



Finding Relevant Research in Youth Studies: Case Study on Christian Faith-Based Youth Work

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Finding Relevant Research in Youth Studies: Case Study on Christian Faith-Based Youth Work

Abstract

As youth work develops as an academic discipline, identifying relevant research publications becomes important. This paper describes the method and results of an exercise to identify published research on Christian faith-based youth work. A search structure of terminology for (youth work) AND (Christian faith) was created and applied to five bibliographic databases, complemented by citation searching and colleague recommendations. Eight research articles were identified. Scopus proved to have the greatest sensitivity (ability to retrieve relevant articles) followed by ProQuest and Web of Science. Web of Science had the greatest precision (ability to avoid retrieving irrelevant articles) followed by Scopus and then ProQuest. JSTOR database retrieved one relevant article (retrieved on Web of Science anyway) and PsycINFO none. For this topic Scopus, Web of Science and ProQuest proved the most effective databases. For researchers and academics in youth studies, this paper provides a resource on methodology and published papers.

Keywords

Bibliographic databases; Christian faith; faith-based youth work; literature reviewing; youth studies; youth work.

Introduction

As youth work develops, particularly as part of government policies to improve the lives of young people (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007), so too does the academic enterprise to underpin such initiatives becomes important. Hence, for example, the National Youth Agency, the national organisation for youth work in England (2020), has developed a *Youth Work Academy*. This is designed to foster collaborative learning opportunities, and the development of academic departments at universities and colleges devoted to youth studies.

The knowledge base for teaching and training on youth work comes from a variety of research and theoretical sources. As research in the field develops, youth work is now reaching the stage where more systematic approaches are required to retrieve published papers relevant to teaching some topics. Also, as research projects on youth work develop and governments seek 'evidence-based' initiatives, knowledge and skills in literature reviewing are becoming increasingly important. Whilst a range of literature exists on youth work, knowing how to identify relevant research is not easy. Literature reviews on topics within youth work are beginning to be published (Smith & Walsh, 2019) as a way to synthesise knowledge effectively.

As academia enters the 'digital age', systematic approaches to literature reviewing are developing with increasingly rigorous and effective methods for identifying, appraising, and synthesising literature relating to a specific topic or question. The review process is treated as a scientific process in its own right that is methodical, explicit, replicable and challengeable (Fink, 2010; Mulrow, 1994; Petticrew & Roberts,

2006; [6]). Creating a rigorous approach to database searching to identify relevant studies is the first step in creating rigorous reviews of literature.

With the steady increase in the number and types of journals, there are challenges in identifying relevant publications. A trigger for seeking to develop robust methods for identifying research in published papers is the creation and development of bibliographic databases. Bibliographic databases extract the abstracts (summaries) and publishing details of articles from journals, and present them in a structure which makes it more straightforward to search and find articles of interest. The challenge in this environment becomes one of designing a search that most effectively retrieves relevant abstracts (sensitivity) and avoids retrieving irrelevant abstracts (precision). This study explores and develops a rigorous yet feasible methodology for retrieving published articles on youth work using a systematic approach to searching bibliographic databases. Christian faith-based youth work was used as a case study topic for this purpose. To make this manageable and useful, the focus of this methodological exercise was restricted to research articles on the topic.

Christian faith-based youth work is a well-established part of the tradition and heritage of youth work, arguably making significant contributions both to the origin and development of youth work practice. In a recent study of young adults, most referred to some presence of religion in their lives (Madge & Hemming, 2017). In recent years a number of articles have been published on faith-based youth work: with young Buddhists (Lam, 2018), Jews (Michael et al., 2018) and Muslims (Thompson & Pihlaja, 2018). For the purposes of this paper 'faith-based youth work' is understood as a specialism within broader youth work practice. The purpose of youth work is to 'enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential.' (National Occupational Standards, 2020: 7). Within this article, the term 'youth work' is used to refer to the (increasingly professionalised) practice in the field; the term 'youth studies' is used to refer to the major academic discipline underpinning courses in youth work. It is recognised that the term 'youth ministry' is used in some contexts, and also that the definitions of this term and the term 'Christian youth work' are not always consistent. In this exercise the authors have had to embrace a variety of terminology used by authors so as to retrieve relevant studies as explained in the Methods section. In this paper, for simplicity, we have generally used the terms 'youth work' and 'Christian youth work'.

Methods

Five bibliographic databases were identified, the final selection being based on consultations with a subject librarian at Ulster University and learning from approaches in related fields (Best et al., 2014; Mc Elhinney et al., 2016; McFadden et al., 2012; McGinn et al., 2016). Given the size of these databases, it is apparent that effective and efficient search methods are required to retrieve material on a specific topic (Bates et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2018).

- *JSTOR*, provides access to about 12 million academic articles from 2,000 journals across 75 disciplines (jstor.org).
- *ProQuest Complete Collection*, is a large, multidisciplinary, full-text bibliographic database estimated to contain 90,000 sources (ProQuest.com).

- *PsycINFO* is a bibliographic database of abstracts in the field of psychology containing over 3.5 million records from more than 2,500 peer reviewed journals (apa.org).

- *SCOPUS* is a large database of abstracts from about 23,000 peer-reviewed journals in the fields of science, technology, medicine, social sciences, arts and humanities (scopus.com).

- *Social Science Citation Index* and *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* are part of *Web of Science*, with abstracts from about 12,000 journals (webofknowledge.com).

For the design of search formulae, the use of 'concept groups' that is to say, groupings of terms pertaining to a particular concept, is recommended (Stevenson et al., 2016). Boolean operators are used to connect concepts as a way of understanding how databases work. The operator OR is used for synonyms within concepts (i.e., the searcher does not mind which of these terms is retrieved), and the operator AND is used to join the concepts (i.e. the search requires at least one element from each concept to be included for the abstract to be relevant). The use of Boolean operators within the search creates relationships between concepts for the purpose of establishing search parameters.

The first task was to identify the concepts that were essential to be included in an abstract (or in the indexing of an abstract) for it to be relevant. Two concept groups were used to frame the search in order to embrace the range of material to be drawn on which might be linked to the study focus. The defining concept groups were based on appraisal of known literature and scoping during preliminary searches on the databases.

In order to capture the essence of the topic, two concepts were identified: (youth work) and (faith-based) in discussion with a specialist librarian. It was then necessary to identify alternative terms (synonyms and other related phrases) for each of these concepts. This part requires a consideration of the variant terminology that might be used by authors in different parts of the world, and over the years when they might have published. Youth ministry is a term which is used particularly in the United States and Australian contexts instead of 'faith-based' or 'Christian' youth work as is more common in the UK. Hence it was necessary to include these variations to capture the focus of this study. In the approach to searching, terms are used synonymously in order to be as broad and as inclusive as possible. Thus, the search included terms such as 'youth ministry' and terms related to individual Church denominations as well as 'faith-based' and 'youth work'. Searches using the following search formula were carried out on 3rd October 2019:

- ("Youth Work" OR "Youth Worker" OR "Youth Workers" OR "Youth Ministry" OR "Youth Ministries")
- AND
- (Christian* OR Christianity OR "Faith Based" OR Faith-Based OR Anglican OR Catholic* OR Methodis* OR Protestant* OR Quaker* OR Presbyterian*).

Thus, a general search structure was created which was then adjusted to suit each database. The databases above varied in terms of search functions and the majority provided the option of using Boolean operators (AND, OR and brackets) to help broaden or narrow the search. The 'advanced search' option was used, where available, to increase the precision of the search. Where filters were available on the database, these were used.

The searching of bibliographic databases was complemented by seeing whether any of the citations within retrieved relevant studies were themselves relevant (citation searching). Any papers known to the study team were included also.

The articles retrieved were assessed to evaluate whether they were eligible to be included using pre-defined inclusion criteria:

1. full text available in English;
2. focus on faith-based youth work (by whatever terminology);
3. published in a peer-reviewed journal; and
4. report of original research.

The databases searched were evaluated in relation to both their search sensitivity and search precision. The sensitivity of a search indicates its effectiveness in finding a high proportion of the total number of publications relating to the research question (Taylor et al., 2015). This is measured by dividing the number of relevant articles identified on a particular database by the total number of relevant articles. Sensitivity can also be understood as the 'completeness' of a database in terms of potentially relevant articles. 'A high level of sensitivity is required to ensure as few potentially-relevant records as possible are missed' (Wright et al., 2014, p4). The precision of a search indicates its effectiveness in avoiding retrieving irrelevant publications (Taylor et al., 2015). If a search is created that retrieves thousands of hits, it may be sensitive in that many relevant studies are included within these. However, much work would be required to sift through the retrieved hits to find these! In order to calculate search sensitivity and search precision, the following formulae were employed:

➤ *Sensitivity %* = no: of included articles from one database / total no: of included results across all databases X 100;

➤ *Precision %* = no: of potentially relevant results in one database / total no: of included results for that database X100.

Another interesting metric by which to evaluate bibliographic databases is to see how many articles were retrieved on each database that were not retrieved on any other. This gives an indication as to whether any database might be regarded as 'redundant' for the search on our topic, if all articles that it retrieved were also retrieved by another database anyway. This is termed: *unique articles retrieved*.

Following database searching, communication was attempted with the corresponding author of included studies in order to find out about any other potentially relevant sources not yet uncovered. In addition, the references within included studies were searched to see if any of these were themselves eligible for inclusion. Although the database search formulae were developed so as to be as sensitive and precise as possible, inevitably many irrelevant studies were also retrieved. Final selection against the criteria was carried out by the authors, two acting independently and then meeting with a third author to discuss those where there were disagreements.

Findings

Two thousand and seventy 'hits' were retrieved from the database searches, recommendations from colleagues and citation searching (see Table 2). This includes duplicates retrieved from more than one database.

The articles retrieved from the database searching, citation searching and colleague recommendations were filtered using the first two criteria. This created a preliminary list that excluded articles that were not close enough to the topic or were not available in English (see Table 1). The excluded pieces at this stage were picked up in the initial search due to the words being picked up in things like reference lists and key words which were not an accurate reflection of the piece and where the database sensitivity or precision may have produced pieces deemed not relevant to

this study. Following this 'initial screening' phase, the articles were reviewed to apply the final two criteria of being research and published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Table 1: Preliminary List of Relevant Articles by Topic

Author	Full text in English	Faith-based youth work	In peer-reviewed Journal	Research	Final Decision In/Out	Study Design
Aziz (2019)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Baker (2007)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Bixler (2017)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Blier & Stanton (2018)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Brierley (2006)	In	In	Out	In	Out	Survey
Canales (2006)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Canales (2009)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Canales (2014)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Christian (2012)	In	In	Out	Out	Out	n/a
Clayton & Stanton (2008)*	In	In	In	In	In	Qual
Clyne (2015)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Collins et al. (2010)	In	In	Out	In	Out	Survey
Daughtry (2012)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
De Kock (2015)*	In	In	In	In	In	Case study
Gallagher (2007)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Goreham (2004)*	In	In	In	In	In	Survey
Green (2008)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Guru (2014)	In	In	Out	Out	Out	Book review
Hart (2015)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Hill (2018)	In	In	Out	In	Out	Mixed Methods
Lanker (2007)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a
Nash et al (2007)*	In	In	In	In	In	Qual
Pimlott (2013)	In	In	Out	In	Out	Mixed Methods
Sonnenberg et al. (2016)	In	In	In	Out	Out	n/a

Stanton (2012)*	In	In	In	In	In	Qual
Thompson (2013)	In	In	Out	In	Out	Qual
Thompson & Smith (2015)	In	In	Out	Out	Out	n/a
Thompson (2018)	In	In	Out	In	Out	Qual
Thompson & Ballantyne (2017)*	In	In	In	In	In	Qual
Van Dijk Groeneboer (2015)*	In	In	In	In	In	Qual
Webber et al. (2010)*	In	In	In	In	In	Qual

*These items asterisked are the final included studies

Each database was evaluated based on (1) its ability to identify relevant articles (sensitivity) and (2) its ability to limit the number of irrelevant articles retrieved (precision) (McFadden et al., 2012). A summary of the search results after applying all four selection criteria is illustrated in Table 2. As outlined in the methods section, the usefulness of the databases was evaluated using metrics of sensitivity and precision.

Scopus had the highest sensitivity (63%), retrieving the most (five) of the eight relevant studies. This was followed closely in terms of sensitivity by ProQuest and Web of Science which retrieved four studies each (50% sensitivity). JSTOR retrieved just one relevant article, and PsycINFO none.

In terms of avoiding retrieving irrelevant articles, Web of Science was the best (precision 9%), requiring sifting through only 43 papers to find the four relevant ones. Scopus was about half as good (precision 5%; sifting 104 papers to find five), and ProQuest about half as good again (precision 2%, sifting 185 papers to find four). JSTOR had 1% precision, requiring sifting through 1700 articles to find a relevant one. As noted above, this one relevant article was also retrieved on Web of Science which performed better on precision as well as on sensitivity.

As can be seen in Table 3, the article retrieved on JSTOR was also retrieved on Web of Science, making JSTOR redundant for this search topic by comparison with Web of Science which performed better on both sensitivity and precision. In other words, the same eight articles could have been retrieved by searching SCOPUS, ProQuest and Web of Science without using JSTOR or PsycINFO. Although Web of Science was a reasonably good database to use on this topic, it did not retrieve any unique studies. However, one of these was retrieved on JSTOR and not on SCOPUS or ProQuest, so omitting Web of Science as well as JSTOR would have reduced the number of relevant from eight to seven.

Table 2: Summary Table of Hits and Included Studies

Database	Potentially relevant articles ('hits')	Included articles	Sensitivity (%)	Precision (%)
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JSTOR*	1660	1	12.5	0.06
ProQuest*	185	4	50	2.16
PsycINFO*	10	0	0	0
SCOPUS*	104	5	62.5	4.8
Web of Science*	43	4	50	9.3
Recommended Sources	21	0	0	0
Citation Search*	47	0	0	0
Total:	2070	8***	n/a	n/a

*Numbers include duplicates retrieved on more than one database

** From trawl of references within included studies

*** Number excludes duplicates

The eight included studies are shown in Table 3, together with the database(s) on which the article was retrieved. No relevant articles were retrieved from the citation searching or recommendations by colleagues.

Table 3: Included Articles

Author	Included Article	Database
Clayton & Stanton (2008)	The changing world's view of Christian youth work. <i>Youth & Policy</i> , 100, 109-118.	ProQuest
De Kock (2015)	Being a church through religious learning at the street level. <i>Ecclesial Practices</i> , 2(2), 217-234.	SCOPUS
Goreham (2004)	Denominational comparison of rural youth ministry programs. <i>North Dakota State University Review of Religious Research</i> , 45(4), 336-348.	JSTOR Web of Science
Nash et al. (2007)	Raising Christian consciousness: creating place. <i>Journal of Youth and Theology</i> , 6(2), 41-59.	SCOPUS
Stanton (2012)	Christian youth work: teaching faith, filling churches or response to social need? <i>Journal of Values and Beliefs</i> , 33(3), 385-403.	ProQuest SCOPUS Web of Science
Thompson & Ballantyne (2017)	'Being church': the social and spiritual purposes and impacts of Christian detached youth work. <i>Journal of Youth and Theology</i> , 16(2), 89-116.	SCOPUS
Van Dijk Groeneboer (2015)	Youth ministry: about youth? <i>Journal of Youth and Theology</i> , 14(1), 25-44.	ProQuest SCOPUS Web of Science

Webber et al. (2010)	Models of youth ministry in action: the dynamics of Christian youth ministry in an Australian city. <i>Religious Education</i> , 105(2), 204-215.	ProQuest Web of Science
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Discussion

Developing literature reviewing in youth work

As formal teaching and training for youth work develops, those in teaching roles increasingly need to be able to access relevant literature, including research as well as theoretical writings. As youth work develops its academic base, approaches to reviewing the literature will increasingly be required. Outlining what is already published in this field has become complex due to the rapid growth of published materials. A review of published literature that is based on identifiable methods is a robust way to demonstrate what is known on a topic and what gaps there are in knowledge as priorities for future research.

The approach explored in this paper was designed to assist readers in understanding how to create a robust search strategy to retrieve published articles relevant to their topic. The search formulae used for identifying relevant studies were broad enough to ensure an ecumenical perspective whilst remaining rooted in the Christian theological tradition. The relevant articles retrieved by the search included a range of perspectives including ecclesiological, pedagogical, psychological and sociological. This demonstrated the value of the approach for those wishing to understand a range of perspectives on their work and teaching. Such approaches to retrieving (and then synthesising) the literature will help to build a foundation for research and teaching in youth work and youth ministry.

The criteria for inclusion of studies included being published in a peer-reviewed journal as a minimum quality threshold. Extending the search to grey literature (such as theses, conference proceedings and organisational reports) is sometimes regarded as reducing the potential for publication bias (Burdett, Stewart & Tierney, 2003; Booth et al., 2012). However, some alternative quality threshold is then required with a clear rationale (Taylor et al., 2015). Our quality threshold proved straightforward to implement, and is easier to justify if challenged compared to the situation where an article is excluded on some more subjective quality grounds.

Limitations of the study

A limitation of this study was that the study team did not have access to databases (such as Ixtheo or ATLA) specific to theological disciplines. As a consequence the literature retrieved focuses on publications in the social sciences. The findings should be read in this context. The essentials of the methodological approach developed will, however, still be value for youth studies across a wide range of bibliographic databases. It should be noted that this appraisal of databases relates to this particular topic and on the date of the searches. Different results are likely to be obtained on different topics and as particular databases improve their coverage or search facilities. This paper is designed to add to our knowledge about the quality of databases and the most effective ways of searching them. Future searches on other aspects of youth studies will add further to expertise within the subject area. This methodological exercise focussed on youth work rather than on college- or university-based work with young adults, although it is recognised that there is not always a clear line between these spheres of activity in practice. It is recognised that theoretical papers and

reflections on policy contribute to the field; the purpose of this methodological paper, however, was to focus on articles that are research-based.

For the purposes of this exercise, a number of studies by those considered 'prolific voices' in this arena, have been excluded as they did not meet the criteria applied as outlined in this paper. For example, literature by Dean (2003, 2010), Catto (2014), Davie (1994), Root (2017), Collins Mayo (2010), Day (2009) and Brierly (2006) were deemed ineligible upon application of the inclusion criteria. This decision was taken in keeping with the focus on a sociological perspective on research pertaining to Christian, faith-based youth work. However, these influential pieces of literature have provided a significant contextual and foundational framework in the preparation of this search methodology. The themes and concepts developed by these authors through their work over many years, have helped frame the search criteria and subsequent inclusion criteria outlined in this paper.

Choice of databases: sensitivity, precision and unique articles retrieved

This exercise found that SCOPUS, ProQuest and Web of Science all had reasonable sensitivity on this topic; JSTOR performed less well and the one article retrieved was in any case retrieved on one of the more sensitive databases for this topic. Our search on PsycINFO retrieved no relevant studies on this topic. In terms of precision, Web of Science performed best, with Scopus and then ProQuest following behind. JSTOR did not perform well in terms of precision on this topic. With the theological dimension to this case study, one might have expected that the humanities-oriented JSTOR database would perform better. Relevant studies tended to have a social science rather than a theological perspective, perhaps reflecting the larger volume of empirical research in social science than theology relevant to this topic. It may be that PsycINFO would be more useful for a youth work topic more closely and directly related to psychological constructs such as self-esteem, peer pressure, trust, etc. The conclusion is that for the topic of faith-related youth work, SCOPUS, ProQuest and Web of Science were the most useful databases. JSTOR may be more useful for identifying theoretical (as opposed to research) papers on more purely theological topics and PsycINFO may be useful for more psychologically-oriented topics. These aspects merit further exploration.

Team working

Three peer reviewers, as part of the research team worked together in reviewing studies to result in the final eight pieces included for synthesis, having devised the inclusion criteria. The Cochrane Handbook (Higgins & Green, 2011, section 7.2.4) suggest that; 'decisions about which studies to include in a review are among the most influential decisions that are made in the review process. However, they involve judgement. To help ensure that these judgements are re- producible, it is desirable for more than one author to repeat parts of the process. In practice, the exact approach may vary from review to review, depending in part on the experience and expertise of the review authors'. Using at least two authors may reduce the possibility that relevant reports will be discarded (Edwards, 2002), and so the team of three authors reviewed the articles. This robust process and team approach helped to ensure a higher degree of accuracy, accountability and transparency in arriving at the final eight studies.

Specialist advice

The research team sought specialist advice from the Subject Librarian for the faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Ulster University. The subject librarian, with

expertise in devising Boolean operators and managing database searching in this field, helped refine the search terms and concept groups and assisted in the early decisions around the use and inclusion of databases. The team sought to search within the aforementioned databases in order to inform the development of more skilful searching in the field. Consideration was given to time and resourcing constraints in this instance as well as knowing when to stop searching. This can be a great challenge to consider, thus, a timebound parameter was agreed in conjunction with the subject librarian to provide adequate boundary and clarity to the search.

Terminology

In this search, the clarification of concept groups and key terms was important. As has been discussed, the field of youth work can be seen as unwieldy and sparse in terms of research. Crossing national and international boundaries also caused the team to consider language and terminology that might be considered similar or related to the aims of the search. Whilst the original focus of search was faith-based youth work (as understood in a UK context), the team had to ensure to be inclusive of other jurisdictions and understandings, incorporating both denominational facets of 'faith-based' as well as specifying the 'Christian' focus in this instance. Terms in relation to youth work and young people were also included in order to capture as broad a base of literature as might be relevant.

Conclusion

In the process of undertaking scientifically robust research, careful consideration must be given to analysing the evidence that exists within the literature. A systematic approach to literature searching has the potential to provide robust data and evidence that will subsequently inform practice. Literature searching in relation to youth work, therefore, should consider a range of databases with relevant subject coverage. A wide, systematic approach can be helpful in identifying the most relevant articles and thus help to provide a knowledge upon which to base practice, teaching and research. The approach should be undertaken in an unambiguous, transparent and replicable manner, beginning with a comprehensive literature search (Arthur et al, 2012).

The literature searching process illustrated the usefulness of particular databases, and that there was no one database so comprehensive that it made all others redundant. Use of two concept groups ('youth work' and 'faith-based') with variant search terms gave reasonable sensitivity and precision. It is hoped that the approach to creating a search methodology presented will help inform future reviews on youth studies. The systematic approach found a breadth of articles and publications which shared a focus with the review title. The relevant articles identified which met the four criteria for inclusion will be used to create a systematic narrative review of research so as to build a sound platform for research and teaching on this and related topics.

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