YOUTH IN ACTION:
EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE
FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

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Synopsis

THE FOCUS OF THE YOUTH AND THE LAW PROJECT (YALP) AT Campbelltown, New South Wales is crime prevention—a social approach of working proactively with young people to increase their self-esteem, reduce anti-social behaviour and help them carry out community improvement projects.

Over its seven years of operation, YALP has evolved methodologies which can empower young people of all backgrounds to initiate change in their community, and in that process, acquire skills which increase self-esteem and equip them for an active and positive contribution to the community. YALP's fundamental message, from experience, is that young people do have good ideas, and given the chance and some support, they are able to plan and implement their own projects for change.

As Australia begins the 1990s in serious economic recession, communities everywhere face a growing pool of underemployed/unemployable young people, and look for crime prevention strategies to counter the risk of youth alienation, marginalisation and communal violence.

The objective of Youth Action is to establish a wide-based community movement which encourages the positive involvement of young people in solving issues which affect them—treating young people as resources, not as problems. Youth Action will be supported by a YALP resource group offering community leaders, youth workers and young people experiential training in YALP methods of empowerment.

This paper describes YALP's approach to crime prevention; the history and methodology of the Project from 1985 to 1992; summarises the lessons learned; and proposes a wider application of the methodology as a youth-participation crime prevention strategy which could be implemented in many communities interested in addressing youth alienation.
Youth and the Law Project's Approach to Crime Prevention

The Project's approach to crime prevention is to use social strategies. As a social strategy in crime prevention, YALP's methodology for involving young people starts with the assumption that young people can take responsible decisions and actions, given the opportunity and climate to learn the necessary skills. Further, the motivation to learn and acquire useful living skills can be stimulated by encouraging self-direction and responsibility for control of the action projects which are generated.

YALP's approach is supported by comments made in a recent paper, "Rethinking social policy for young people and crime prevention" (Coventry et al. 1992, p. ii). The paper says, in part:

Emerging from the political rhetoric is the term "crime prevention" which is clearly problematic. It further accentuates inadequate notions of crime and reinforces the view that it is the justice system that must take primary responsibility for all troubling and troublesome behaviour. It further attributes a negative label to these young people subject to interventionist policies, and subsequently fails to focus on the positive and constructive potential of Australia's youth.

The term "social development" is open to a wider variety of interventionist strategies and should encourage greater participation from all sections of the community in recognising and addressing the problem of youth neglect, alienation, marginalisation and structural disadvantage. Structural disadvantage is a product of unemployment, poverty, racism, sexual inequality and marginalisation through limited access to social resources . . .

Collective community ownership of social development/youth integration policies is vital to the effectiveness of any initiative.

YALP's philosophy stands in direct contrast to that of many youth-serving agencies, where adults (including youth workers) have traditionally seen their role as discovering what the young people's problem are (albeit by consultation) and then (as adults) determining solutions or providing services, on the young people's behalf. YALP's central idea that young people can be given control of the project—that the process starts "where the young people are at" and remains young people centred at all times—can itself be both difficult to understand and quite threatening to the adult-ordered organisational culture of youth-serving agencies.

Overview of YALP

History and methodology

The Youth and the Law Project is a proactive crime prevention project based in the Macarthur region (35 km south west of Sydney). Its unique approach is to work with young people (aged 14-24 years) in the region to design and implement their own programs for change.
YALP is funded by the Law Foundation of NSW, which initiated the project in 1985. In 1984, the Foundation had commissioned Professor Duncan Chappell to study the high rate of youth crime in the area. His report, *Growing up in the Macarthur Region*, recommended a project which addressed youth crime by actively involving young people in solving the problems which affected them. Youth Forum, an innovative youth organisation which had extensive experience in conducting forums with action-outcomes for young people in NSW, was employed to manage the project.

YALP's objectives are to reduce crime and enable local young people to have a positive influence on their community through:

- giving them opportunities to identify and discuss issues which concern them;
- encouraging a positive and active approach to solving their problems and creating change; and
- resourcing them with skills and facilities to support their action.

YALP's philosophy of working with young people is based on facilitating action, not directing it. Young people control the projects and activities in which they are involved. Young people are the decision-makers, the workers and action-researchers in YALP project groups. The Project Officer acts as facilitator and support adult to the group.

In all its activities, YALP puts high priority on both the personal development and the skills acquisition of young people. YALP's strategy is to:

- firstly, engage interest in taking up issues which are important to young people—usually by holding a workshop or similar event to attract participants and distil issues;
- secondly, form project groups of young people interested in solving a particular problem they have identified, where experiential learning builds self-esteem and confidence in applying new skills.

Project groups meet regularly to work on realistic, achievable projects. They are supported by an adult adviser who acts as facilitator and resource decision-maker. The content of the decision-making and the direction taken by the group is strictly the responsibility of the young people. Project group numbers frequently increase over the term of the project, as members encourage friends to join in, but a typical group size is six to ten members and a project's life is typically six to twelve months. The support adult introduces appropriate skill development activities as the needs arise (for example telephone and interviewing skills before approaching the Mayor's office for information). The support adult also plays a vital role in consolidating the learning experiences of the group, which are directly related to the tangible objectives of the project.

The project group follows a seven-step problem solving process to achieve its goal:
• identify aims;
• collect information;
• consult other young people and adults;
• isolate key concerns;
• develop a strategy;
• implement strategy;
• evaluate and debrief.

Since its commencement in 1985, YALP has stimulated over forty project groups in Macarthur and other regions of NSW, through its own project and through joint projects with youth serving organisations such as the Sydney City Mission and the Police Citizen Youth Clubs. Amongst other things, these project groups have:

- produced books and kits for young people to use relating to the law and legal process; child abuse; health and drug abuse;
- organised two large multicultural festivals which embraced games, stalls, cultural performances—and a supportive local community;
- improved relationships between police and young people through community public relations and a "Say G'day to a Cop" campaign;
- established suitable venues for young people's entertainment such as: skateboarding facilities; an after-hours under-18 night club; and one-off events such as dance-parties and band concerts.

Some projects have been great successes, bringing large numbers of young people and adults together to celebrate their community, attracting publicity and media interest. Other projects have been less remarkable, but achieved their objectives nonetheless. Some have been outright failures. But all projects have provided experiential learning, and two consistent outcomes:

- The community and young people in particular, benefit directly from the projects which are developed as solutions to real problems; and
- The participating young people acquire personal skills and self-confidence, through their experiences as members of the project group, which open up further opportunities in all spheres of their life, equipping them for a positive contribution to the community.
Applications

The Forum years 1985-89

For the first four to five years in Campbelltown, YALP ran annual Community Youth Forums involving 120 or so young people from the sixteen high schools (public and private) in the region plus members of youth groups (drop-in-centres). The forum was residential over three days, which gave adequate time for the ideas discussed and the processes of the forum to be absorbed by participants who may have come with little prior commitment. Participants' reaction sheets and the observations of teachers and youth workers bore testimony to the powerful "awakening and motivation" achieved in the course of a few days (in many cases—the antithesis of at-school behaviour). The forum event provided a "special something" shared across the normal divisions of school, suburb and their socioeconomic associations, a "glue" which often held through the life of a project group.

YALP was not very successful in attracting participants from the out-of-school ranks, largely because these young people were less able to commit themselves to a three-day program in advance. Nonetheless, some such groups which did attend, from a Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS) and from Odyssey House (drug rehabilitation), were able to join in and valued the experience of the forum, clearly demonstrating the applicability of the process.

The forum model required young group leaders to run the Forum with about twelve group leaders for 120 participants. These group leaders were elected from the participants at one Forum and trained in group-leader skills by YALP staff and a voluntary adult advisory group, over six months of the following year.

This group leader training gave some participants extra skills and confidence, which led to further training opportunities and more skills. Ex-group leaders have become project officers with YALP. Another result of the group leader training was the complex role-model provided for young participants who could see their peers doing interesting things and were motivated to emulate them or at least "to have a go".

The Community Youth Forums produced a variety of project groups (6+ each forum) which by the end of the forum were highly motivated and able to start as a group which had already "come together". YALP as a new organisation in the local youth field was still viewed with some suspicion and not well integrated.

During this period, a number of successful one-day workshops were held between forums to address specific current issues such as vandalism, drugs and issues for students of non-English speaking background (NESB). These led to the formation of additional project groups.

The Evaluation and YALP Access—1990-92

In November 1989, the Law Foundation commissioned a comprehensive and independent evaluation of YALP which positively reinforced the value of its process and recommended that the YALP methods be disseminated to other youth organisations. The adoption of the one-day workshop model was also
recommended as the starting point, rather than the Forum, because of the relative cost effectiveness of one-day workshops.

Taking up recommendations of the evaluation, YALP undertook a three-year dissemination strategy under the title of "YALP Access" which had three main thrusts.

- To carry out joint projects with large youth-serving organisations where YALP was in a "consulting role" and the joint project partner contributed to YALP costs. The YMCA, Sydney City Mission (SCM) and Police Citizen Youth Clubs (PCYC) were approached and resulted in a small local joint project run with the Campbelltown SCM; and a pilot program in three PCYCs.

While the YALP methods were clearly applicable to the PCYCs and worked well with (at risk) patrons of two inner city clubs, the organisation values and structures were threatened by the idea of yielding project control to the young people. The SCM project was also successful at the local level and met a challenge that YALP methods might not apply to young people out of the school system and not yet in employment. The trial project, however, was not designed to be taken up through the organisation as a whole.

As a dissemination strategy, joint projects did not work, mainly because the established agencies and their youth workers were reluctant to accept fully the YALP philosophy of young people having control of projects of their own making. This experience was reinforced by joint working relationships with youth workers in other fields.

- To promote and publicise YALP, particularly at the local level—to make it more widely known and accepted in the community. YALP produced a glossy brochure; gave talks at Rotary, Lions and Apex Clubs and so on; took more opportunities to join local and state-wide youth worker networks; gave presentations at conferences; and generally became more aware of promotion opportunities. The Law Foundation produced a documentary video on the Project as part of a series publicising Foundation initiatives.

- Having to explain YALP in so many different settings consolidated YALP's own understanding of its processes and improved the application of its methods. In conjunction with the PCYC pilot program, draft instruction manuals were developed for training workers. These have been substantially improved to form the basis of the recently published YALP Book (1992).

This strategy was eminently successful and has led to far more enquiries of YALP and requests to work with other local services. Together with the development of local projects (the third strategy element), YALP has become recognised and accepted amongst the local youth networks as
having special skills to offer, particularly in regard to young people's participation.

- To develop locally based projects so as to widen local impact and serve a more representative sample of youth needs, using workshop days rather than Community Youth Forums as the stimulus. A number of YALP initiated workshops were held with local projects groups emerging, but, in addition, YALP received requests to design programs for other groups: for example young offenders under the supervision of the NSW Government Young Offenders Support Team (YOST), Odyssey House drug rehabilitation clients, Marrickville youth workers with a mixed clientele. Another major local project was undertaken with funding from a National Youth Initiatives Grant for Juvenile Crime Prevention by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training. YALP worked with young people of non-English speaking background (NESB) in a project called "Listen without prejudice", the outcomes of which were documented in a book published at the conclusion of the project (The YALP Book, August 1992). Being a Campbelltown-based project, it has further established YALP's presence in the field and opened up recognition among migrant communities.

The result of these three YALP Access strategies has been to strengthen YALP operating practices, with a widening of experience in diverse settings and groups of young people variously positioned along spectrums such as "at-risk" and "not-at-risk" and "high-literacy" and "low-literacy". YALP workshop programs have retained the same core ingredients, but have been varied to suit the differing groups and starting points. YALP has further consolidated its understanding of its successful practice and is now recognised as offering something unique amongst current youth work models.

It is from this background that YALP proposes a wide-based youth participation crime prevention strategy which any and every community can take up, called "Youth Action".

**YALP Learnings**

From the YALP Access dissemination phase, YALP has consolidated the following lessons:

- YALP's process works for all kinds of young people and the fundamentals are empowering.

- Adults are disinclined to give young people real power and control over projects. Adults tend to want to fix the problem, rather than allow the young people the chance to try—and maybe even to fail—but certainly to learn.

- The level of commitment to the work of a project group seems to be influenced by the level of interest generated at the start-up event (be it
workshop, forum or other activity), and this in turn is limited by the feeling of group cohesion before or during that event.

- The design of the "workshop" event should be flexible and take account of a group's relative cohesion, literacy skills, background and particular interests.

- Young people, in terms of their involvement with YALP, tend to move through four stages, and processes need to be kept appropriate at all times:
  - **apathy**—feeling impotent to bring about change in an adult-dominated world;
  - **interest**—awareness of one's own views as being OK to share, and hearing others' views;
  - **ideas**—involvement in generating ideas for change; recognising the possibility of a solution;
  - **action**—commitment to a goal and a project group; the rewards from challenge and success, even if small at first.

- Starting points in the process will differ with the participants and their readiness for progression to the next stage. Residential workshops (Forums) give rich, concentrated time. Equivalent day workshops can be spread over calendar time.

- The adult-support role is difficult to fill. Adults must avoid the temptation to take over the decision-making of the young people, rather than taking up their cause.

- Handing over power to the group may be threatening to an adult and can be perceived as an invalidation of that person, especially where self-esteem is not strong.

- The motivation and faith to pursue a young-person-centred approach must come from within the person's own experience, not be imposed.

- Experiential training is the most (possibly only) effective means of learning the support adult role and acquiring the skills.

- Time is an essential ingredient in the processes of change, both at a personal and an organisational level. Change must be allowed at the participant's own pace.
Youth Action—The Concept: wide-based youth-participation crime prevention strategy

YALP proposes that its experience and methods form the basis of a juvenile crime prevention strategy called Youth Action, in all communities.

Youth Action is a community-based active citizenship program which promotes learning through responsible action. Youth Action seeks to encourage young people to form small working groups in their local area (suburb, school, youth group, church or other group), to identify issues which concern them and to take positive action for improvement with the support of the adult community.

Youth Action will be a movement, rather than an organisation. It will provide a working model on which communities can establish their own action groups of young people wherever and whenever a need arises.

Youth Action has a fundamental belief in the capacity and motivation of all young people, from whatever background, to contribute positively to the community in which they live, given the opportunity, appropriate skills and support. It offers a complement and an alternative to the skills development practised in schools, and a special chance to those who do not "achieve" in the traditional education system, or who may have left school and face long-term unemployment and the risk of adopting patterns of anti-social behaviour. Youth Action draws on seven years of action research on crime prevention by YALP at
Campbelltown and more than twelve years working with young people through Youth Forum.

Youth Action's method is uniquely researched and designed in Australia. Through their experience of working together to solve mutually agreed needs, young people learn vital skills which they continue to use for community and personal benefit, for example problem solving; communications; planning; working in teams; speaking in public; relating effectively to adult decision-making processes. In so doing, young people develop the skills, self-esteem and confidence which make them valued to their community.

The Role of Youth Action

Youth Action will be supported by a YALP resource group which will promote its methods of working through the production of well researched, effective training materials and experiential-learning workshops, made available to all who wish to learn: teachers, youth workers, community workers, adults-in-support of action groups, and young people wanting to train as group leaders. Youth Action will use existing bodies and networks to promote youth-inspired community work.

The YALP resource group will have three main functions:

**Training**

- Experiential training for interested community members to learn the approach and set up their own action groups of young people.

- Training materials and in-the-field guidance to assist communities in the wider establishment of Youth Action groups, including a Youth Action resource book, videos and model programs as starting points for new groups, with hints on approaching the local community, businesses and Council for funding support of projects.

- Training of young people as group leaders to help the spread of action groups.

**Publicity**

- Publicising the development and growth of Youth Action programs and their achievements—newsletters written by young people about their projects and learning—and other promotional materials.

- Public relations campaigns to launch Youth Action statewide and targeting specific groups such as youth work training bodies (TAFE & UWS etc), schools, church youth groups, P & C groups, Councils.

**Research**

- Youth Action will continue action research into better ways of working with young people to achieve community change through locally organised workshops and larger regional forums, as appropriate. It will address the special needs of disadvantaged groups (such as young
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offenders, NESB youth, long-term unemployed youth) and promulgate findings through the training medium.

Youth Action—Implementation Strategy

On the ground

Youth Action programs should require little structure beyond having:

- a group of young people with "a need to address";
- an adult person in support (facilitator) role;
- a place to meet;
- a link to Youth Action's YALP-based resource group for training and support as required.

It will be fundamental, however, that the resource group respond only to requests from communities which have expressed a clear "want" to take on the program; that is people who know they have a need!

A suitable starting point would be a "training forum" (workshop) to which interested community participants would be invited, for example, groups from up to six communities.

The training forum would provide both separate and joint skills development for young people and adults (equal numbers) who make up the community groups. The young people would be training as group leaders; the adults training as support-adults facilitating a project group of young people.

All participants would plan the start-up program for their own community, together. This would be supported as necessary by the YALP resource group. Within two to three months of the training forum, community groups would run their own start-up event (for example workshop) and two to four project groups would begin their work. The YALP resource group would continue its support, as needed, with a clear strategy of making the community group self-sufficient.

Once the community group felt sufficiently confident, six to twelve months after its program was established, it would initiate a training forum for other community groups in the region. This would disseminate the model more rapidly through the community and build support networks at the same time.

The training materials produced by the YALP resource group to support these activities would be developed to fit the National Youth Sector Training Curriculum currently being developed by the Australian Federation of Youth Sector Training Councils.
The next steps in putting Youth Action into practice are:

- To gain expressions of community support and interest, in NSW where YALP is based and also in other States;
- To develop an operating budget for approximately five years, and seek (with the Law Foundation of NSW) suitable partners to support the YALP resource group.

It is anticipated that local communities which adopt Youth Action will find their own funding sources. These demands are expected to be modest.

References
