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'Is it Still Youth Work?': An Investigation into the Experiences of Professionally Qualified Youth Workers employed in Social Care Settings

In recent years, there has been increased recognition of youth work as a distinct profession defined by a singular set of values (Jeffs and Smith, 2010). Although the 'uniqueness' of youth work has been questioned in light of the growing trend towards outcome-focused and 'social work'-type interventions (Kiely, 2009), paid youth workers are increasingly required to have completed a professionally endorsed youth work degree. Moreover, youth workers typically claim allegiance to ways of working which are informed by a specific set of principles. These principles emphasise youth workers' role as informal educators who work in a democratic and empowering fashion with young people in order to promote their personal and social development. A further significant defining feature of youth work is that it is based upon young people's voluntary participation (Devlin, 2012).

Despite the increased recognition of youth work as a distinct profession, it has become common for professionally qualified youth workers to secure employment working with young people in social care contexts. Social care is concerned with planning and providing 'professional care to vulnerable individuals and groups of all ages who experience marginalisation, disadvantage or special needs' (Social Care Ireland, n.d.). Unlike youth work, young people engaged in social care do not typically do so on a voluntary basis and the terms of the relationship is often regarded as different. It is, therefore, appropriate to explore how youth workers' professional formation impacts on their experiences in social care, to assess if and how, the 'youth work relationship' translates to a social care context and to determine whether youth work principles can enhance social care practice in any way.