



COUNSELLING IN OPEN YOUTH WORK

A PRACTICAL GUIDE



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COUNSELLING IN OPEN YOUTH WORK

Counselling takes place almost every day in open youth work. It happens at serving counters. Or it might take place in private office rooms. And sometimes a park bench provides the location. But wherever it happens, it's an important aspect of an open youth work practitioner's daily routine.

Counselling is shaped according to the issues a young person has and the specific demands of their situation. And that could mean anything from once-off counselling sessions or quick interventions to crisis counselling or multi-week counselling programmes. In line with the increased level of professionalism in the social work arena, the expectation for youth workers to be more aware of the practical realities of counselling is also on the rise.

This guide to counselling in the context of open youth work is designed to help practitioners (also referred to as youth workers in this guide) navigate this aspect of their work. The content is based on a field research project run in Austria and Germany with the help of numerous youth workers. Along with an outline of relevant specialist literature and research, written surveys, one-on-one interviews and focus groups with those active in the field were also carried out. In addition, open youth work organisations were studied directly. Here, existing everyday practices were observed and analysed in a structured manner, not only by our research team but also by the youth workers themselves. The results were collected, discussed with youth workers, researchers and educators, and then systematically prepared for publication. The guide outlines features and condi-

tions observed in open youth work counselling. These are not unique in the field of low-threshold work with (young) people, but are special in view of the atypical counselling processes and unusual settings associated with open youth work, in contrast to specialist forms of counselling such as that seen in psychotherapy environments. The extreme openness to youth issues and the avoidance of any deficit orientation with regard to counselling are also important differentiators.

The following seven fundamental elements of counselling should be understood as building blocks in the counselling process. They do not necessarily depend upon each other and they can overlap. Those engaged in open youth work will find that they're already implementing many of these elements. Having these practices put down in writing is meant to provide context, a reference and food for thought.

To be effective, professional practice in the open youth work discipline requires clear guidelines. This document serves as such, covering topics ranging from challenges around settings and personal resources to the skills and qualifications of practitioners. In our exploration and definition of

methods and practices, we have focused on youth work – fully aware that the field also concerns itself with and works with children. This guide is primarily concerned with the counselling of young people over 12.

Last but not least, digital youth work and online counselling in particular cannot be ignored by the open youth work field following the pandemic years. We have not given this aspect a dedicated chapter, as we take the view that the features and principles of counselling are always the same. Certain features of an online environment are on occasion considered. The guidelines do of course cover the necessary skills for online work. But for reasons of complexity, this will likely form part of the content for our next guide.

We would like to thank the many collaborators who worked on this guide. That includes those working in the open youth work field, the researchers and the teachers. And we hope it provides both motivation and support in ample quantities!



1 DEFINITION OF COUNSELLING AND SETTING GOALS

Open youth work is unique in that its practitioners are able to respond to what young people have to say in open, flexible and movable settings. Here the principles of Cooperation, Efficiency and Visibility provide a basis for shaping the transitions between various learning environments as well as shifts to counselling contexts. The Cooperation principle requires open youth work practitioners to take part in young people's activities whilst paying the expected professional attention to boundaries. The Efficiency principle calls for concise interventions that will keep the broader conversation going. The Visibility principle calls for transparency with regard to the youth workers' attitudes to the young people with whom they are working, and is also meant to allow

for those young people to reveal their own existing attitudes.¹

In open youth work, counselling is a communicative process that allows an individual to understand themselves better, develop new goals, strive for transformation and have access to new approaches and resources.²

Open, informal points of contact and in-passing situations reach young people not catered for in formal settings, or whose experiences have led to them keeping their distance from formal structures.³

These low-threshold environments often involve aligning to the world in which young people typically live, and a participative dialogue process in developing techniques to

help, with a focus on building trust and building minimal asymmetries into the relationship between counsellors and those being counselled.⁴

Open settings and proximity to everyday environments allow easier access to counselling. This provides particular opportunities for young people affected by social exclusion and marginalisation – low-threshold counselling can contribute towards the development of a fairer infrastructure.⁵

Understood in the sense of its basic goals of helping young people develop their potential and play an active role in society, open youth work opens up realistic possibilities for counselling them. This is because it takes not only life situations, needs, interests, potential, problems, resources and opportunities in the subject's living environment into account, but also allows for collaborative moments of shared learning and processing.⁶

As the research results reveal, counselling practices in open youth work offer not only the chance to deal with crises, but also support for the tasks involved in everyday life. Young people are supported in taking appropriate decisions and developing suitable plans of action. In this sense, counselling can also be considered an educational process.

In the context of counselling work, open youth work practitioners pursue the following goals in particular:

- Growing responsibility and improving the life skills of young people
- Supporting self-efficacy
- Supporting young people in dealing with everyday life
- Guidance in the development of identity and personality
- Helping to deal with past experiences and frame what has happened in their lives
- Providing information



2 PROFESSIONAL PRINCIPLES AS NORMATIVE GUIDELINES

Professional principles form the basis of any specialist work and are a key element of professional identity. These are normatively defined concepts that guide practitioners and their organisations in their daily work.

Along with those that apply to the broader field⁷, the professional principles considered by the subject experts in this guide deal specifically with counselling practices, thus forming the guidelines for counselling in open youth work. They are not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, the guide cov-

ers a selection chosen for a particular relevance to a specific aspect of open youth work: counselling practices.

We have introduced these professional principles at case-appropriate points within the framework provided by the seven fundamental elements. We are nonetheless fully aware that these principles are intrinsic to, and worthy of consideration at, all stages and for all elements of a counselling process, overlapping with and to some degree influencing each other.

3 FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF COUNSELLING PRACTICE IN OPEN YOUTH WORK

The following seven aspects were defined as fundamental elements of counselling in open youth work, always considering the real-world feedback provided. To put these into practice, specialist knowledge and skills are required – ones that should be explored in further detail. The professional principles mentioned above, which refer to fundamental approaches, provide a bigger-picture orientation.

The outline structure of the fundamental elements draws on Hiltrud von Spiegel's classification in terms of 'competency clusters'.⁸ These consist of knowledge, mindset and skills aspects. The

mindset aspect is incorporated in the descriptions of the fundamental elements. The professional principles covered within each can be applied to multiple elements, though they can be prioritised at specific stages of counselling. This is highlighted with reference to the empirical data.



“As is so often the case in open youth work, counselling emerges from an entirely normal conversation.”



ESTABLISH CONTACT AND BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

“The 18-year-old walked into the youth café during normal opening hours and sat down on the sofa. He remained there for about half an hour and looked particularly thoughtful. I sat down with him, to make sure everything was okay. I asked him how he was doing (...)”

“In front of the café, a young woman sat waiting for a bus. I emerged from the hangout to see if any young people were already there. The young woman greeted me and we got talking. She produced a crumpled letter from her bag. She needed help (...)”

How initial contact is made is strongly tied to the relationship between the young person and the youth worker, as well as to the organisation. If it is a case of initial contact, then at first it is important to spend time getting to know each other. If a working relationship already exists, then any needs can be established fairly quickly. There are thus differing initial phases at this critical juncture in the counselling process. But what they all have in common is that the open youth work practitioners offer various types of supportive interaction, depending on what the young people need. They show interest in the young person and their living environment, show understanding, are always ready to offer another



opportunity to try something and also provide space, opportunities to retreat and basic needs at an infrastructural level.

Thus on the one hand establishing contact can be built on a good relationship and trust, while on the other hand making contact can lead to a relationship developing via counselling. *"...it grows out of an existing relationship, then builds and deepens that relationship."*

As the examples already show, there are many ways to make contact in open youth work: either young people approach practitioners as a result of a specific need or problem, or contact is made when a service is used and needs become apparent. Young people then share more about their lives, their stories begin to reveal more detail, and conversations grow deeper and take on a reflective aspect. After that comes a questioning phase, which may or may not result in a counselling situation. In other words, co-production between youth workers and young people emerges.

Co-production

A shared process in which young people and their needs take centre stage. As long as there is no danger to themselves or others, they can also terminate the conversation or the process at any time.

KNOWLEDGE

One of the things that need to be understood here is what co-production means in practice. Open youth work professionals approach young people on an active basis, make themselves available to them, provide a presence and show an interest. As a result of their recognition of young people, and because they take them seriously, they are regarded as 'special' adults.

To do the professional principles justice, knowledge of existing industry-specific topics (including for example the issues faced by young people, how to build on initial contact, relationship models and dynamics) is needed. Also required are systematic approaches to the



Active listening

Practitioners don't just listen passively. Rather, they communicate their understanding to their counterpart in as fundamental a way as possible. That applies as much to the words used as it does to the emotional reactions and non-verbal signals a young person gives.

subjective reality of the young person. In addition, establishing contact presupposes that practitioners are familiar with the methods and basic values of open youth work, such as an orientation around the individual and their living environment.

SKILLS

A key skill set, ultimately a part of showing interest, includes active listening, attentive listening and asking questions.

Hiltrud von Spiegel⁹ defines a communicative, systematic approach to practical work.

She defines this as the development of a solid working relationship, the development and nurture of a plan of action, understanding and negotiation on the basis of dialogue, and mediation. The latter requires an awareness of one's own competencies and skills – and knowledge of one's own limits – as the counselling process goes on.

This in turn calls for the skills of self-observation, self-reflection and empathy, as well as the ability to accept and work with uncertainty, ambiguity and lack of clarity in a situation.

Empathy

This is the ability to put oneself into another person's shoes on an emotional level. It's showing a willingness to try things regardless, learning the background to their situation and understanding their behaviour.



“Rarely do the youths have just ONE issue that needs to be addressed. Once they see that we’re there for them, they come with ALL their issues, as well as those of other family members.”

IDENTIFY A NEED FOR COUNSELLING

“You’re just going through your daily routine or working in an open environment, and suddenly you find yourself in a counselling situation. Often it’s just a few minutes – minutes in which the issue then suddenly emerges.”

“You can tell by looking at them. Then it’s a case of making an attempt. I start talking to the person: ‘You’re not doing so well, are you?’ And then you get an immediate response: ‘I want to talk’ or ‘I don’t want to talk’.

The first element’s premise gives rise to a challenge, namely the notion that the specifics of any required counselling become clear in every interaction with young people. On their side, disclosure of an issue for counselling is strongly dependent on the quality of the relationship with the practitioner. Young people often choose which practitioner they want to trust. The important thing is to pay attention to their needs, to take an interest in them and to be ready to explore them if and when the youth wants to. When a need is perceived, this should be clearly and transparently stated, along with the practitioner’s own perspectives. Placing the needs of young people at the centre is an important part of a youth



Acceptance

Mutual acceptance forms the basis for a real-world relationship. Practitioners must accept when counselling isn’t welcome or young people don’t see the need for it. Such differing perspectives must be recognised and tolerated.

worker’s basic mindset. Whether the young people open themselves up to counselling and gain something from it is their own responsibility – provided they are not in danger from others or themselves. It is okay to fail and failure must be accepted by the youth workers. In many cases, a young person will provide a clearly-defined problem, but a specific ‘issue for counselling’ can’t necessarily be defined. Evaluating the scope and urgency of the issue at this stage represents a major challenge for practitioners and requires appropriate coordination of resources within the team.

KNOWLEDGE

The freedom to choose is an important aspect of maintaining a young person’s well-being. A code of protection within the organisation is thus key. On the basis of a corresponding risk analysis or risk estimate, open youth work counselling needs can be substantiated. Knowledge of discipline-specific guidelines and as well as the principles of one’s own organisation¹⁰ is thus a necessity. Furthermore, the same applies to a fundamental knowledge of so-called developmental tasks, in order to be able to bring a better understanding for the ‘youth’ stage of life and guarantee support that matches needs.

It’s not compulsory

Young people make use of open youth work organisations and services on a voluntary basis. It’s their decision what they’re willing to try, with whom, to what extent, for how long, how often, etc.



SKILLS

Two essential skills in keeping with the 'identifying the need for counselling' element are 'signalling willingness to talk' and 'perceptiveness'. The latter implies observing the situation without any judgement, at first removing oneself from it entirely. That in turn calls for the ability to reflect on one's own system of standards and values. Along with the voluntary principle, openness and acceptance, there is a major challenge involved in remaining patient when, for example, a practitioner believes there may be a need for counselling, but this is not articulated by the young person and/or they do not want to address it. However, when an urgent case for counselling is perceived, the youth worker needs to be brave in order to broach the subject transparently and respectfully.

Authenticity

Authenticity is closely related to transparency and a professional understanding of roles. In open youth work, boundaries and scope of action should be made clear to the young person concerned.

In cases of uncertainty around the issue or counselling need articulated, the ability to probe deeper is also called for. Sometimes the issues as expressed by young people need to be 'translated'. Frequently, they do not define any specific needs. This means recognising and talking about the needs underlying a particular issue. This 'translation' skill is closely associated with the so-called 'breaking point', a moment of acceptance considered very important in practical work. This refers to the shift from a conversation to a counselling process.



"The young woman came over during a picnic in the park. There was a lot going on, a lot of other kids who might overhear what she said. But despite the chaotic setting, it was a successful counselling session."

CREATE A SETTING

The stage for counselling often takes shape "in a very spontaneous manner. The young woman drops in with no warning because she's in a crisis situation. And her best friend is always with her, as per her wishes."

"The young woman prefers a random spot as a setting for counselling, but the possibility that others will overhear the conversation may be a problem. But switching to another setting can disturb the 'vibe'. Just mentioning careful communication can be a significant intervention."

As with counselling practices, settings for counselling can be extremely varied and atypical. Significant differentiators here are both location and the open/closed nature of the setting. Open settings involve relatively informal and often vague or undefined meeting points and 'appointments'. The primary goal is finding a setting appropriate to the need. The counselling process here could be a normal but focused conversation, but it could also be a process in which the young person takes action or has tasks (e.g. research) – the practitioner is always available and pro-



vides support. Due to the proximity to everyday life that is a fundamental part of open youth work, the choice of setting should be flexible and low-threshold.

In open youth work, counselling often plays out in different kinds of settings from those 'typical' for social work. Forms of counselling can for example include:

- Open settings in public spaces
- 'Partially closed' settings in public spaces (e.g. taking a walk)
- Open settings in youth centres or drop-in centres
- 'In-between' settings (open – closed; e.g. conversations over a counter)
- Closed settings in a room (individual counselling, particularly in cases of professional necessity)
- Group or peer counselling settings
- Digital counselling settings

KNOWLEDGE

What all settings have in common is that they need to be considered and weighed up in terms of confidentiality. It is important that youths are given a feeling of safety,

even when they themselves have opted for an open setting. That means the practitioners need to provide this safety, the watchword here being 'do it where you feel safe.'

In keeping with the principle of situation-specificity, it is important to have an understanding of the effects of different contexts, as well as a basic knowledge of the organisations active in the field.¹¹ This contextualisation and flexibility can thus also mean turning to additional resources in the discipline, as well as sharing them. Also required is an underlying knowledge of the different forms settings can take and their physical features. Last but not least, a knowledge of the relevant laws and legal background is important in this context.

Proximity to everyday environments

Proximity to everyday life means on the one hand that social services are readily available and accessible in a young person's own living environment. On the other, it refers to as comprehensive an understanding as possible of their interwoven life experiences and constructs.¹²



Safer/braver spaces

Youths are still subjected to violence at the hands not only of adults but also their peers. It happens in family environments as well as in schools, other educational institutions, at work or in clubs. Here there is a special duty of care as well as the need to provide safe locations. These safe spaces, where anything can be shared, create fertile ground for 'braver spaces' – places that allow for the open sharing of thoughts and opinions.

Closely related is the anonymity aspect. In digital counselling settings this is particularly challenging, and calls for practitioners to be transparent about other options in terms of setting. Some of the challenges here include the fact that young people often use their real names online, that their physical space can't be assessed in terms of safety or confidentiality, that chats can be saved – and much more.

SKILLS

When keeping to the principles outlined, it is inevitable that young people do not always choose the ideal environments to open up about their issues. A conversation can begin at the bar, for example,

and others may be present – but that may be the setting that works from a young person's perspective. Spontaneous peer-to-peer chats may however arise from such a situation, as other young people tune in and tell of their own experiences. Here close observation and a weighing-up of the situation are important in terms of when and how the practitioner brings themselves into the counselling process – or not. The ability to transfer an 'in-passing' counselling session to a different setting, taking time and locations into account, is a key skill in open youth work. This transition can also go in the direction of a digital setting, which in turn presupposes knowledge and competencies in the digital world.

Confidentiality and transparency

In open youth work, young people decide for themselves what personal information they wish to divulge, if any. Young people have the right to expect any data shared to be treated confidentially and to be informed about anybody having or being given access to that data. Data related to crimes or relevant to child or youth protection can constitute an exception in terms of data sharing, but the young person must still be kept informed about any data divulged.



“Removing some pressure, reassurance and encouragement worked well. Some perspective was achieved. (...)”.

FACILITATE A CONVERSATION

“The counselling was very emotional for the young woman. She was somewhat hysterical, she cried and her words came tumbling out. As the counselling person, I thus had to handle a lot of emotions and somehow give her a lift.”

“I have to be attentive and empathetic, and be able to read between the lines. I have to hear what the person wants to share. Body language doesn’t always match what is said – I have to recognise that and resist substituting myself and my experiences into the situation.”

Bearing in mind the principles covered so far, such as co-production, practitioners often let the young person take the lead in the conversation (in other words, where they want the conversation to go), although the practitioner is likely to steer the process. This means the professional responsibility for the conversation, its flow and any solutions remain with the youth worker. Along with managing questions and the like, it’s important that practitioners don’t tell of their own problems or misuse the counselling situation for their own ends. Active listening is particularly important when it comes to facilitating a conversation.

Taking things seriously and offering recognition

Practitioners are regarded as ‘special’ adults and that colours the way they’re experienced. Exactly because of that power structure in the relationship, practitioners must never forget to take the individual’s living environment and plans for life seriously – and to offer recognition for them.

What’s required is to pay attention during the conversation, watch body language, notice the unsaid while taking what is said seriously, handling those words with sensitivity, asking further questions and encouraging the young person to keep on speaking. Facilitating a conversation calls once again for flexibility, for example allowing an open-setting conversation to flow naturally whilst also shifting the dialogue to a private location where necessary. A basic work principle here is formed by a strengths-based approach, which takes seriously the concept that young people are experts in their own living environments. The idea is to pinpoint their strengths and bolster them. Identifying and unblocking these is the basis for the solutions-based approach inherent in open youth work counselling. In the context of a counselling session, practitioners provide the chance to

focus on issues, opportunities for reflection and possibly a shared path to a solution..

KNOWLEDGE

In the first instance, facilitating a conversation in the context of a counselling process requires a fundamental understanding of communication and language, which is ultimately also needed for a familiarity with techniques for approaching the young person’s subjective reality. Where open youth work is concerned, this implies field-specific knowledge (e.g. issues faced by young people). An understanding of methodological concepts also allows for a solutions and needs-based approach that is more flexible and easier to tailor. When working in the field, the need for understanding during the conversation is strongly emphasised.

This is thus also in line with professional principles previously covered, such as ‘taking things seriously’ or ‘transparency’, on which the participants draw during co-production. In addition, not only a knowledge of the interplay between society and individual is required, but also of that between personal development and moral compass. Through these relationships, a





Attentiveness

not only to the young person, but with regards to the youth workers themselves! As with creating a setting, it's important that everyone taking part in the conversation feels at ease. Things to pay attention to here are for example pace, language, reticence on the part of the practitioner, building in breaks and pauses, appropriate use of conversational techniques and much more.

variety of cultures and groupings influenced by biographical development processes – and only partly changeable – exists in any community.¹³

SKILLS

Knowledge on its own is not enough. Techniques for facilitating conversations need to be trained, tested and then put into practice. Examples of such methods include motivational conversation skills, non-violent communication, paraphrasing/mirroring/reframing, moderation and mediation skills, 'Socratic' conversation competencies and eclectic, integrated methodologies.

The implementation of the above is also improved by the ability to structure and guide conversations in accordance with the techniques

A strengths-based approach

Young people are experts when it comes to their own living environments. From a professional perspective, what is important is to perceive living situations as they do, as well as how they can structure and tackle everyday life. If they are lacking certain strengths, then they need the appropriate support – which may in some cases need to be arranged through other people or services.¹⁴

and methods chosen. Linguistic skills are of additional importance.

But handling the general requirements of facilitating a conversation must always be borne in mind – particularly when a conversation is interrupted (e.g. by a phone call) or the participants' comfort is limited (e.g. long conversations require breaks in which to recover – physical and mental well-being is a basic requirement for a constructive conversation). Thus this element also calls for the ability to self-reflect and self-observe.



"...and kept on having follow-up conversations with her, planned across a full year, until she had truly recovered, (...)."

SHAPE A COUNSELLING PROCESS

"Usually it's only in 'after-hours' pedagogical relationship building that enough trust develops for the young people to confide in us and we can 'conduct' counselling. In our counselling processes, a good relationship between the young people and ourselves is essential."

"Often, a process is almost complete, but something new comes up during that final phase. Sometimes young people we have worked with before get in touch once again, ask for advice and receive support. Once one thing is wrapped up, something new often opens up."

Given the needs-oriented approach, the first thing to ascertain is whether needs can be taken care of alone, whether practitioners can handle this or whether the issue needs to be referred. Thus practitioners sometimes only play an accompanying role in a counselling process, sometimes a counselling role, and sometimes both.

"Due to there being no serious urgency, the counselling session was set for the following day, when things were less busy and there was enough capacity to commit to the young man."

In open youth work, long-lasting counselling processes that differ from 'typical' processes are a reg-



Focus on needs

is a specialist principle that puts the needs of youths at the centre of educational processes and support initiatives. Needs are always influenced by social norms and values, and these must be considered on a daily basis so that open youth work can contribute to leading a good life as well as social inclusion and participation.¹⁵

ular occurrence. Often a relationship is already established, and a low level of formality is a defining feature. Its open, searching and encouraging character represents low-threshold support that is decisive in terms of keeping some continuity. Often there is an immediate reason, stimulus or situational willingness on the part of the young people that creates a momentary window for a counselling process to begin. Youth workers describe the dynamics and the 'timetable' of a counselling process as diverse and often disjointed. To ensure that young people do not suddenly get into a counselling process involving a particularly intense interaction, the practitioner must be transparent from the very first contact. They must communicate

roles, goals, tasks and a concept of how things can be taken forward in an understandable and justifiable way, exactly so that the young person can take their own decision about whether to go ahead and open up.

This ethical requirement is equally applicable to the conclusion of a counselling process. The practitioner needs to enable an active 'letting-go' and further progress for the young person. The proximity to their living environment and the broad openness of the practitioners allows youths to 'grab onto' the counselling with their issues.

Practitioners often find themselves unable to provide the know-how that is required or sought in the situation at hand. To admit that to themselves and their counterpart at that moment in time, as well as to continue on a simplified basis and take responsibility for finding specific expertise, is a major challenge for the working relationship and the counselling process. In counselling, one's own concepts of a relationship always force their way to the surface.

To be aware of this dynamic as a practitioner, and to be able to distance oneself from one's own experiences and worldview, is a layer of protection for young people seeking advice. And 'ongoing reflection around everyday experience'¹⁶ is also needed in order to recognise moments when one's own capacities are exceeded.

Developing 'relationship skills' is thus a central element in the increased professionalisation of open youth work counselling: self-awareness, professional case reviews, individual and team supervision as well as any further education need to be made possible in the organisation and youth workers need to be aware of these.

KNOWLEDGE

As the reference to 'shaping' a counselling process already hints, the most important requirement is an understanding of how a counselling process is framed, including, for example, knowledge of an assignment's context and scope, of available resources and of setting and defining goals. As already laid down as a basis in the pro-



Relationship skills

"are the ability to build solid relationships and shape them in a responsible manner."¹⁷ Empathy and a well-developed awareness of one's own sensitivities and orientation is a basic pre-requisite for ensuring that the practitioner's emotions and mood (or mood swings) don't have a negative impact on the counselling process. An awareness of changes and the development of hierarchical structures in the relationship is also important, e.g. not trivialising a young person's power to shape as they take on the role of a person in counselling, but rather to handle this responsibly.

fessional principles, knowledge of phase models for counselling processes is particularly helpful when it comes to developing a process. The 'relationship skills' described above require a level of knowledge around the concept of relationship competence, but also knowledge from related fields of study, particularly neuroscience-based approaches, which deal with the phenomenon of resonance in a deeper way.



SKILLS

Designing counselling processes calls in particular for the ability to develop and maintain a plan of action, implying the need to 'keep at it', to 'chase up' and to 'start again'. In open youth work, interactive skills are key in developing a solid working relationship. This goes hand in hand with the ability to play roles with regard to distance and closeness as well as to finding solutions around service, quality and finances (start/finish, exit, documentation). In line with this, a major competency required involves structuring counselling processes whilst also building in flexibility, thus ensuring a sympathetic atmosphere as the process unfolds.

"It's important to have a variety of colleagues, with whom the young people have relationships of differing quality. On top of that, ongoing communication and a broad view within the team are very important, thanks to its variety of skills and mix of specialist knowledge areas."

TAKE A TEAM APPROACH

"The other question is this: 'When has the moment come in which I myself no longer feel comfortable and need support?' I just need advice from peers so that I can ask: 'How can I do this well? Is there existing know-how for this issue? How do you usually proceed with something like this?'"

"We do discuss things that haven't gone particularly well in our team. Here it's important to be transparent to the young people about the fact that we do talk about such things as colleagues, and that strict confidentiality is in that sense limited."

A team approach means that after consultation with the young people, details are passed on within the team and processed according to what is realistically available or possible. Youth workers are often challenged in the counselling process: the acute crises and difficult life situations of some young people demand much of them emotionally.

Counselling based on proximity to the living environment often leads to expectations of 'omnicompetence' and the counsellor having their limits exceeded in terms of particular competencies. Isolating the issues and team debriefing are among the strategies for handling these demands in a professional



manner. Other things that contribute to better professional solutions include seeking advice from specialists within the organisation, reflecting on deeper causes and consultation within the team, supervision, practical exercises (e.g. role play) and coming together for further training.

Open youth work is targeting the 'four eyes principle' as the standard in counselling practice. Usually, one practitioner acts as the lead or main point of contact, while a second person from the team provides additional validation, further opinions and close-at-hand appraisals. Transparency within the team is a central factor in teamwork and this must also be communicated to young people. Adequate documentation ensures not only quality control but also facilitates smoother handovers in the case of practitioners being unavailable or similar issues. Ideally, documentation of the counselling processes should be done in a participatory manner, meaning it is carried out together with the young person involved. Best practice requires that the team not only ad-

resses challenges, problems and situations that are too demanding, but also celebrates successes. When transfers and referrals come about, an expansion of the team through system partnerships with external people can be the result.

KNOWLEDGE

In general, working in a team requires a basic knowledge of one's own organisation, its guidelines, mission statement and team culture. In addition to understanding teamwork techniques, a fundamental knowledge of data protection, reporting obligations and essential legal principles is needed. In the context of teamwork, an awareness of the personal gains and development that come from such collaboration is also important. Practitioners in open youth work need to have a good grasp of quality assurance and development tools, particularly those needed for self-evaluation, in order to foster a culture of learning from failure and continuous improvement. This fundamental element also allows for greater acknowledgement of the experience-based knowledge of the youth workers involved.

SKILLS

Above all, the ability to work as a team and engage in peer consultation using related methodological concepts (such as the GEBE method) is crucial. The goal here is to evaluate counselling processes and/or needs from multiple perspectives and subject them to a 'reality check'. In order to effectively harness the power of a team, a clear overview and consequent pooling of knowledge, skills and resources within the team are necessary. So too are transparency and openness. Seeking advice from colleagues not only requires an active culture of learning from mistakes but also an understanding of who in the team has what expertise and where the team's limitations may lie. Therefore, being able to co-produce within the bounds of existing system resources is one of a team's inherent requirements. In this sense too, transparency towards the young people is needed. And ideally, in cases where barriers emerge, the individuals should be

involved so that they play an active part in further planning. When it comes to this collaborative implementation of counselling practices, the ability to document concisely, briefly and clearly proves particularly important when it comes to handovers, substitutions or continued counselling.

Documentation

Documentation in open youth work usually takes the form of log books or daily reports. Minutes from team meetings are also kept. Beyond this, details regarding certain incidents or individuals are sometimes recorded. This is to enable continued professional development in the team, and is done on a case-by-case basis whilst observing data protection norms. Online databases are also available for statistical documentation.





“Following a referral, the young people often come forward voluntarily and share their progress – or that something didn’t work.”

ARRANGE REFERRALS

“We’ve just guided a number of young people who had emotional issues to deal with. I didn’t feel like any limits were being exceeded in my conversation with one young woman, because a youth centre in our network came to my mind immediately. A place where I knew she would be able to get support.”

“We include other organisations in open work where appropriate, so that barriers and fears can be removed and the young person can get to know the organisation.”

“It’s best to accompany them personally and remain in contact with the centre, to make certain that the young person is fully connected. If desired, we maintain contact with them going forward.”

Low-threshold access and openness, as well as addressing needs relating to young people’s living situations, require a broad range of professional competencies. Counselling in open youth work represents a cross-section of tasks and topics. Open youth work, and especially its counselling practices, serves as a bridge or interface between low-threshold and high-threshold options.

This means counselling requires institutional understanding and competencies in establishing contacts in order to assess processes, resources and what actually makes sense. Personal contacts are therefore often crucial in engaging young people. The inherent hierarchies within the network and the limited resources in the social and healthcare sectors create significant tension and dissatisfaction among professionals. They become frustrated when they cannot reach for the resources required, and when institutional services are not accessible to young people. This also leads to young people having a low level of ‘trust in the system’. Many have had negative experiences with expectations of conformity (such as in schools), and thus suffer from the consequences of institutional exclusion or discrimination.

Moreover, high-threshold organisations are often not aligned with the specific needs of young people, which is why there is sometimes a need for guidance and often ‘translation’ with the help of the open youth work discipline, even during a subsequent counselling process. The goal of open youth work in this context is to facilitate transitions and enable sustainable, resilient connections to institutional services. Depending on the needs and available options, this is achieved in three broad steps: information/referrals, guidance and involving external experts (to lower barriers). Regardless of the stage the process is at, it’s always

Embracing failure – “It’s okay to fail!”
 Mistakes happen in life and are part of the learning process. Positive learning experiences can be drawn from every mistake or failure. In the context of embracing failure, then, mistakes should thus be accepted and understood as fuel for further development



important to agree on it with the young people and actively involve them based on the participative principle (e.g. What form should the guidance take? Assistance, sidekick, spokesperson?).

KNOWLEDGE

As previously mentioned, institutional network knowledge and an understanding of synergies are particularly important in the context of arranging referrals.

In practice, making use of the best network resources available is something youth workers tend to do automatically when it comes to referrals. The aforementioned bridge or interface role also requires a fundamental understanding of how social work is organized locally, how the field of open youth work is politically integrated and the prevailing communication culture, especially when it comes to transfers.

There needs to be an understanding of possible effects, what can be expected of the individuals being spoken to or involved in co-production, how progress can be made

Participation

Wittwer¹⁸ defines the participation of children and young people as ‘the free, age-appropriate involvement of young people not only in decision-making processes but also in the discussion and shared planning prior to decision-making, as well as in the subsequent implementation and evaluation phase of all issues that affect them. This is done through institutional channels such as elections and voting, as well as non-institutional channels like online debates, associations, youth parliaments, demonstrations, etc.’ Therefore, open youth work practitioners must relinquish a significant portion of their contextual power in order to achieve an authentic, participatory and democratic mindset.

visible to all participants, and how the young people can be empowered in the process, so that they are able, for example, to articulate their needs when accessing higher-threshold services.

In addition, knowledge of the mission, guidelines and principles of one’s own organisation is needed, for example in order to maintain the boundaries between counselling practices and therapy.



SKILLS

Trust is a key word for the ‘arranging referrals’ element on many levels, whether it be a lack of ‘trust in the system’ among young people, trust among practitioner colleagues, or self-confidence. It is not surprising that what is required in practice is to push for relationship-building within the network and to live a culture of embracing mistakes. Mistakes have an important function in the cognitive process – and in environments where mistakes are accepted, individuals who make them also feel accepted.

This in turn implies dealing with failure by openly recognising gaps in knowledge and in the service landscape, as well as process-related uncertainties with regard to young people. And given the goal of a resource-efficient service, successes that can serve as a foundation for further progress are put under the spotlight.

Thus the ability to cooperate with other organisations, taking into account the aforementioned factors in such collaborations, is a necessity. Also needed is the ability to give an account of the process until a given point in time and provide a specialist assessment of the current status.



4 SYSTEMIC CONDITIONS

As with open youth work generally, there are specific background requirements for open youth work counselling. To guarantee the professionalism and quality of the counselling services, it is important to consider the legal, organisational, conceptual, staffing and also infrastructural basis. Determining these standards is not usually the responsibility of the youth workers themselves, but rather falls under the duties of the management, funding agencies and regional administrations.

The following selection of systemic conditions illustrates minimum requirements to be kept in mind and to guide action out in the field.

LEGAL BASIS

The legal basis underpinning open youth work counselling varies – or in some cases there is none at all. This is evident not only when comparing Germany and Austria but also within federal states, as each has its own administrative structures and, ultimately, ways of doing things. The way these are defined often affects the way funding is respectively structured and the extent to which counselling practices are implemented in the field. Consequently, counselling in open youth work often operates in a legal grey area and is primarily a negotiated understanding at the level of the respective organisations and actively involved parties.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

It is important to develop a shared understanding of counselling within the organisation. As with other services provided in open youth work, putting counselling practices into action should be a goal inherent in the mission. There needs to be a clear commitment within the team and appropriate external communication towards other players in the system as well as funding agencies. Professional documentation is essential in this regard. If an organisation considers counselling an integral part of its range of services, it must also ensure the necessary working conditions are in place.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Particularly when it comes to quality assurance and development, it is necessary to implement appropriate tools or, if they already exist, reinforce and promote them. Team supervision, or individual supervision when needed, as well as the opportunity to participate in further training, should be standard practice. Self-reflection and team reflection, in the spirit of peer support under a team approach,

should be facilitated by a culture, expressly supported by the organisation, that supports feedback and learning from mistakes. Only then can all the potential in the team, its expertise, and the experience of its practitioners be effectively harnessed as they should. This also entails a duty of care towards the employees, including guidance in their practical approaches, protective measures, incentive structures and documentation systems.

INDIVIDUAL ASPECTS

As with other services in open youth work, appropriate education in the field of social work is required in order to provide counselling. Multi-skilled teams are ideal for counselling in this particular field. There is no expectation for individuals to be ‘jacks-of-all-trades’, but rather to utilise the resources within the team. A diverse, interdisciplinary team ultimately allows for more flexibility and tailor-made approaches. The effectiveness of team collaboration is often influenced by the working conditions created by the organisation, such as employment terms, compensation and hierarchies within the team. The interest practitioners



take in using open youth work methods in the field is heavily influenced by these working conditions and, ultimately, capacity in terms of cases handled.

INFRASTRUCTURE: TIME AND PLACE

Finding a setting is closely tied to the time and spatial resources available. Time availability and an associated flexibility are essential for addressing and responding to counselling needs and/or concerns that are often spontaneously enunciated. Related to this are the opening hours of open youth work centres, which can limit flexibility in terms of the form counselling processes can take.

The space aspect, including the location, transport connections, layout and accessibility of centres for young people with disabilities, is also of great importance. Whether the available premises provide spaces for retreat and/or open settings makes a difference for practitioners in their daily work. Additionally, the architectural and aesthetic design of the spac-

es and locations should be taken into account, considering in particular the impact of atmosphere on counselling processes, a factor which is often overlooked due to its perceived triviality. Last but not least, the available resources are usually linked to the number of cases and the funding situation, which ultimately leads to a clear need for systemic conditions that recognise and consider counselling as an integral part of open youth work alongside the discipline's established services.

There is no doubt that counselling is part of the diverse range of services in open youth work. Just like other services, counselling practices must be defined, framed and further developed to guarantee youth work of exceptional quality.



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- ⁷ cf. bOJA 2021, p. 52-58.
- ⁸ cf. Hiltrud von Spiegel 2021, p. 84ff.
- ⁹ Hiltrud von Spiegel 2021, p. 100
- ¹⁰ cf. Hiltrud von Spiegel 2021, p. 99
- ¹¹ Thiersch, Grunwald und Königter (2012, p. 189).
- ¹² cf. Hiltrud von Spiegel 2021, p. 99
- ¹³ Spiegel 2021, p. 96 and 127.
- ¹⁴ cf. Hiltrud von Spiegel 2021, p. 89 and 99
- ¹⁵ cf. Juvivo 2019, p. 16f.
- ¹⁶ Stolla 2017
- ¹⁷ Achim Schrödter 2021, p. 1159
- ¹⁸ Wittwer 2015, p. 8



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ABOUT THE PROJECT: COUNSELLING IN OPEN YOUTH WORK – ANALYSIS & FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

As part of a two-and-a-half-year project, existing counselling practices in open youth work in Austria and Germany were analysed. Criteria for quality were identified, and necessary systemic conditions for open youth work practitioners were defined. The results were discussed and contextualised in various formats for sharing, both with experts from the discipline and with research and academic partners from an extended collaboration network. The findings of the project have culminated in this guide.

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS:

- boJA – bundesweites Netzwerk Offene Jugendarbeit
- AGJF - Arbeitsgemeinschaft Jugendfreizeitstätten Baden-Württemberg e. V.
- FH Campus Wien, Kompetenzzentrum für Soziale Arbeit

Project timeframe: 1.2.2021 to 31.7.2023

FINANCING:

Erasmus+/KA2 - Collaboration to promote innovation and share best practice/strategic youth partnership.

GOALS:

The main objective was the further development and professionalisation of open youth work, specifically with regard to low-threshold counselling approaches in the context of open youth work.

- Understanding counselling practices in open youth work
- Developing innovative counselling methods in open youth work
- Developing a (new) understanding of open youth work counselling and thus a (new) place for it in the broader field of social work
- Developing the professional profiles of open youth work practitioners

METHODS APPLIED:

- Analysis of existing methods through participant observation, focus groups, written surveys and one-on-one interviews with open youth work practitioners as well as partners in the broader system
- Accompanying social research in selected open youth work organisations – both 'mobile' and fixed-location
- Analysis of qualitative self-observation by selected open youth work practitioners
- Discussion and sharing with practitioners, researchers and educators active in the open youth work discipline

