



*Universities should be about more than developing work skills. They must also be about producing civic-minded and critically engaged citizens - citizens who can engage in debate, dialogue and bear witness to a different and critical sense of remembering, agency, ethics and collective resistance.*

Henry Giroux (2013)



# CONTENTS



Introduction	4
Ethical Principles	6
Primary Consideration	7
Social Context (Ecology)	8
Equity/Equality	9
Empowerment	10
Duty of Care	11
Probity	12
Confidentiality	14
Co-operation and Collaboration	16
Professional Development	18
Self-Awareness	19
Boundaries	20
Self-Care	22
Conclusion	24
References	25



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## INTRODUCTION



4

Ethics is the study of moral obligation involving the distinction between what is right and what is wrong and this is influenced by a person's values and beliefs. Values are abstract ideas that shape actions and are developed and nurtured through upbringing, education and maturation. NSETS has responsibility for the standards of education and training of youth workers in Ireland and this includes concern for the values and practices inculcated during professional formation. To date endorsement panels have examined in a broad general manner the values and ethics included in programmes. The aim of this paper is to articulate and make explicit the ethical considerations to be included in youth work professional formation programmes and is based on a vision of ethical practice in youth work. While primarily a document to promote discussion on ethics in youth work education and training programmes it is also hoped that, through engagement with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the youth work sector in general, a wider discussion on ethics in youth work will be stimulated. Such a discussion may eventually lead to agreement on standards of behaviour for youth workers and the development of a formal code of ethical practice.

The contents of this paper are based upon a review of a number of existing 'codes' of ethics from other countries whose understanding youth work is aligned to the understanding here on the island of Ireland. This paper is intended to be a basis for discussion and includes the salient features advocated by these codes. An ethical framework could never hope to embrace all the circumstances in which a youth worker may find her/himself on a daily basis nor can it be a manual on how to act in specific situations.





# INTRODUCTION



To attempt to do so would be almost impossible and would be so prescriptive that it would seriously curtail the autonomy of the youth worker to practice in a challenging, imaginative and creative way. It represents, rather, a framework for individual workers and teams to contemplate and initiate ethical action. It should provide a basis for reflective practice, so important for good quality youth work, and a tool for youth workers to review their practice through an ethical lens. More detailed documents will come over time from discussions with youth workers, youth organisations, young people and other stakeholders.

## A Note on Semantics

Different ethical codes use a variety of terms to describe the young person actively engaged in a youth work relationship. These terms include 'client', 'constituent' and 'young person'. For the purposes of this document the term 'young person' will be used. The term 'client', which appears in a number of codes, is powerfully argued for by Sercombe (2010)<sup>1</sup> however it is a term that many involved in the teaching and practice of youth work have a difficulty with. A discussion on the appropriate terminology to describe the professional relationship with young people should contribute to an interesting debate with students.



<sup>1</sup> See discussion on the term 'Client' by Sercome, H. (2010) Youth Work Ethics SAGE Publications Ltd



## ETHICAL PRINCIPLES



6

The following is a summary of the key principles included in almost all the codes reviewed:

- Primary Consideration
- Social Context
- Equity/Equality
- Empowerment
- Duty of Care
- Probity
- Confidentiality
- Co-Operation and Collaboration
- Self-Awareness
- Boundaries
- Self-Care





## PRIMARY CONSIDERATION



This principle is based upon the understanding that the young person we engage with is at the centre of our work and that we are working from a rights-based approach. We are obliged to serve their best interests above that of other, secondary stakeholders, who may include parents, community, youth organisation, funders etc. We work with the young person from their unique starting point and accept their individual circumstances in a non-judgemental way. We are required to show empathy and to try to understand things from their perspective. When issues arise our obligation is to the young person even though we may be the only professional taking this stance. Key issues for youth workers arising from this principle include motivation (of the individual worker, the organisation and the funder) managing the young person's behaviour, (especially in the early stages of the relationship), and in inter-agency work. Ethically, the moment the young person ceases to be our primary consideration our work with him/her ceases to be youth work. Balancing the increasingly specific expectations of funders and other stakeholders against our commitment to the rights and interests of the young person may prove to be a significant challenge for youth workers. Ensuring our work with the young person continues to be developmental and educational rather than a form of social control is part of that challenge.

### Critical Thinking for Students



7

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides a useful basis for discussion on the young person as our primary consideration. Students should consider if their work focuses on concern for the individual or if the needs of the collective group take precedence. Similarly, do organisational structures, policies etc. put the needs of the young person first?





## SOCIAL CONTEXT (ECOLOGY)



8

***“A sustained youth work ethic requires attention not only to young people’s personal development and their relationships with each other and within their immediate communities, but also to the social structures that produce systems of inequality, exclusion, poverty, and deprivation in the neighbourhoods in which Youth Services are often placed. The ethical commitment to change the structures that impact unjustly on young people means that any youth service which is only concerned with the personal development of the young people they are working with is only dealing with half the story.”***

Sercombe (2010, p.153)

An ethical obligation exists for youth workers to challenge the social structures that cause young people to be marginalised and disadvantaged. Young people exist in a social environment and the role of the youth worker also extends to that environment. Youth workers recognise the impact of ecological and structural forces on young people. Their work is not limited to facilitating change with the individual young person but extends to the social context in which the young person lives. As White (1987) asserts,

***“there is a gap in our ethical practice if routine injustices against young people are not being attended to.....are we just treating the casualties rather than delving into the causes?.... .Are we in fact the soft cops?”***

White, (1987, p.3 )

### Critical Thinking for Students



Youth workers should consider if their practice is representative of agents of social control or agents of social change. The purpose of education and the emancipatory potential of youth work as an educational process should be considered with reference to such authors as Freire, Macalister Brew, Dewey, Bruner, Giroux etc.







## EQUITY / EQUALITY



This principle requires youth workers to ensure that their practice promotes equality and that their services are provided for young people equitably. They are also required to treat all young people in a non-discriminatory manner (regardless of their own personal beliefs) and to actively oppose discriminatory action including bullying and harassment. They must ensure that they are offering an equitable service and that they are developing practices to work with the most marginalised young people in society. Encouraging the young people we work with to value diversity and difference, particularly in the context of a multi-cultural society, and promoting just and fair behaviour, while challenging discriminatory actions and attitudes on the part of young people, colleagues and wider society is core to this youth work principle.

### Critical Thinking for Students



9

Equity is essentially about fairness. Treating everyone equally is not the same as treating everybody fairly. Allied to the principle of equity are the principles of Diversity and Interdependence<sup>2</sup> (Eyben *et al* 2002). How do these principles underpin youth work and how do they contribute to the development of a pluralist society? Youth work students should be encouraged to reflect on their own practice and the work of their organisations. They should critically consider if the service they provide is truly equitable and have a reality check about what is possible, what is desirable and what is achievable in their own context. They should also consider strategies to address gaps in provision.

<sup>2</sup> Eyben, K, Morrow, D, Wilson, D and Robinson, B (2002) *The Equity, Diversity and Interdependence Framework-A Framework for Organisational Learning and Development*. University of Ulster. 112 pp ISBN 1-85923-160-8





## EMPOWERMENT



10

This principle is based upon the belief that all young people are able and competent to make decisions for themselves and that youth workers should be facilitating and developing this capacity. While the use of this specific term may be fading the concept remains core to the practice of youth work. The process includes facilitating young people to develop their capacity for positive action by enabling them to clarify and pursue their chosen priorities.

This includes building skills of decision making, engagement and co-operation; making power relations open and clear and supporting young people in holding those with power accountable; (assisting young people to develop a credible and influential voice). It also involves facilitating the young person's disengagement from the youth work process/professional relationship. Empowering young people, individually and collectively is at the centre of ethical youth work practice while ensuring that this can be accomplished without developing unnecessary dependency.

***"Youth work that does not empower young people is not ethical"***

Sercombe (2010, p.137).

### Critical Thinking for Students



Youth work students should consider the process of empowerment and ask 'do we empower young people or do young people become empowered through our engagement with them? - how much are we a catalyst or inhibitor?' A critical understanding of concepts such as agency and structure, and models of participation considered against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child should be facilitated by tutors.





## DUTY OF CARE



The legal obligation to provide a duty of care has become a major guiding expectation in public life and youth workers have an ethical responsibility to ensure that their youth work environments are safe for young people. The ability to strike the right balance between taking unnecessary risks and encouraging young people to participate in challenging educational programmes can be an ethical minefield for youth workers. Assessing and managing risk is part of the role of the youth worker however risk management should not result in risk avoidance. Young people need exposure to risk in a controlled environment in order to develop their capacity for sound judgement, to develop self-esteem, confidence in their abilities and the resilience necessary to deal with life's challenges.

***"If a young person is harmed (stunted, passive, repressed, fearful, underdeveloped) because of our unwillingness to take risks that is also our ethical responsibility"***

Sercombe (2010, p.112).

Youth work that actively avoids all risk taking is ineffective. This is an important ethical consideration for youth workers especially when youth organisations are anxious to reduce risk and where insurance companies are defining the boundaries of programmes. Similarly, the spectre of litigation hangs over all youth workers (and their organisations) should a young person be harmed as a result of engaging in challenging youth work activities. Youth work that avoids risk in the face of these obstacles is, however, in danger of inhibiting the growth and development young people and their ability to develop resilience.

### ***Critical Thinking for Students***



Does the safeguarding agenda act as an enabler or barrier to good youth work? In whose interest do we protect young people? What are the parameters of acceptable risk? How do we facilitate resilience without risk?



## PROBITY



Youth workers are in a powerful position to influence young people and as such they should be examples of the utmost honesty and integrity. Some of the areas of concern for youth workers include being honest about personal and organisational motivation; finance and fundraising; and the exposure of young people to the media.

Youth workers should exercise honesty and integrity in terms of motivation and rewards, which may involve financial gain but may also involve other things such as power, profile, emotional security, personal identity and so on. This does not mean that youth workers cannot benefit out of their work (i.e. in the form of recognition, awards etc.) but this cannot be at the expense of young people. While there is no evidence that any level that corruption exists within youth work, it is important that youth workers take time, both individually and collectively, to reflect on and ensure the probity of their work. All youth workers should proactively declare any personal or business interests which may be perceived to influence their judgement in any aspect of their working life. This should include, as a minimum, personal direct or indirect pecuniary interests and should normally include such interests as close family members or those in the same household. A declaration of any interest should be made to

the employing organisations and or partnership organisations if it relates specifically to a particular issue under consideration. Youth workers should withdraw from any discussion or determination of matters in which they have an interest and should withdraw from meetings if their interest is direct or pecuniary.

Youth workers should be open and honest in all their dealings with the young people they work with. The youth work relationship is forged out of a 'psychological contract'<sup>3</sup> that requires the youth worker to be open, truthful and acting in the best interests of the young person. The youth worker must be transparent about who they work for and the motivation of that organisation. They should not deceive young people either by presenting misinformation or withholding information from them that could affect the working relationship. Youth workers need to be mindful of the need to manage the competing interests and expectations of different stakeholders. Finding the balance between the specific expectations of funders and/or partnership agencies and staying true to the ontological and epistemological 'moral compass' (Fullan, 2001) of youth work may prove difficult for some youth workers to reconcile.

<sup>3</sup> Rousseau, D.M. (1989) Psychological and Implied Contracts in Organizations, *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1989, P121 -139 Available online at: [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Denise\\_Rousseau/publication/226857215\\_Psychological\\_and\\_Implied\\_Contracts\\_in\\_Organisations/links/5424bc220cf238c6ea73b6ad.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Denise_Rousseau/publication/226857215_Psychological_and_Implied_Contracts_in_Organisations/links/5424bc220cf238c6ea73b6ad.pdf)  
See also Rousseau, D.M. (1998) The 'problem' of the psychological contract considered, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 19, 665-671 (1998). Available online at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232471292\\_The\\_'problem'\\_of\\_the\\_psychological\\_contract\\_considered](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232471292_The_'problem'_of_the_psychological_contract_considered)



PROBITY

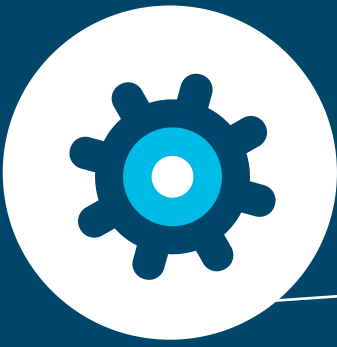


### Critical Thinking for Students



Are we always honest with young people in our dealings with them? Do we use youth work to promote a hidden cultural, political or religious agenda? Are our financial dealings and accountability mechanisms telling the real truth? Is it ok to tell 'white lies' when accounting for monies?





# CONFIDENTIALITY

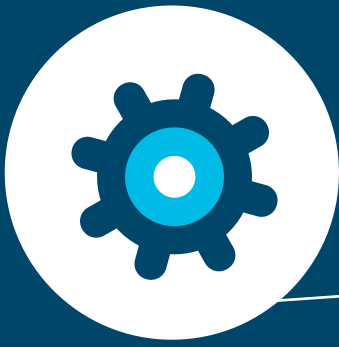


14

Confidentiality in the youth work relationship is an ethical obligation which can also prove to be a moral dilemma. Youth workers create a trusting relationship in which young people feel comfortable to disclose information that they would not necessarily share with other adults in their lives. Confidentiality facilitates the development of the sort of trust that young people need prior to sharing personal information. The information provided by young people should not therefore be used against them or shared needlessly with others. Young people have high expectations when it comes to confidentiality and yet for youth workers the ability to keep some things confidential is not always legally (or morally) possible. There are clear parameters surrounding what youth workers can treat as confidential so we need to clarify the limitations of confidentiality with young people at the outset of our engagement with them.

Youth workers often develop helping relationships with young people who are struggling with very serious issues in their lives (i.e. violence, abuse, and/or criminality). The evolution of the professional relationship is often a slow process and the development of a 'covenant' or contract comes at a particular point in this process. The youth worker should carefully consider the point at which the nature of their professional relationship is clarified, i.e. that the young person is the youth worker's primary consideration, and that they operate under legal limitations in relation to confidentiality.





# CONFIDENTIALITY



There are obviously circumstances in which passing information about a young person on is not only ethically justified but is legally required. Many youth organisations have written guidelines for staff on this issue. Where information needs to be shared, the young person involved needs to be advised and provided with an explanation for this.

Youth workers need to be aware that other organisations/professions they collaborate with may have different policies regarding confidentiality. Some youth workers face ethical dilemmas with the timing of conversations about confidentiality and issues such as record keeping. This concern arises from fears that the difficult task of engaging with marginalised young people may become impossible if youth workers introduce conversations around confidentiality and record keeping. This timing should be guided by a critical understanding of the ethical considerations of the issue at hand.

## Critical Thinking for Students



How do we maintain our professional integrity and credibility with young people if we need to breach confidentiality? What sort of issues do we need to pass on to others? Are we a gossip about young peoples' problems or do we challenge colleagues who are? How safe/private is the information we store on young people?





## CO-OPERATION AND COLLABORATION



16

Young people often present complex problems/issues to youth workers that require the services professionals with specific skills to help them move forward with their lives. Youth workers, however, can often be defensive about their work in the face of a professional community that doesn't understand professional youth work and who may be dismissive of their methods and knowledge base. As a result some youth workers may be tempted to disregard potential sources of professional help in favour of a 'do it yourself' solution. Youth workers however cannot 'fly solo' as, ethically, this is not an option. Working in deliberate isolation increases the risk of dependency-based relationships and denies young people the right to an equitable share of available resources. Our ethical obligation is to respect other professions and play our part in building a partnership approach. This includes finding a way through the inter-agency politics that beset organisations. Key to the ethical stance of the youth worker is that the young person is our primary consideration.

Inter-agency collaboration enables a young person to access a greater range of choices in terms of support networks and access to a range of resources to meet their needs. Co-operating with other professionals also expands the youth worker's access to information and available resources. There is an ethical obligation therefore for inter-professional co-operation. This requirement goes beyond just referral - we have responsibility to ensure the referral is appropriate and that the agency we refer the young person to is competent. We must also continue to offer support to the young person and may need to 'walk' them through the early stages of a new process.

***"...our responsibility does not end when we hand the phone over to a young person to speak to a colleague or when we have fixed a date for the next inter agency meeting"***

Sercombe (2010, p. 83 ).







## CO-OPERATION AND COLLABORATION



As noted already, working with other professions can be challenging for youth workers. Professions do not have equal status which makes joint working for youth work as an emerging profession (and one often perceived as low status), challenging. Inter-agency work is often dominated by the profession with the highest status. Establishing the professional credibility of youth work, its role and its mandate is therefore important in these arenas. It is also important that youth workers feel confident and competent in their professional abilities, believing that they and their colleagues have a valuable contribution to make. Core to eliciting this professional respect is to offer professional respect. Similarly youth workers have an obligation to present a professional persona at all times if they are to gain the respect of fellow professionals. Appearance, time-keeping, fulfilling professional obligations, appropriate contribution to discussions, teamwork etc. are all important to being respected and valued as a professional practitioner.

### Critical Thinking for Students



17

How do we create a professional persona? Do we come across as professionals? How well do we work with other professionals? What are the challenges for youth workers involved in interagency work? How do we promote effective working relationships? Are we professionals because of our qualifications or our approach to our work?





## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



18

The need for professional development is a standard requirement for most, if not all, professions and obliges practitioners to be skilled, competent and knowledgeable and to keep up to date. It is also important for them to be able to recognise when they reach the limits of their competence and/or abilities. A youth work intervention into the life of a young person is a serious matter and for the youth worker caring is not enough. They have to be good at what they do, to be knowledgeable, skilful and have a professional understanding of the processes they are involved in. Keeping this knowledge and skills base up to date and refreshing their creativity is an ethical obligation for all youth workers. Within the professional development framework academic institutions, youth work organisations and youth workers share a collective and individual responsibility to provide for, facilitate and pursue continuous professional development. This includes ensuring that programmes and courses are provided so that youth workers can maintain their professional and occupational competence in a rapidly changing work environment. There is also an obligation to ensure that youth workers understand and develop reflective practice and are facilitated to reflect in, on and for their practice.

The need to provide specific support to youth workers at the start of their careers and to youth workers struggling with their practice has been widely recognised. This gives rise to questions of mandatory training. Given that adults working with young people have privileged access to them and can play a significant role in their development, it does not seem unreasonable to insist that they train (and continue to be trained and supervised) in order to maintain their professional and occupational competence, and status as a youth worker. The issue of ensuring that all youth workers, both voluntary and professional are meeting minimum standards is also very much on the youth work agenda. The roll out of standards frameworks will lead to questions regarding compulsory training and supervision. Recognising the power of youth work and the capacity of poor or unethical practice to do real harm to young people should drive this agenda.

### *Critical Thinking for Students*



What are the benefits of maintaining professional, intellectual and occupational competence? Why should we reflect on our practice? How should/could we contribute to the development of our colleagues? How often should we update our skills/knowledge base?



# SELF-AWARENESS



Youth workers have an ethical obligation to be aware of their own personal values and reflect on how this impacts on their work with young people. To achieve this they must be aware of their motivations for being involved in youth work and have a well-developed sense of their own personal and professional values. They should identify potential conflicts, be sensitive to the differing needs of young people and be respectful of their values and beliefs. Respect and dignity are crucial to being able to accept differences in their personal beliefs and the beliefs of the young person/and or colleagues while recognising that the universally accepted concept of Human Rights cannot be compromised.

The values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of young people may clash with the values/principles of some youth organisations. This may create an ethical dilemma for the youth worker in upholding the values of their organisation against the values of the young people. The youth worker has an ethical responsibility however to respect right of the young person to freedom of thought and not to try to impose or indoctrinate alternative values and beliefs on them, irrespective of the perspective of their organisation.

## Critical Thinking for Students



How self-aware are we as practitioners? Have we an inflated view of our abilities? How do we respond to critical feedback? Are we critical friends or just critics? Are we conscious of the positive/negative effects our behaviour has on colleagues and /or young people? Are we in competition with the world or do we hide our weaknesses by seeking to work with others? How do we react to difficult people or are we difficult to work with? Do we respect the values/beliefs of others or do we impose our worldview on everybody?





## BOUNDARIES



20

The youth work relationship is a professional one, intentionally limited to protect the young person and the purpose of the work. These limits need to be clearly understood by all parties and maintained. The need to consider professional boundaries is a key ethical issue for youth workers. The relationship has to be one of trust as youth workers create space for young people to be vulnerable. The protection of the relationship and the protection of young people in the relationship are crucial. Research by Devlin and Gunning (2009) and Moore et al (2013) reflects the expectations of young people participating in a youth work relationship. Devlin and Gunning (ibid) report that the young people involved in their study indicated that their experience of the youth work relationship was of *'being cared for, cared about, supported and respected'* (a regularly occurring word) but also *'challenged'* and *'stretched'*. In Moore's study the expectation of the young people of a caring adult, including youth workers, was that their *'care went beyond professional care'* (Moore 2013, p.66).

Ethical youth workers will maintain the integrity of professional boundaries and good reflective practice, both individual and collegiate, will ensure this. It is extremely important that youth workers are clear and discuss boundaries with the young people they work with. This discussion should entail the nature of the relationship and expectations from both parties. Issues around accessibility, dual relationships, contact times, methods, and duration will also need to be considered.

The management of professional boundaries can be more challenging for practitioners operating in small communities (e.g. geographical, cultural or other) or living in the community they work in. Dual relationships are much more likely to occur in these circumstances and the youth worker may be prone to encounter ethical dilemmas for which more vigilant reflection is required.





## BOUNDARIES



A youth work intervention should not be undertaken lightly especially since some young people may be emotionally fragile. Youth work can be a risky business and in recent years' youth workers have been advised to protect themselves from the possibility of allegations of inappropriate behaviour. Despite this it is important that youth workers ensure that the professional relationships they develop with young people are warm, caring and supportive and not undermined by a preoccupation with risk avoidance.

An additional element to the ethical principle around boundaries requires youth workers to ensure that the activities they engage in outside of their professional role do not undermine the confidence of young people or the public in youth work as a profession.

### Critical Thinking for Students



Youth work students should consider how they decide the appropriateness of professional boundaries. How do we know if our relationship with young people has breached the boundaries of professionalism? Are we too casual/friendly with the young people we work with or do we appear distant and reserved? How appropriate is our language – do we influence young people to behave in a negative or risky way? Is it ok to socialise with young people outside of work? How do professional boundaries impact on our use of social media?





## SELF-CARE



22

*“the successful facilitation of the (youth work) process clearly requires substantial experience and a high degree of skill on the part of those responsible, the educators, whether paid or unpaid.”*

Department of Education and Science (2003,p.103).

The youth work profession has experienced high levels of practitioner turnover which at times has had a detrimental effect on the quality of youth work. Youth workers are very often required to work with disaffected young people in less than satisfactory facilities, during ‘anti-social’ hours and in a climate of financial uncertainty. Additionally, the work they do may not appear to be particularly valued by the local community, the general public or government departments. All of this indicates that the work can be challenging for some workers. Given this environment there is an ethical responsibility on youth workers to practice self-care and take responsibility for their health and wellbeing in the workplace. They should ensure a healthy work/life balance and take a preventative and proactive approach to health and wellbeing. This should include being able to ask for help and support if needed.

Workers struggling with high levels of stress or even burnout are not in a position to provide the level of service that young people need and deserve. They may become irritable, reactive, lose insight, take offence easily and may end up blaming young people for their stress. In such circumstances young people cannot develop the long term relationships required to build trust or to promote their development. They may feel let down or abandoned if their expectations of the worker are not fulfilled. Ethical youth work practice is concerned with preserving the health of youth workers, to ensure the longevity of their career and to enable their ability to provide a sustained high quality service. Obviously balance is a key factor - practitioners entering in to the profession must be cognisant of the demands of the job and similarly, employers need to be mindful that their staff may require some flexibility and understanding as they try to deal with life’s challenges both inside and outside of the work environment.





## SELF-CARE



### Critical Thinking for Students



In the contemporary world of work stress is an inevitable occupational hazard but stress in itself is not always a bad thing. Youth work students should consider the range of stresses that can impact on them during their working lives. Prevention is obviously better than a cure so students should consider coping strategies and the support mechanisms that they could use to help them deal with stress. Similarly students should be self-aware of any predisposition to feeling stressed. Do the organisations they work for or have been on placement in have good policies and procedures for reducing the stress of staff or are they high stress environments?





## CONCLUSION



24

A salient feature of any profession is the obligation of its membership to ethical practice. NSETS is committed to promoting the highest standards of youth work education and training and considers a critical understanding of ethical youth work practice to be a key priority. It is incumbent on all those institutions and organisations involved in the education and training of youth workers to impart the professional values and responsibilities espoused here to their students.

This document serves as a guide (which is by no means definitive) on ethical issues to be considered by learners studying the discipline of youth work and so it should be used as a basis for developing a critical and professional dialogue on ethical youth work practice.

NSETS is keen to receive ongoing feedback on the content of this document so that it can evolve to meet the needs of the contemporary youth work community. Education and training institutions should consider its content and reflect on the merits of what has been posited here.

Future NSETS endorsement panels will want to see evidence of how programmes develop an ethical understanding of youth work and the NSETS Committee will actively encourage and engage in critical debate with the sector on this matter.

NSETS recognises that there is much more to do to embed ethics in youth work education and training, not least of which is the development of a formal code of ethics. This paper is the first step in the promotion of ethical youth work and it is hoped that it will begin the process of raising the status of youth work in Ireland and, more importantly, to ensure that our young people are the recipients of the highest standards of ethical youth work practice.







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26

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