Report to the Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment & the Life Sciences

Project Title: Frontline youth work with street children and youth: Edge work, boundary work, hard work

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Introduction

Millions of street children and youth across the world live in abject poverty, in violent conditions, are subject to harsh and unremitting health, social, and psychological pressures, are exploited by adults and older youth, and forced into sex work and other marginal, temporary, and episodic employment with demonstrable short, longer, and life-long health and human development consequences. This is a public health, child rights, and social development issue. Frontline youth workers are a worldwide, first line of response to moderating the conditions of these street children over short- to long-term, facilitating their safety, access to medical, nutritional, educational, legal, and other services. This qualitative research on frontline youth work and its organizational context in Nepal examined elements and aspects of frontline youth work practice and potential for increasing the effectiveness of frontline youth workers in the primary and secondary prevention of problems associated with street children and in promoting their human rights and human development, a society’s moral compact with these children. Data were collected from 24 frontline youth workers and eight management level staff from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with street children, and 23 street children and youth.

The study found that workers viewed street young people as both victims and deviants, who were partly responsible for their own victimization and future life-outcomes. A primary approach used to help young people “fix” their problems and themselves as “problems” was “socialization.” In practice, this was a form of social control. As young people transitioned from street outreach program to a drop-in center and then to a transition home, there was an increase in the workers’ control of these young people’s activities, choices, and even voices. Child rights and their participation were emphasized in theory, while in practice participation was workers’ manipulation and tokenism rather than youth-driven and youth/adult equity. These NGOs were the only agencies that offered services to street young people. They worked with little support from government and in an environment of public distrust and financial uncertainty. A powerful influence to their work was their international donor agencies that, as part of their funding to NGOs, guided and shaped the street level understanding and practice of frontline youth work. At another level, NGOs by teaching workers their roles and work and by requiring them to show outputs influenced this work. At the individual level, unethical practices of some
workers further alienated young people from mainstream society and damaged their own and their agencies’ reputation. Overall, workers and their agencies were doing good work, particularly in the context of many obstacles. No discernable effort was being made to confront the larger, complex, social institutional sources of what is the “street children” social problem. No one – neither government, NGOs, nor international organizations – had named fully or even begun to take this on. Frontline youth work was not a solution to the “street children problem.” It was a small band-aid on a larger, deeper cut.

1. Financial summary

The award from the Consortium was used on expenses related to the study’s data collection and analysis. Specifically, the award money was used for a field visit to Nepal to collect data from street children and workers. Two frontline workers were contracted to facilitate data collection from street children. Interviews with street children were conducted in groups. Twenty-three street children actively participated in the interviews, while their peers stayed in the group and listened to the conversation. A two-day feedback session was organized for government, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, and local non-governmental organizations to share preliminary findings and receive feedback. The award money was also used as stipend for time spent on data analysis and report writing.

2. Results

Final dissertation titled, "Frontline Youth Work with Street Children and Youth in Nepal: Edge Work, Boundary Work, Hard Work" has been published by ProQuest/UMI. Additionally, I am working on publishing parts of this research as journal articles. A poster presentation was made at the University of Minnesota’s COSP Poster Symposium and Roundtables.

3. Future project plans

This project was my dissertation, which I successfully defended on December 2012.