

National health and development youth policies: valuable exercises or bureaucratic niceties?

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A national policy challenges professionals to move beyond their specific field and view young people from a broad holistic perspective

Health practitioners specialising in adolescence tend to have some common characteristics. They are passionate about young people. They have a strong community focus. And they tend to view health from a broad perspective that encompasses the links with families, peers and the school or workplace. It is this

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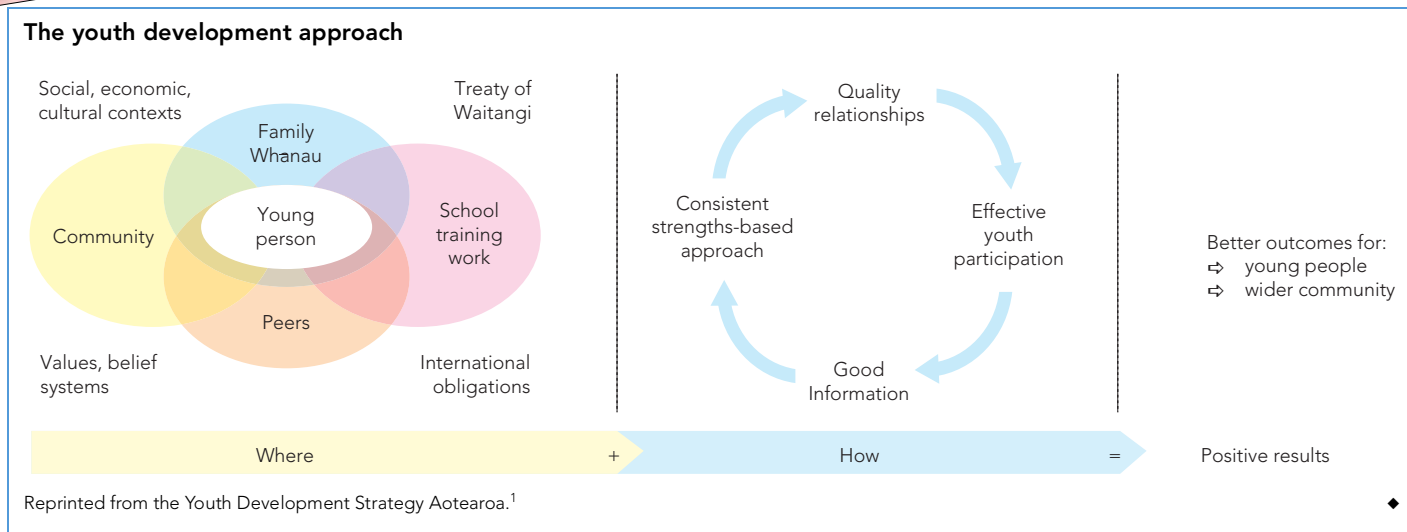
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broad perspective that provides the critical link between discussions about adolescent health and those about youth development. This article begins with a wider focus on positive youth development and then shifts to ask questions in relation to health practice and delivery. In early 2002, the New Zealand Government released the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa.¹ This document was the product of extensive discussions and workshops with a cross-section of young people, youth practitioners and academics with an overseas peer review process. Led by the Ministry of Youth Affairs, the Strategy's goal was ambitious. It was to provide a common framework that would inform all government policies in relation to young people. The driving question being — what do “we” need to do to support the development of a healthy youth population?

Outline of the Strategy

Talk of fragmented government policy is common — particularly in relation to young people. For Australia, with its federal and state



policy machinery, this reality is likely to be accentuated (see page 394).² The body of research on achieving health gains clearly signals that health outcomes are the result of a complex set of relationships and factors.³ Is it possible to develop a policy framework for one segment of the population, in this case young people, that can encompass this set of complex relationships? These were the bold objectives of the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa.

The Strategy is not a prescriptive list of what youth policies should be. This was intentional. National youth policies are often merely a collation of existing policies that relate to young people. Although this may be informative, it does little to advance a coherent and evidence-based approach that transcends the different policy silos. The challenge is to integrate the various strands of evidence into a single framework that informs discussions about the range of policies that affect young people (eg, health, education and justice policies). To achieve this, the Strategy needed to guide the way policy is constructed in many different areas of government and community life.

An essential core of the Strategy is the six interrelated key principles:

- Youth development is shaped by the “big picture”.
- Youth development is about young people being connected.
- Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach.
- Youth development happens through quality relationships.
- Youth development is triggered when young people fully participate.
- Youth development needs good information.

The Box presents a visual summary of the Strategy’s approach.

What has New Zealand learnt from this exercise?

The process of developing and implementing the Strategy has highlighted a number of issues — both positive and negative — for New Zealand.

Having one national framework to inform all youth policies is valuable. It has an ecological approach and is linked with an equivalent strategy for children. Having a dedicated youth development agency (Ministry of Youth Development) that is mandated to promote and monitor the application of the Strategy is critical. The Strategy has informed a number of policy initiatives since its launch, although this is difficult to quantify. The youth transitions

policy for young people aged 15–19 years and not in education, training or employment⁴ drew heavily on the Strategy’s framework and evidence base. Importantly, the Strategy’s existence has helped to promote an integrated approach to young people’s health and development in an explicit way, as opposed to it being a vague ideal.

There is still a degree of awareness of the Strategy across the country. As most government policy statements have a relatively short lifespan, this is positive. Four years after the Strategy’s launch, a survey of youth workers showed that 45% are familiar with its main points and a further 26% had heard of it and use the Strategy in their work.⁵ Other professionals tend to be more aware of their sector-specific policy documents (eg, in education, health, welfare, justice) than a generic youth document. They, like governments, tend to act in silos.

On the negative side, there is the ongoing risk that the Strategy will revert to a single sector (or issue) focus. This would see youth development pigeonholed to focus on one aspect of young people’s development, instead of being the glass through which we view all youth policies. Related to this is the risk that the language of youth development and health will revert to a mechanistic, deficit-dominated style. Words and phrases like “holistic” and “social connectedness” are beginning to appear in government documents, frequently with very watered-down meanings. However, this is not altogether bad, as introducing new concepts into government vocabulary is necessary.

As is the case with all government policies, gains in one area can be undermined by political pressure to introduce policies and approaches that are not consistent with the Strategy. An example of this interplay in New Zealand is the policies relating to youth offending. There is continual pressure on politicians to take a “get tough” stance on young offenders, despite this approach being at odds with the Strategy and contrary to the evidence that it is detrimental to young people’s development and health.⁶

Keeping a clear common conceptual framework for the Strategy has been important. Without this, the document risks fragmenting into a collection of policies that relate to young people, each with a different set of assumptions and understandings. It is very hard to achieve integration (or even coordination) of policies for young people without agreement on what is important to support young people’s healthy development.



What could Australia learn from the New Zealand experience?

There is a risk of overstating the contribution of the Strategy. Many people in the New Zealand health profession are unaware of its existence and possible application to their work. Noting these limitations, the most significant potential gain from this initiative is the challenge it presents to all professionals working with young people. It requires them to lift themselves above the boundaries of their professional context and training to view young people from a broad holistic perspective. In this position, there is no dominant issue or problem that is the focus — rather, the focus is on contributing to the positive healthy development of young people. A related challenge is to integrate insights gained from this wider perspective back into their professional sphere.

This can be done by simply using the six principles to ask questions of a health service. For example, How much is your service informed by changes in the wider environment (big picture), such as rising unemployment or media messages? How does your service assist young people to make connections with other groups or agencies that can contribute to their wellbeing? How does your health practice help young people identify their strengths? How do workers in your service build effective relationships with young people? And so on.

Feedback received on the Strategy is that its core messages are very simple — mostly common sense. We hope this is not a criticism, but just a reminder that we need not overcomplicate matters and that there is value in simplicity.

Competing interests

None identified.

References

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IN FOCUS: PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

Most publicly available information about mental health appears to focus on mental illness, and research shows that most young people interpret “mental health” as meaning mental illness. It is also known that many “at-risk” young people lack the necessary social support networks and skills to cope with adverse life events and that the creative arts are a useful tool for promoting self-expression, health and wellbeing.

In Focus was a pilot project that aimed to engage and support at-risk young people (aged 12-25 years) from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds by promoting positive mental health and wellbeing through the creative medium of photography.

This collaborative project was funded by the NSW Transcultural Mental Health Centre and was proudly sponsored by Platinum Imaging (a Chakra Alliance Member) and Fuji Film. The Transcultural Mental Health Centre's Youth Mental Health Project worked in partnership with several youth health, mental health and multicultural services across eastern, central, south-western and western Sydney in 2003.

Young people were recruited to participate in interactive workshops and outings, culminating in a roving photography exhibition (October 2003 to April 2004). They were given disposable cameras and encouraged to explore and capture images that they felt best reflected positive mental health and wellbeing and the experience of living in a culturally diverse society.

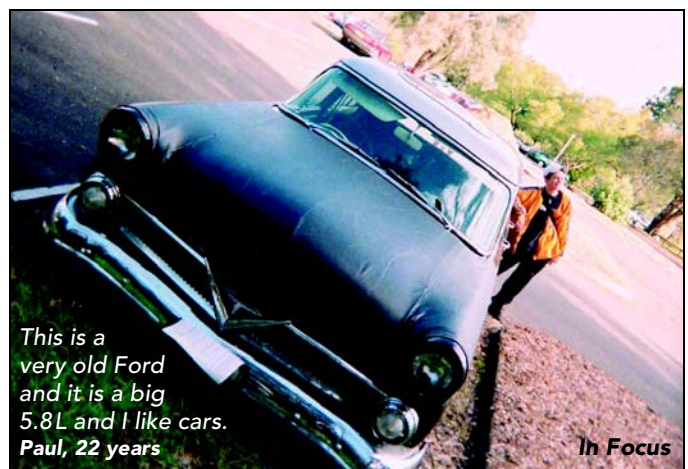
In Focus enabled service providers to connect with young people who were particularly at risk because of language barriers, poor literacy skills, homelessness or risk of homelessness, education break down, or under-utilisation of youth health services because of stigma or lack of awareness. The project allowed youth health workers and young people to engage in a creative, positive and constructive process to explore issues and portray images relating to

mental health and multicultural Australia — themes particularly relevant in today's political and social climate. Most importantly, *In Focus* promoted the mental health and wellbeing of the young people involved by providing them with access to early intervention services such as counselling; encouragement to re-engage with their schooling to pursue the creative arts; and the chance to express their thoughts and make new friends. As a medium for self-expression for these young people, photography proved to be an accessible yet powerful communication and educational tool.

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For other images see pages: 414; 415; 417; 421.



This is a very old Ford and it is a big 5.8L and I like cars. Paul, 22 years

In Focus