



YouthAction
NORTHERN IRELAND

An Occasional Youth Work Practice Paper 9 The role of youth work in young people's learning

June 2007

This paper has been developed from a Cross Border Practice and Policy Seminar focusing on **'The role of youth work in young people's learning.'**

This was presented by YouthAction Northern Ireland, Dundalk Institute of Technology, City of Dublin Youth Service Board and Youth Work Ireland. This seminar provided an opportunity for a range of practitioners from North and South to explore different strands of current thinking in relation to exploring the definition of learning, recognising how young people learn, exploring why young people may disengage from learning and pose solutions to this disengagement within a youth work context. Models of youth work practice which incorporate conscious learning for young people were presented by **Dublin North Inner City Project** and **YouthAction Northern Ireland**

"Young people disengage because of their family, school and wider community. This tends to result in a disengagement from life in general. Youth workers are not there as family or school support mechanisms but rather supporting young people to be agents of their own learning and above all learning to be happy within their lives."

James O'Callaghan, Adventure Sports Project,
Dublin North Inner City Project



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Education – What is its' role in today's society?

**David Getty, Head of Humanities,
Dundalk Institute of Technology**

We live in a time of opportunity, prosperity and security with a focus on economic nationalism in which education and learning is seen as the catalyst to building the state and the country. Government is looking at the labour market requirements and viewing 'Education as the national human resource'. This has resulted in an increased bond between education and the economy. Education now addresses 'narrow vocationalism' and producing young people with a 'trained incapacity' ultimately utilising learning methods which disengages young people from a creative learning process. This is not active and exploratory learning or indeed enjoyable learning. The sense of identity is lost within this learning process and the focus lies on assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Are young people getting what they should out of formal education and formalised or accredited training within youth work? Schools are becoming more pressured to produce qualification inflation rather than addressing the reality of young people's issues. Youth work is experiencing similar challenges in making stronger links with how young people are being prepared for the local economy within a broader globalisation framework. The proposition is that education policy (formal and non-formal) is sub-ordinate to the needs of economies and issues arising from this include the holistic needs and learning of young people, the impact of a 'narrow vocationalism, skills acquisition and assessment', and how gaps are widening between young people disengaged and those who are becoming over-qualified.

There are questions around the tendency to focus on employment, education and training within youth work. However, as the Rowntree Poverty Study (2000) comments "even if full employment were achieved, poverty and exclusion would not disappear."

As we have seen in relation to schooling and other areas of welfare, governments increasingly have made use of crude outcome targets by which to direct and judge the activities of agencies and individuals. Alexander (2000: 532) argues that the English system has become, within the space of a decade, 'centralised and ruthlessly policed'. Its focus on goals, curriculum and achievement has meant that other key aspects of the education process get sidelined. Much more of teachers' time is spent on administration and upon demonstrating that they have 'delivered' the required curriculum. There has been a

corresponding decline in their ability to build relationships with students and to develop and sustain extra-curricula activity such as clubs, teams and the performance arts. One of the strange features of this movement is that there is now substantial evidence to suggest that a focus on relationships and involvement in clubs and groups brings substantial benefits to those participating. This can involve better health and a significant improvement in educational performance (larger, possibly, than the testing regime produces) (Putnam 2000: 296-306, 326-333).

This emphasis on outcome and delivery is the result, in significant part, of the importation of business thinking and ideology into public services. There is a fundamental problem with the way that such business models have been applied to welfare agencies.

The Nature of Youth Work in Northern Ireland (2004 Harland, Morgan, Muldoon) research found that there was strong agreement that youth work should be process rather than product orientated and be rooted firmly in the nature of the relationship between the youth worker and a young person... *"repeatedly youth workers stated that they primarily focused on building relationships with young people rather than specific or measurable outcomes"*. (p.20).

The Department for Education and Skills (UK) – 9 Oct 2003, 14 – 19 Opportunity and Excellence highlights that, *"14 to 19 years marks a critical phase in young peoples' lives. It is the period when they build on their earlier learning and prepare for adult life and employment. However, too many young people lose interest in learning before the age of 16. As a result, too many of them drop out of formal learning at 16. Moreover too many of those who remain fail to reach their full potential."* (p.1)

The disengagement from learning is often just the beginning of a cycle of low expectations and disaffection, with consequences felt not only by individuals, but by local communities and wider society.

"Youth work has the power to transform the poverty and sadness into happiness" (James O'Callaghan, Adventure Sports Project, Dublin North Inner City Project)

Priorities in relation to recognising and measuring young people's learning

This section explores the role of youth work in formal learning. The writers explore the tensions between the non-formal youth work approach and that of formally recognising young people. A changing environment with increased focus on outputs, targets and performance indicators is highlighted in the context of government policy and the youth work profession priorities for the future. What are the opportunities and limitations for young people, organisations working with young people and the youth sector as a whole?

A perspective on learning (and formal learning) within youth work in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

Against the back drop of a changing political and economic climate the youth sector has grown from a loosely structured, uncoordinated service to one that now encompasses a very broad spectrum of youth work across the voluntary and statutory sector. We now have a Youth Work Strategy in Northern Ireland (2005-2008) and the Youth Work Act 2001 and the National Youth Work Development Plan in Ireland which articulates what the youth sector should be about underpinned by an agreed set of values.

In recent years the youth sector has developed a more structured formalised approach to meeting the needs of young people and we are witnessing a change in the nature of youth work itself - a move towards **formalising the learning** which takes place in youth work and a more effective connection developing between formal and non formal education creating some debate amongst practitioners.

1. What has brought about this move and what is the sector's view on this?
2. What are the issues in this for us as youth workers?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities?

Formalising the learning

Youth work is traditionally defined as being centred on personal development in response to the needs of young people and based on young people's starting points. Through developing meaningful relationships with young people this work has enabled them to make informed choices about their future. Youth work was not about formal learning – rather it was about creating space away from a structured environment. The formal learning sector on the other hand has had an established standardised curriculum. What distinguishes the two perhaps most greatly is the voluntary nature of young people's participation and the nature of the relationship between worker and young person as opposed to formal education mandatory to 16 and relationships where the power base lies heavily with the teacher.

We have observed in recent years is a move towards youth work:

- providing learning for young people in a youth work environment which is being formally recognised, through awarding bodies which provide young people with opportunities to develop key skills, work based learning and employability skills
- using formal frameworks to accredit the learning that is taking place naturally or normally in youth work such as the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme, Youth Achievement Award scheme and Millennium Volunteers programme
- being recognised and adopted within the formal schools curriculum as a valid intervention for learning- such as, learning for life , citizenship and personal and social development

Why this shift?

- changes in government policy and consequently a change in emphasis in youth work, including the development of a Youth Work Strategy, Act and Plan
- a shift in youth work focus which applies a business ideology to public services



Government Policy

Governments in both Northern Ireland and Ireland state that social exclusion is best targeted through education and employment. It recognises the role youth work can play in addressing social exclusion amongst young people and how it can play a role in engaging disaffected young people and re-engaging them in a learning process. However many would argue that getting young people into education and training irrespective of how or by whom is not a panacea for all social exclusion and that social exclusion is a more complex issue.

The emphasis on developing employability skills among young people has now shifted learning to be seen in the context of employability, work skills, key skills, life-long learning and an increasing pressure on the youth sector to deliver on this agenda.

Applying business ideology principles to youth work practice

There has been a move towards the application of business thinking and ideology into public services with a strong focus on outputs and outcomes. This has become increasingly the case with youth work and many would feel that it is at risk of becoming target driven with the real purpose of youth work (building relationships, creating spaces for young people) being sidelined because of pressure to deliver outputs. Many feel that less regard is given to soft outcomes with value for money being equated to quantifiable outputs and targets – a shift towards valuing product rather than process. We see this most clearly in funding requirements where funders are increasing emphasising numbers and the monitoring of outputs with accreditation.

Funding bodies have become increasingly focused on outcomes which are quantifiable through formal learning outputs – qualifications linked to employability linking back to social exclusion. These forms of measurement do not in any way recognise truly the value and contribution that youth work plays in young people's lives.

By adopting a business ideology approach many feel that we are at risk of compromising the core purpose of youth work, our values and principles, our distinctiveness and our motivation for doing youth work. This is a key issue for youth work operating in a funding world increasing driven by business principles.

This is the changing environment within which youth work now finds itself and the youth worker is increasing faced with a number of difficult questions.

How do we respond to this changing environment and what are the issues for youth workers?

From the discussions some state that a move towards formal learning has created tensions within the sector. Some argue that by doing so there is an erosion of the values and principles and the core of what youth work has always been about and what has distinguished youth work and the learning that takes place there from traditional formal learning. Others feel that it is about youth work being a bit smarter about what we are doing and about finally gaining credit and recognition for all the learning that is taking place naturally within youth work – particular through such schemes as the Youth Achievement Award.

Many are asking the questions:

- Are the core principles of youth work being eroded?
- Are the key characteristics of youth work being undermined by a world increasingly focussed on formal learning and outputs?
- How can we hold fast to youth work values and beliefs and yet embrace the change?
- Are youth workers turning into teachers and trainers and managers into monitoring and data collectors?
- Are the lines between the formal and non formal becoming blurred to the point where youth work will just be subsumed into formal education and its distinctiveness and uniqueness lost?
- Will 'youth work in communities' be compromised for a 'youth work in schools' approach?
- What is youth work now going to look like?

Some youth workers reported a feeling of resentment and a sense of powerlessness in this changing climate where their views and perspectives are not being acknowledged.

Opportunities within this changing environment:

Can we create a balance where youth work can be true to itself (its values and principles) and at the same time offer young people formal recognition using non formal approaches?

If workers are feeling a sense of powerless can we seize opportunities to develop and influence monitoring tools? Perhaps the challenge to us is to develop measurement systems which best reflect what we do. We need to be taking a greater role in shaping measurements, not just for the protection of youth work as an educational process, but to reflect education per se.

Increasingly we see a growing acknowledgement and recognition of the value of youth work approaches in all aspects of policy – community development, creating a shared future, creating vibrant rural communities, addressing gender inequalities and most pertinently in playing a key role in providing formal learning opportunities in a non formal environment.

An argument can be made in the youth sector that we don't have to compromise our values and beliefs but that we need to and have in some respects got better and smarter at articulating what we do, how we do it, and how we can measure it.

In providing learning opportunities for young people we are offering young people greater choice – if young people and in particular young adults who have disengaged from the formal learning sector want to learn in a youth work environment then youth work can offer them an alternative learning environment and in many instances lead to greater learning outcomes.

Youth work has changed over the years not just as a result of government policy but because of the core of what we do. It has changed to meet the changing needs of young people. Research has shown that young adults will participate and benefit more from a youth sector which provides them with identifiable outcomes and progression routes which are recognised by employers and educational establishments.

Creating connections between formal and non formal learning is an opportunity therefore to respond to the changing needs of young people. This is particularly important for young adults who want to choose where they learn and how they learn. Young people who have not had the chance to succeed in a formal learning environment can through non formal youth work approaches finally have a chance to achieve. Ultimately they should have the opportunity to realise their potential and have this learning formally recognised if they so wish. Should youth work have a role in formal learning? Young people have a right to choose where their learning and education takes place, how it takes place and the right to choose to have their non-formal education recognised formally.

{Clare Conlon, YouthAction Northern Ireland and Mary Mooney, City of Dublin Youth Service Board}

Seminar Discussions:

Seminar participants believed that there were advantages to the role of youth work in delivering accredited training. These included creating a career structure for young people and influencing the practical application of learning. However challenges were cited which included the impact of funding expectations on demonstrating outputs and targets, often through numbers of young people attaining accredited training. Further challenges include how youth work defines itself as a quality assurance system having procedures for demonstrating performance but without becoming too prescriptive and bureaucratic. Specific areas of discussion and exploration are highlighted below:

What is learning?

Seminar participants identified that learning should be seen as an holistic approach whereby young people are engaged on the basis of their multiple intelligences.

Measuring young people's learning

Overall participants believed that there was a need to measure learning processes and impacts for young people but this must be flexible. From the outset the worker needs to consider who we are measuring learning for – the young person, worker, organisation, funder etc. In addition it needs to be highlighted what learning measurement is actually being noted such as qualifications, soft outcomes, group learning, community based learning etc

“It is important that we measure the process and not just outputs and number crunching. How can we measure this process? Within youth work the learning happens due to the relationship-How do we capture this?”
(seminar participant)

Within this debate we need to remember that learning will only take place when young people are motivated and open to learning as identified by them.

It was also cited that it can be difficult to measure learning and that the sector needs to identify tools which aid measuring conversations and activities. Clear statements about what the youth sector sets out to do, how we do it and how we measure the impact should be transparent throughout. We need to consider how we involve young people in the measurement of their learning.

“Youth workers need to articulate clearly what they do. This is not about short term interventions but rather long periods of intervention. Measurement needs to take account of this.” (seminar participant)

Purpose of youth work

The sentiment among participants was that the voluntary nature of youth work and the informal and non-formal learning methods based on conversation, trust and meaningful relationships (such as sitting together for meals and feeling relaxed) should be kept at the fore within youth work and as a profession we should not shy away from this. The Council of Europe defines informal education as opportunities that arise in daily life and from daily experiences through family, friends, the media etc. They define non-formal education as a planned educational activity which is not structured and which takes place outside the formal setting.

Within any learning context the learning should come from the participant or 'learner'. This reflects the youth sector principles and practices of youth participation in which young people should have ownership over the process and contribute to the shaping of their own learning. Youth workers access deeper understanding of what is going on with young people and encourage their responsibility for learning. The very heart of youth work allows young people to take risks, create safe environments and test out new things. We can acknowledge that young people do make mistakes, and through conscious reflections they can recognise their learning.

Young people don't necessarily want youth work to be heavy and reflective of the school structure and approach. The role of youth work should be about learning in non-formal environments and this ultimately challenges the role of youth workers in schools. Participants were concerned that a concentration of youth workers focussed in schools may impact on the community based approach and result in more individualistic interventions, thus affecting the sense of collectivity and social conscience.

“The unique role of the youth worker and the voluntary nature of a young person's participation should not be compromised when working in co-operation with other professions.”

(p.10, Dept of Education -The Nature of Youth Work in NI: Purpose, Contribution and Challenges)

Youth work supporting young people within a formal education framework

There can be tensions and misunderstanding between formal, informal and non-formal education. Teachers and youth workers have very different skills. When young people disengage from formal education the youth worker often comes in to retrieve the issues that young people are faced with. Young people who are most challenging are often passed on to youth workers. The Youth Work Act in the Republic of Ireland encourages the role of youth workers towards schools to address challenging behaviour among young people. The intervention is thus often based on 'sorting the problem out', which may not embody the nature of youth work.

"Schools curriculum for learning is old fashioned. We all need qualifications which zone in on our abilities and interests. The education system doesn't suit everyone and if it doesn't your left out and that's when Youth Workers come in." (seminar participant)

Education, learning and employment

Overwhelmingly participants felt that the youth work sector was working towards an economic development agenda without the sector considering or challenging such an approach and the impact on the profession. Is the role of a youth worker about addressing education and employment within society at the expense of the relationship with young people?

Seminar participants believed that it was more important to recognise contributions and achievements of young people and to focus on what they are already doing rather than focussing on what they could be doing.

"Formal accreditation is not the 'be all and end all' of youth work. Positive affirmation is very important in building young people's confidence/identity, even though this may be a pat on the back." (seminar participant)

"There should be a focus on emotional social intelligence-Seeing how young people learn and exploring alternative way's of learning. We need to find the interests of young people and build on this making education processes relevant to the everyday lives of young people." (seminar participant)



Conclusions

There is currently an opportunity to raise the profile of youth work as an educational process, raise the professionalism and standard of youth work and consequently increase the quality of experience for young people. This challenges youth workers to consider and articulate more clearly what we do; how we do it; how we best measure young people's learning and most importantly what young people gain from our interventions.

The seminar participants agreed that:

- Learning takes place when young people are motivated and open to learning experiences as identified by them.
- The core principles of youth work (voluntary, participation, youth led, relationship building, equality) create positive learning outcomes for young people.

Recommendations:

- Research into current evaluation/measurement tools used by youth workers should be prioritised by the Department of Education Youth Work Priorities for 2008 – 2012 and the National Youth work Development Plan and effective models published.
- New measurement tools should be developed as a sectoral initiative in partnership with young people, which identify learning outcomes for young people.
- Professional and vocational youth work training should include the theory and practice of evaluation, and measurement tools within youth work.



- * We could get a box for students to put comments in about what they think.
- * A petition could be created for students to sign for either academic or non-academic subjects.
- * Go to the Head teacher/Director and meet with him about it.

- 1) Язык ПРЕДЛОЖЕНИЙ
- 2) Петиция
- 3) ПРИБУДУЩЕЕ
Дир-ра о необходимости ПРИНЯТЬ наше мнение во внимание.

Youth Work Developments within the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

The **Youth Work Act 2001** (Republic of Ireland) was established to provide a legal framework for the provision of youth work programmes and services by the Minister for Education, the Vocational Education Committees (VEC's) and by the national and regional youth organisations. The Act sets out the definition of Youth Work as a planned programme of education designed for the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary participation, and which is complimentary to their formal ,academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations. 33 VEC's are in place throughout the Republic of Ireland to implement the Act.

The **National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007** is the major statement of Government Policy on Youth Work in the Republic of Ireland. It was established to improve quality standards in youth work and put in place mechanisms for enhancing professionalism. This would be achieved through facilitating young people and adults to participate more fully in, and to gain optimum benefit from, youth work programmes and services. The plan aims to enhance the contribution of youth work to social inclusion, social cohesion and active citizenship in a rapidly changing national and global context. In addition the plan would put in place an expanded and enhanced infrastructure for development, support and co ordination at national and local level.

The plan defines its vision based on the Youth Work Act (2001):

"A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is-

- a) Complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and*
- b) Provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations".*

The development of a **Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in Northern Ireland (2005-2008)** articulates what the sector should be about underpinned by an agreed set of values. The Department of Education which supported this partnership strategy values the contribution made by youth work and its role in the non-formal education of young people, with its particular emphasis on participation and empowerment of young people. The youth sector's vision of the future is one where all young people in Northern Ireland:

- are able to enjoy themselves, realise their potential and participate as active citizens in a secure and peaceful society;
- know their rights and responsibilities and have these rights protected and promoted;
- are valued, understood and involved and feel safe and supported.

This is further overarched by a ten year Strategy for Children and Young People (2005-2015) published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

Defining Non Formal Education

Education is a lifelong process which enables the continuous development of a person's capabilities as an individual and as a member of society and can take three different forms:

- formal education
- informal education
- non-formal education

"non-formal education corresponds to a collection of teaching tools and learning schemes that are seen as creative and innovative alternatives to traditional and classical teaching systems". European Youth Forum

A Council of Europe "working group on non-formal education" has elaborated its own definition of non-formal education as a *"planned programme of personal and social education designed to improve a range of skills and competencies, outside but supplementary to the formal educational curriculum. Participation is voluntary and the programmes are carried out by trained leaders in the voluntary and/or State sectors, and should be systematically monitored and evaluated, the experience might also be certificated. It is generally related to the employability and lifelong learning requirements of the individual person."*

Non-formal education is a way of helping societies to be more democratic and to respect human rights. It is a necessary supplement to formal education.

Council of Europe





YouthAction
NORTHERN IRELAND

YouthAction Northern Ireland, the University of Ulster Community Youth Work Department and the Curriculum Development Unit have hosted a series of thematic seminars. The purpose of the seminars is to contribute to the understanding of youth work, develop training and enhance methodologies. An action learning approach provides opportunities for youth and community workers and others working with young people to share ideas and methods of practice.

Other papers in the suite of seminars include:

1. Young men and education
2. Gender conscious work with young people
3. Involving young people in action research
4. Working with young women with disabilities on the issue of employability
5. Principles of working with young women who identify as other than heterosexual
6. Developing rural youth work
7. Strategic and practical partnerships in meeting the needs of young people
8. The contribution of youth work to promoting young people's involvement in volunteering
9. The role of youth work in young people's learning
10. Creative approaches and methodologies in working with young people

Information on these seminars/papers can be attained from:

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