

# An Introduction to Intersectional Practice in Youth Work



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# 1.

# Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction to YouthLink Scotland

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We're a membership organisation representing more than 100 youth organisation members across Scotland, both voluntary and statutory.

We champion the value of the youth work sector, challenging government at national and local levels to invest in youth development.

Our vision is for a nation which values its young people and their contribution to society, where young people are supported to achieve their potential.

With support from the Scottish Government, YouthLink Scotland has set up Action on Prejudice to be a central online hub to provide information and resources for young people and those that work with young people about tackling discrimination, prejudice and hate crime.



## 1.2 About this toolkit

The toolkit is designed to be used by anyone working with young people aged 11-25 years. Ideally those using the toolkit will have some experience of facilitating individual and small group work with young people in a range of community settings.

If you are new to the idea of intersectionality that's great, you are in the right place. This toolkit will give a basic introduction to intersectionality, why it is important for us as youth workers and how we can include it in our work.

This toolkit consists of two parts. Part 1 is this introductory booklet. Part 2 consists of two training sessions where you will learn more about the ideas that make up intersectionality and youth work. In these interactive online sessions we will deepen our understanding of how we can embed this practice in our work with young people and build a community of like-minded workers across Scotland.

This resource is the start of a learning journey and we fully acknowledge that there will be different interpretations of the ideas we present. We welcome these differing perspectives and fully commit to learning and deepening our practice as we move forward.



### 1.3 Introduction to intersectionality

Intersectionality\* is based on the idea that individuals have a complex mix of identities, such as religion, race, family, culture, socio-economic status, which influence the way they experience and participate in the world and their communities.

Intersectionality describes how different forms of cruel and unjust treatment (oppression) connect around an individual's identity and how this can amplify inequality and influence their experience and view of the world.

In our communities we see the lives of too many young people shaped by persistent forms of oppression. This oppression has many forms including inequality, discrimination and prejudice.

Young people experience inequalities and discrimination in various forms, and

this can negatively affect their well-being and chances for participating equally in society.

As youth workers we can use Intersectionality to support young people to make sense of their own reality.

Understanding and naming our identities is important because it can lead to a greater understanding of the (positive and negative) impact that the multiple identities have on the individual's capacity to participate, on an equal basis, at all levels of society.

Intersectional practice can be more powerful in communities and relationships where power isn't equally distributed. Understanding and embracing intersectionality through youth work provides a great opportunity to bring about meaningful representation and participation where before there was none.

\*Kimberlé Crenshaw originally coined the term "intersectionality" as a way to help explain the oppression of African-American women. Watch her TED talk [here](#).

## 2. Exploration of key terms

**Equality** is the idea that we are all of equal value and deserve equal opportunity, respect and dignity.

**Inclusion** is understanding, identifying and removing barriers that exist to ensure participation and belonging.

**Equity** is similar to inclusion, it ensures that we have equality of outcome regardless of background. It is about making sure people are not directly or indirectly excluded and that positive steps are taken to include those who might otherwise feel excluded.

**Diversity** encourages respect for and expression of the range of identities represented in society

**Stereotypes** can be defined as generalizations of groups of people when we assume that all individuals in that group have the same characteristics (stereotypes can be both positive or negative).

**Prejudice** are stereotypes + emotions. They can also be positive or negative, but we often use this word to describe strong negative emotions towards some groups of people.

Stereotypes and prejudices are commonly influenced by family, friends, media, where and how we are brought up. We often adopt them on an unconscious level making them hard to spot and hard to change.

**Discrimination** is what happens when we put prejudice into action.

**Protected Characteristics** are part of the Equality Act 2010. They provide a basic framework of protection against direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation in services and public functions, as well as providing protection for people discriminated against because they are perceived to have, or are associated with someone who has, a protected characteristic. The protected characteristics are:

Age / Disability / Gender reassignment / Marriage and civil partnership / Pregnancy and maternity / Race / Religion or belief / Sex / Sexual orientation.

# 3. Youth work and intersectionality

## 3.1 What is youth work

Youth work is an informal educational practice that supports young people's personal, social, emotional, and civic development.

Youth workers in Scotland and YouthLink Scotland have developed a set of youth work outcomes. They are:

- Young people are confident, resilient and optimistic for the future
- Young people manage personal, social and formal relationships
- Young people create, describe and apply their learning and skills
- Young people participate safely and effectively in groups
- Young people consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control
- Young people express their voice and demonstrate social commitment
- Young people broaden their perspectives through new experiences and thinking

The focus of youth work is the building of individual and collective assets and strengths and creating conditions where young people can understand themselves and their world and enact positive change for themselves and their world.





### 3.2 Youth work approach

#### 1. Young people choose to participate

In youth work, young people choose to enter into a learning relationship with youth workers and other young people, and as a result are more likely to be actively engaged in their own learning and development. Voluntary participation is essential to learning related to personal and social development.

#### 2. Youth work builds from where young people are

Youth work engages young people in their communities. Learning is related to and builds on the lived experience of young people. It acknowledges and takes at its starting point young people's social environment and the issues that affect them. It is respectful of young people's connection with peers, family, community and culture.

#### 3. Youth work recognises young people and youth workers as partners in the learning process

The young person is recognised and valued as an equal partner in the learning process. In youth work the curriculum is negotiated between the youth worker and the young person and the learning relationship is respectful and accepting.



### 3.3 Youth workers and intersectional practice in 3 parts.

In her 2012 article in the Journal of youth studies 'Building social and cultural capital through youth work' Annette Coburn argues that youth work encourages thinking and action about equality and has three critical pillars that build intersectional practice.

Firstly, through problem-posing dialogue and conversation, it raises awareness of historical and current forms of discrimination. Young people can see how knowledge is created and take action to change the social conditions in which inequality and discrimination prevail.

**Youth work action?** Engage in Conversation with young people.

Second, it creates safe spaces and conditions for young people to interrogate their values and beliefs, to experience difference and to increase their understanding or capacity to produce knowledge about their identities.

**Youth work action?** Self-reflection and helping young people reflect are crucial.

Third, it enhances the possibilities for collaborative learning between young people and youth workers that enables a positive view of young people to be made visible. This increases the possibility for a reconfiguration of the views and understandings of young people as integral to society.

**Youth work action?** Engage young people in informal education

To explore these pillars in more depth we encourage you to sign up for the youth worker training that accompanies this handbook.





Let's look at these core youth work actions in more detail:

### Conversation with young people.

Youth workers are comfortable with the idea of engaging with young people in conversation, but what sits behind this everyday action? Nicholas Burbules (1993) offers this succinct list.

- **Concern.** In being with our partners in conversation, to engage them with us, there is more going on than talk about the overt topic. There is a social bond that entails interest in, and a commitment to the other.
- **Trust.** We have to take what others are saying on faith – and there can be some risk in this.
- **Respect.** While there may be large differences between partners in conversation, the process can go on if there is mutual regard. This involves the idea that everyone is equal in some basic way and entails a commitment to being fair-minded, opposing degradation and rejecting exploitation.
- **Appreciation.** Linked to respect, this entails valuing the unique qualities that others bring.
- **Affection.** Conversation involves a feeling with, and for, our partners.
- **Hope.** While not being purely emotional, hope is central. We engage in conversation in the belief that it holds possibility. Often it is not clear what we will gain or learn, but faith in the inherent value of education carries us forward.

**Find out more about dialogue for learning, education and change**



## Self-reflection and helping young people reflect.

As a youth worker your ability to reflect on your own journey as a person, where and how you fit into society, what you choose to do (or not to do) about this and how you support young people to do the same is a crucial part of being an effective youth worker.

Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) state that reflection is an activity in which people 'recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it' They suggest the reflection has 3 core elements:

- Returning to experience – that is to say recalling or detailing salient events.
- Attending to (or connecting with) feelings – this has two aspects: using helpful feelings and removing or containing obstructive ones.

- Evaluating experience – this involves re-examining experience in the light of one's intent and existing knowledge etc. It also involves integrating this new knowledge into one's conceptual framework.

Self-reflection and encouraging young people to reflect on their own situations is central to intersectional practice, it is the foundation of learning and change. Understanding who you are, where you have come from and how you have got to where you are is crucial. In the words of civil rights activist Joseph Lowery "If you don't know where you come from, it's difficult to determine where you are.- It's even more difficult to plan where you are going."

**Read a little more about reflection, learning and education**



## Engaging in informal education.

Historically, Philip Coombs (1973) described Informal education as ‘the truly lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influences and resources in his or her environment — from family and neighbours, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media’.

In more recent times Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith (2005) define Informal education as “the wise, respectful and spontaneous process of cultivating learning. It works through conversation, and the exploration and enlargement of experience”

They suggest that effective informal educators emphasise certain values in their work. These include commitments to:

- work for the well-being of all.
- respect the unique value and dignity of each human being.
- dialogue.
- equality and justice.
- democracy and the active involvement of people in the issues that affect their lives.



Informal education creates a space where youth worker and young person are partners in the exploration and learning process. It is an equitable and fair approach that (when done well) fairly distributes power.

In Scotland, our informal education approach is guided by many professional and policy supports that we explore further in the training program that accompanies this toolkit – join us to find out more.

They include but are not limited to:

- Community Learning and Development values and ethics
- Youth Work outcomes
- Youth work skills framework
- Youth work National Occupational Standards



## 4. In practice



### 4.1 Case study

Case studies from organisations working intersectionally will be available alongside this toolkit on the Action on Prejudice website.

### 4.2 Practical games and activities

On the Action on Prejudice website you will find practical games and activities you can do with the young people you work with to explore the topic of intersectionality with them.

Both the case studies and activities are available on the Action on Prejudice website.

<https://actiononprejudice.info/intersectionality>.

# 5. What next

We hope that this resource will be built on as understanding of intersectionality increases and as we gather more lived experience examples. It is important to remember that each individual will have a different experience and every experience should be valued and understood in order to build a full understanding.





action on  
**prejudice**

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