was also included in the debriefing of participants.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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