

Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Topic: Youth Work

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1. Background

1.1 The distinctiveness of youth work.

Youth work has a long history stretching back 150 years or so. It emerged in the late 1800s at a time of considerable societal change and the numerous voluntary youth organisations that were established then sought to engage young people for diverse reasons that included controlling ‘troublesome’ youth; improving social cohesion across social classes; improving education and life opportunities for young people and providing spaces for young people to meet, belong, learn and develop in association with other young people (Smith, 2013). From these roots youth work evolved as a distinctive practice driven by particular values and principles. Today youth work retains in distinctiveness as a unique way of working with young people that uses informal education methods and processes (Jefferies and Smith, 2010).

In Ireland the distinctiveness of youth work and some of its associated values are acknowledged within the Youth Work Act (2001) which defines youth work as ‘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; (i) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and (ii) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations (Government of Ireland, 2001). This definition points to the core focus of youth work as social/informal education where young people can voluntarily choose to be involved. These distinctive features set youth work apart from formal education with its imposed curriculum and mandatory attendance system. The voluntary principle means that the youth work relationship (ie the dynamic between adult youth workers and young people) is distinctive, for example youth workers generally refer to the young people they work with as “participants” or “members”, or just as “young people”, rather than as “students” or “pupils” or “clients Devlin, 2017). The youth work relationship is built by putting young people, their needs and ‘where they are at’ at the centre of the work rather than on adult agendas or imposed programmes of learning.

Youth work is a values driven way of working. Important values include participation, equality and inclusion, empowerment, social justice and partnership with young people. Devlin and Gunning (2009: 12) argue that this values base illustrates an ‘*ethical dimension*’ to youth work and points to its ‘commitment to human well-being...and the broader common good’.

Among the key features of youth work are the following:

- youth work is committed to ensuring and promoting the safety and wellbeing of young people;
- young people are full and active partners in youth work, participating meaningfully in making decisions and in programme planning and implementation;
- youth work should aim to empower young people and give them a voice, individually and collectively, and it should uphold and promote the rights of children and young people as citizens (such as those set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child);

- youth work should aim for openness and inclusiveness and for the active promotion of equality; no individual young person, and no group of young people, should feel excluded or diminished in a youth work context;
- youth work has a community dimension and a social purpose; it has benefits for adults as well as young people; it strengthens social solidarity and contributes to positive social change;
- youth work, like all good education, should be experienced as both challenging and enjoyable, fulfilling and fun, enriching and uplifting, for young people and for adults.(Devlin 2017)

Youth work focuses on the structural causes of young people's experiences of poverty, inequality, lack of opportunities and on working with 'particular groups of young people who share certain identities, circumstances or needs, and in many cases who have collectively been the victims of social inequalities (based on such factors as gender, class, disability, race, ethnicity and sexuality)' (Devlin 2017). Furthermore, youth work seeks to go beyond the personal and social education of individual young people and 'has the potential - even the responsibility - to raise awareness in society as a whole of the nature and impact of such inequalities and to involve young people themselves in working to challenge and change them' (Devlin, 2017).

1.2 The Value of Youth Work

Over its 150 years of development, youth work in Ireland and across Europe, has increasingly been recognised by policy makers for its valuable contribution to young people, communities and society. In Europe, youth work as an informal education process is valued for its role in addressing social exclusion, improving young people's life chances particularly in relation to education and employment, health and participation in sport and culture. Youth work is at the very heart of both the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030. It has also been the subject of numerous recommendations, resolutions and initiatives within both institutions (see for example Council for Europe 2013, 2017; Dunne et al. 2014). Together, the European Union and the Council of Europe have 'progressively urged recognition of youth work as a provider of specialized non-formal education for youth' (Morciano and Scardigno,2014), and have pursued this objective jointly through a formal Youth Partnership (pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership).

In Ireland the value of youth work and its benefits to young people, communities and society has been outlined in research studies (Devlin and Gunning, 2009, Murphy, 2013, DCYA, 2013, Brady et al, 2022). In a national empirical study involving young people and adults in youth work in Ireland it was suggested that:

...the most obvious benefits of youth work are for individual young people (including 'concrete' benefits such as information, practical skills, enhanced educational or employment opportunities; and less tangible ones such as confidence, self-esteem, tolerance and sociability). But there are also benefits for the adults involved, both paid staff and volunteers – much the same range of benefits as for young people. There are benefits at the level of neighbourhoods and communities as well – more positive relationships between old and young, reduced tension, better amenities or an enhanced physical environment, more coordinated and effective service provision. Furthermore, because youth work clubs and projects at local level are very often affiliated to regional or national and even international networks, and because the young people and adults who participate in a youth group carry the benefits of their involvement with them into many other areas of social action and interaction, there are broader societal benefits as well (Devlin & Gunning 2009: 51).

In Ireland youth work gained considerable state support through policy and funding developments from the 1970s onwards. Significant increases in state funding as well as the commencement of the *Youth Work Act 2001* resulted in improved recognition of the value of youth work (Devlin 2008, 2010) and in 2007 the overarching *National Development Plan* made commitments to ‘supporting the youth work sector’ by promising the implementation of a *National Youth Work Development Plan* and the setting up of a *National Youth Work Development Unit* (Government of Ireland, 2007:246 – 247). However, the global economic crash in 2008 and resulting austerity cuts meant these promised supports were never put in place and the National Youth Work Development Plan was abandoned. In 2012 the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs instigated a long process of youth work reforms and began a ‘Value for Money Review’ of certain youth funding schemes (DCYA, 2014). The ongoing reform of youth work schemes and some of the associated commentary in the media (e.g. O’Brien, 2015) and in parliamentary debate (see for example Fitzgerald, 2012) provoked the view that policy makers saw youth work as ‘problematic’ rather than valuable (McMahon, 2021).

1.3 The Continued Relevance of Youth Work

However during the Covid 19 Pandemic youth work in Ireland once again illustrated its continued relevance, capacity and commitment to meeting young people’s changing needs (NYCI, 2021) and provided pause for thought in relation to the ongoing value of youth work in Irish society. Minister Roderic O’Gorman acknowledged this when he said in the Dáil that:

Youth organisations have been the unsung heroes of the Covid-19 pandemic, adapting quickly to continue their vital support for young people. Research indicates that young people who engaged with youth organisations during the pandemic fared better than those who did not. ...The €5 million increase in funding for youth organisations is recognition of their great work and the role they play in the lives of so many young people (O’Gorman, Dáil Debates, 14th October 2020).

Since its earliest provision youth work in Ireland has continued to change and evolve alongside changes in society and in young people’s lives (Devlin, 2008, 2010). Youth work emerged at a time of societal upheaval in the 1800s and has developed and become stronger even through times of great challenge. The contribution of youth workers during the Covid 19 pandemic once again illustrated the capacity of youth work to respond to the needs of young people at such times. Over its long and enduring history, Irish youth work has proven itself to be resilient and capable, professional and meaningful, valuable and relevant and whatever challenges are placed in its way the passion and commitment of youth workers and youth work organisations will no doubt continue.

2. Issues Impacting on Youth Work

2.1 Youth Work Beyond Dublin and Targeted Schemes

While youth work is often recognised for the ‘targeted’ work it does particularly with young people who have complex needs, this work does not fully define the purpose or value of youth work. Open access youth work means that it is open to all young people without them needing to be classified or categorised as any type of “risk” group. Youth work is a way of working that seeks to put the young person – whoever they are, wherever they come from, whatever their needs are – at the centre and support and enable them to have a safe space to meet, belong, build relationships, have fun, learn and develop. Universal, open access youth work that happens in youth clubs, youth information

centres, uniformed youth groups and participation initiatives all around the country are extremely important forms of social and informal education for all young people. Recent research by the University of Galway has found that universal, open access youth work offers a range of positive benefits to young people including: personal development and growth, relationships, connection and support; enhanced civic values; health and wellbeing; education and vocational skills (Brady et al, 2022). However, this type of youth work is underfunded in Ireland – in 2021 only €2.2 million out of €67 million spent on youth services was allocated to the Local Youth Club Grant Scheme (O’Gorman, Dáil Debates, May, 2021).

The structural issues of poverty, inequality and exclusion also affect rural young people and indeed may rural young people particularly from minority groups can face additional issues of isolation as well as significant lack of access to support services or indeed transport to gain access to support services (McAleer & NYCI, 2019, NYCI, 2018, Serban et al, 2022). Youth work providers operating in rural counties and rural areas face challenges in relation to the extra costs associated with providing adequate services to a diverse and dispersed youth population, for example a youth worker may need to travel over an hour between projects they work in. The National Youth Council of Ireland’s research on youth work in rural areas found there was ‘lack of adequate funding for the provision of youth work services in rural localities and inadequate funding to support youth work practice in rural communities where young people experience specific needs’ (McAleer and NYCI, 2019). This valuable study on the needs of rural young people and rural youth work providers made numerous recommendations on improving the resourcing and recognition of youth work in rural areas so that the particular challenges of this work can be addressed.

What is needed?

- Youth work needs to be recognised for its contribution to the lives of all young people and improved investment in universal, open access youth work is needed.
- The challenges face by rural young people and rural youth work providers need to be understood better and a specific strategy for improving the funding and delivery of rural youth work needs to be considered.
- The strict rules applied under the UBU funding scheme (such as limits on ratios of young people under different categories as well as time allocations for youth workers for travel) need to be reviewed in relation to rural context and challenges.

2.2 Limitations of ‘Value for Money’ Governance

While funding is being restored slowly to youth work, the funding now comes with a new governance and accountability regime imposed. UBU Your Place Your Space (<https://ubu.gov.ie/about>) is the reformed youth funding scheme for many organisations and projects. It follows from the Value for Money Review published by DCYA in 2014. Reforms have focused on incentivising youth work organisations, projects and workers to perform more efficiently and effectively from a value for money point of view by requiring more numbers based, quantitative measurements and reporting of the work and more surveillance of the work being carried out by youth workers and voluntary youth work organisations through a ‘performance oversight’ framework (see DCEDIY, 2020). The UBU scheme also has tight governance rules that apply to service delivery and ultimately to youth work practice on the ground. There are rules about the percentages ratios of types of young people to be targeted; there are rules for the percentage ratio of time youth workers can spend on certain types of work; there are rules about the kinds of

'interventions' youth workers are allowed to use in their work and there are a set of 7 predetermined personal and social outcomes that are to be the focus of the work with young people under the scheme (see DCYA, 2019).

There is a concern that this is undermining the kinds of values mentioned earlier that underpin youth work as an informal education practice where the process of building relationships and trust with young people and responding to young people and their needs (as determined by them) is core to the work. There is a concern that these governance rules will restrict youth work practice on the ground and lead to a greater emphasis on one to one, therapeutic style work with (fixing!) young people. For example, one of the personal and social outcomes promoted under UBU rules is 'planning and problem solving' which states 'Planning and problem-solving alongside resilience, provides young people with a "positive protective armour" against negative outcomes associated with risky life events. Problem solving has also been shown to be associated with the ability to cope with stresses in life' (DCYA, 2019: 18). Another promoted outcome for young people under UBU is 'resilience and determination' which states 'Resilience and determination - if society intervenes early enough, it can improve cognitive and socio-economic abilities and the health of disadvantaged children. Effective early interventions can promote schooling, reduce crime, foster workforce productivity and reduce teenage pregnancy. Self-discipline has been highlighted as a vital factor in building academic achievement, significantly better than intelligence quotient (IQ)' (DCYA, 2019:18). The language of these outcomes places a lot of emphasis on young people needing to be able to 'cope' and be 'self-disciplined' to deal with stress and risk. These outcomes seem to make young people responsible for having to deal with the structural issues of poverty and inequality. None of the outcomes under UBU encourage young people to analyse or act to change the structural and societal causes of poverty and oppression. There is concern that restrictive governance rules will undermine the values that drive youth work practice and 'the integrity of youth work as youth work' (Kiely and Meade, 2018).

While the UBU operating, and governance rules seek to enhance the value for money performance of youth work by achieving certain outcomes with young people who have been targeted there is little space provided to discussion about quality practice and supporting youth work practitioners to reflect on and improve their practice. Under the rules 30% of a youth workers time is allocated to administration and there is no mention of time allowed for reflective practice or continuing professional development.

What is needed?

- Current governance rules potentially end up restricting and narrowing down what youth workers can do to meet the needs of young people. Youth work requires appropriate governance that supports youth workers and youth work providers to exercise their professional capacity to meet the needs of diverse young people. A review and evaluation of UBU operating rules and performance oversight should include the voices of youth workers and young people.
- Good quality youth work practice is about more than just 'value for money' and needs to be enabled and supported through meaningful engagement with practitioners and young people. This could include support for reflective practice programmes; creative, transformative and storytelling evaluation methods; new quality assurance systems that include peer and youth accountability; as well as support for the continuous professional development of youth workers.

2.3 The Muted Position of “Youth Work” in Contemporary Youth Policy

While funding restorations are slowly being made and there are signals from Minister Roderic O’Gorman that the DCEDIY place a value on youth work particularly since the covid 19 pandemic, over the last decade there have been subtle policy messages that seem to downplay ‘youth work’ in favour of a more generic ‘work with young people’.

Looking back to the early 2000s youth work in Ireland occupied a recognised position in policy terms. For example, there was the passing of the *Youth Work Act* in 2001, the publication of a specific policy strategy *The National Youth Work Development Plan* in 2003 and a serious commitment to support the youth work sector in Ireland was made in the *National Development Plan* published in 2007. The economic crisis disrupted the achievements that had been made in gaining policy recognition and support for youth work and youth work now occupies a much more muted position in contemporary youth policy. For example, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The overarching policy for children and young people* published in 2014 and the *National Youth Strategy* published in 2015 both give only fleeting attention to youth work. In the Value for Money Review of Youth Programmes published in 2014 the economic evaluators intentionally eschewed the use of the term “youth work” (see DCYA, 2014:18) in favour of more generic terms like ‘youth programmes’ and ‘youth professionals’.

In 2017, then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone announced in the Dail that the National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC) would not be reconvened after it had been put on hold in 2013 (Zappone, October 2017). NYWAC had been an advisory body to the Minister ‘in matters to do with youth work, including the coordination of youth work programmes and services’. In the new *Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028: Blueprint* (Government of Ireland, 2022) there is no mention of youth work.

After austerity and reductions in funding opportunities for youth work the places and spaces for the sharing of youth work developments, good practice, research etc. have shrunk with the closing of important publications such as ‘Irish Youth Work Scene Magazine (run by Youth Work Ireland) and Youth Studies Journal (hosted by Maynooth University).

What is needed?

- Commitments made in *Better Outcomes: Brighter Futures* to ‘support and improve recognition of the role of non-formal and informal learning, and in particular the contribution of youth work’ (DCYA, 2014:67) needs to be more fully realised
- The value and contribution of youth work needs to be amplified and more fully integrated into Irish youth policy such as in the emergent new *Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* (Govt. of Ireland, 2022)
- In addition youth work requires a specific policy framework of its own to harness and protect its distinctive contribution to working with young people as well as to support youth workers and youth work providers
- Increased funding support for places and spaces to amplify the value of youth work in society and to aid shared learning across and between youth work practitioners is needed. For example campaigns like ‘Youth Work Changes Lives’ run by NYCI (ND) should continue to be supported and opportunities to reinstate youth work specific publication platforms be considered

2.4 Crisis in Recruitment and Retention in Youth Work

Despite all of the research that provides clear 'evidence' of the value of youth work and its potential to contribute to the personal and social development of individual young people as well as its broader contribution to society in relation to enhancing democracy (Dunne et al, Murphy, 2013, Devlin and Gunning 2009) there is now a crisis in the recruitment and retention of youth workers. This is evidenced anecdotally through our connection with youth work organisations on the ground who are telling us about these challenges.

At a policy level, while the North South Education and Training Standards Committee (NSETS) oversees professional programme endorsement processes on behalf of the DCEDIY and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, there is no coordinated approach south of the border to workforce planning in terms of the education and training of youth workers; recruitment and retention of youth workers ; supporting the development of diversity in the youth work workforce; plans for improving the terms and conditions for youth workers particularly in relation to salary and pensions.

What is needed?

- While DCEDIY has been of the view that a review of NSETS could not go ahead on a North/South basis due to the situation in Northern Ireland, its review of its own work in relation to professional education and training standards and associated matters should proceed.
- DCEDIY needs to support discussion with youth work organisations and youth workers around the country to determine a plan of action to address recruitment and retention issues
- DCEDIY needs to create a youth work specific development strategy that includes workforce planning

3. Conclusion

Despite its long history, youth work remains as relevant and necessary today as it was 150 years ago. Its history of evolution and constant support for young people illustrates it remains well placed to meet the challenges of today. It is a form of education that is responsive and adaptable to the needs of young people and is continuously evolving its methods and responses but always based on a set of clear values that provide its distinctiveness. It now needs the support of policy makers and funders to continue to realise the actual and potential contribution of youth work in supporting the diverse range of needs of young people in a rapidly changing Irish society.

4. Summary of Main Points:

- Youth Work is a distinctive practice that has the potential to offer invaluable support to all young people; it is worthy of support from the state, policy makers and funders
- Youth work in universal and targeted schemes as well as in rural areas, requires increased funding to continue to meet young peoples needs and deliver adequate services; to meet the rising costs of inflation; and to support the retention of experienced staff
- Youth work requires amplification throughout youth policy in order to support the value of youth work and it requires its own strategic policy plan to aid a coordinated approach to planning and development of youth work in Ireland. Specific strategies for developing universal youth work as well as rural youth work needs to be included.

- Youth work requires appropriate forms of governance that do not restrict but instead support the inherent values of youth work in relation to social justice, equality and social change and that harnesses the creativity, flexibility and responsiveness of youth work. Governance needs to support quality practice not just quantitative measurements.
- Support from government to help address the imminent crisis in recruitment and retention of youth workers is needed. A long term strategic approach to workforce planning is needed as is a review of NSETS work.

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