



## **THE NATURE OF YOUTH WORK IN NORTHERN IRELAND: PURPOSE, CONTRIBUTION AND CHALLENGES**

### **Key Findings**

- ◆ Youth work tends to be particularly targeted at young people who are marginalised or excluded.
- ◆ The relationship between the youth worker and a young person is perceived by youth workers as the central plank of youth work.
- ◆ Youth workers seek to teach young people core principles of citizenship, participation and encouraging empowerment.
- ◆ There are major differences between professional and non-qualified youth workers in regard to experience, perceptions of role of the youth worker, understanding the purpose of youth work, understanding youth transitions and wider socio-economic forces, training needs, emphasis on aims and objectives, monitoring and evaluation.

- ◆ While youth work has potential to engage and support young people, it is unrealistic to suggest that youth work can become a panacea for all that society perceives as 'wrong with young people.'
- ◆ There is clear evidence of the benefits to young people of combining formal education with youth work.
- ◆ The issue of 'product verses process' presents a significant challenge for the future direction and focus of youth work in Northern Ireland.
- ◆ Youth work will need to find better ways to measure its contribution to the young people it claims to serve.

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. An extensive review of the literature relating to research and practice in the area of youth work formed the first part of the study. The review discussed the purpose of youth work, the nature and process of youth work in practice and challenges currently faced by the profession. One key issue addressed was the role of youth work in tackling social exclusion. The research also involved focus groups and interviews with practitioners from the field of youth and community work.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

2. The central aim of the research process was to investigate, using a qualitative strategy and appropriate research methods, the role of youth work in combating social disadvantage and low achievement. As the practice of youth work, by its very nature, allows a degree of vagueness about its aims and objectives or any prescription about its outcomes the research strategy was based on the need to interview key respondents who had years of experience in the field of youth work. This in-depth analysis would lead to a categorisation of relevant information related to the topic of investigation and, after careful scrutiny of the data, produce a set of themes that could be illustrated by data extracts. The two methods of data collection were focus groups and interviews.

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

3. The Youth Service in Northern Ireland extends to a wide range of provision for children and young people between the ages of 4-25. Examples of this variety include full-time youth centres, school-based youth projects, community-based projects, detached and outreach projects, church-based groups, uniformed youth groups, after-school clubs, health projects, organizations providing for disabled young people, for ethnic minorities, young people from the Traveling Community, special programmes for young people in the 18-25 age group focusing on the needs of young men, young women, young mothers, preparation for employment, helplines, counselling projects, peer education projects, cultural, environment and citizenship projects.

4. Youth work tends to be particularly targeted at young people who are marginalised or excluded. The practice of 'youth work' is primarily with those young people who 'don't fit into' something or 'are causing problems' to someone or are having difficulties that mainstream society cannot deal with effectively.
5. Youth work in Northern Ireland occurs in different, shifting and complex settings and contexts. These settings are often 'contested spaces' whereby many young people in a particular context are perceived by youth workers as struggling between old ways of doing things and attempts to create more democratic and inclusive processes. It is important to acknowledge that 'contested spaces' for young people are not always sectarian or directly related to 'the troubles' that have been prevalent since 1969.
6. Schools, families, city centres and local communities have also been perceived as 'contested spaces' where young people can feel unsafe, intimidated and disillusioned.
7. Youth workers are passionate, committed and serious about their work. The relationship between the youth worker and a young person is perceived by youth workers as the central plank of youth work. The quality of this relationship and its voluntary nature is of paramount importance for two reasons. First it means that the young person can control the nature of their involvement or withdrawal and second it puts the onus on the youth worker to work creatively with young people. Youth workers seek to teach young people core principles of citizenship, participation and encouraging empowerment.
8. Youth workers emphasise the importance of encouraging young people to take control of their own lives, not least because of the perceived effects of social disadvantage.
9. Fundamentally youth workers deal with:
  - ◆ Different groups of young people who come into contact with an adult (the youth worker) other than their parent(s) or school teacher, who thus becomes potentially a significant person of influence in their lives.

- ◆ Young people who do not conform to the rules and regulations that are evident within the schooling system.
- ◆ Young people in 'contested spaces' at certain stages in their development, ie childhood, adolescence.

### **Professional Issues**

10. In this Northern Ireland study, it would appear that professionally trained youth workers were much more articulate about what they were trying to do than non-professionally trained workers. Whilst volunteers and part-time youth workers have historically underpinned the traditional Youth Service in Northern Ireland, one possible outcome of this is that the status and professionalisation of youth work has been undermined. In this study it was apparent that non-qualified youth workers were as animated and committed as professionally qualified workers. Importantly however, there were major differences between professional and non-qualified youth workers in regard to experience, perceptions of role of the youth worker, understanding the purpose of youth work, understanding youth transitions and wider socio-economic forces, training needs of youth workers, emphasis on aims and objectives, monitoring and evaluation. Youth work should not shy away from debating the issue of professionalisation and the generic use of the term 'youth worker.'
11. Youth workers believed that tackling social exclusion was something that youth work was well positioned to address because of the nature of youth work and the unique relationship between youth workers and young people.

### **Youth Work in Schools**

12. The findings suggest that whilst explicitly the school system is interested in youth work processes to engage with 'troublesome' young people, its ultimate aim is for young people to fit into the school system. Whilst youth workers can build effective relationships with young people regardless of their status, this relationship is more 'strained' within a school setting. The school setting and formal nature of the curriculum causes difficulties for the many disaffected young people with whom youth workers come into contact. When youth workers are contracted to work in a school they feel that in some way the core principles of youth work are compromised. The

drive towards achievement (and inevitable failure for particular young people) within formal education is in conflict with the value base and ethos within youth work.

## **Funding Issues**

13. The increase in short term funding over the past ten years in Northern Ireland, primarily through European Peace and Reconciliation monies, has ushered a spirit of competition into youth work practice, particularly in the community and voluntary sectors.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

14. The research findings revealed that youth work in Northern Ireland is carried out with many young people and in particular those who are not well served by mainstream agencies in society. While youth workers strive to work with all young people, they perceive themselves as working primarily with marginalised young people. Youth workers engage and build relationships with young people irrespective of their academic capability, their social position and sometimes their behaviour. In this capacity youth work can be perceived as addressing social exclusion.
15. Whilst youth workers may understand why young people may behave in a certain way, they do not condone this behaviour. Nevertheless, the nature of youth work places youth workers in a unique and powerful position to initially contact young people and develop meaningful relationships. This is underpinned by the principle of voluntary participation and the fact that a young person can, at any time, choose not to become involved in youth work programmes. Whilst this voluntary principle can be undermined because of the often prescriptive nature of policy and funding led initiatives, the emphasis on relationship building and voluntary participation remain essential aspects of all youth work.
16. Therefore one could argue that without the unique relationship between a young person and a youth worker, youth development and learning potential may be stifled or indeed may not even begin. One of the implications of this is that youth workers need to understand and fully appreciate the significance of 'relationship' in the developmental process.

17. The findings suggest that it is perhaps no longer appropriate to call everyone claiming to work with young people 'youth workers.' Subsequently, there is a need for much more sophistication in the interpretation of those who engage with young people at certain ages, in certain communities, in a certain way, with specific purpose and outcomes.
18. Those involved in youth work do not claim to work with all young people. In fact there are large numbers of young people who choose not to become involved in youth work at any stage of their lives. Despite this, youth work approaches are effective in engaging young people and are strongly positioned to help young people develop and appreciate talents other than their academic abilities.
19. Given that youth work has historically been engaged with both education and welfare provision, it is perhaps not surprising that youth work should be seen as having an important role aimed at tackling social exclusion in young people. In Northern Ireland there are many forms of poverty, violence, anti-social behaviour, hooliganism and paramilitary influence that impact upon the lives and development of young people. Whilst youth work has potential to engage and support young people, it is unrealistic to suggest that youth work can become a panacea to addressing all that society perceives as "wrong with young people."
20. The findings show that youth workers attempt to work with all young people whether generically or specifically in specialised programmes. Indeed the range of work undertaken by youth work is wide and impressive, including working with the unemployed, homeless, ethnic minorities, young people underachieving at school, those involved in crime, joy-riders, teenage mothers and young fathers, those abusing drugs and alcohol, those with behavioural problems, mental and sexual health problems, and those affected by paramilitary activity within their communities.
21. Such a diversity of programmes may result in decisions being made by organisations that prioritise specific issues, for example anti-social behaviour. Paradoxically however, these programmes may be open to criticism regarding the narrowness of their focus, whilst organisations that take a more generic approach are open to the charge that they cannot be as effective across a range of issues and differences.

22. Youth work as an informal educational tool for learning appears to be justified by the fact that many young people fail within the formal education sector. A major challenge facing youth work and educationalists is the need for a new system or way of educating and learning that can tackle issues associated with growing up in Northern Ireland. It is in this context that formal approaches to education such as in schools could be combined with informal educational youth work approaches. Whilst there were apparent difficulties in regard to ethos, purpose and expected outcomes within schools and youth work, there was clear evidence in this research of the many benefits to young people through combining formal education with youth work.
23. While formal education is focused on a prescriptive curriculum, youth work is much more diverse - leaving the outcomes nebulous and difficult to measure. Although there is a danger of being too specific about measurable outcomes, there are growing demands from funders and policy makers for youth work to produce more tangible forms of measurement and accountability. This suggests that youth work must become more effective in articulating who it is they work with, why youth workers are doing what they do, what they hope to achieve from this work, and why they are in a strong position to effect change in young people's lives. Importantly however, findings from this study revealed that the shift from 'process' to a 'product' oriented profession was proving difficult for many youth workers. Indeed, this reorientation in youth work appeared to be happening without the consent or engagement of those at the forefront of youth work. Funders and those interested in monitoring youth work and its effects need to take into consideration the difficulties that youth workers are experiencing adjusting to this new paradigm. The majority of youth workers in this study believed that focusing on 'products' in some way deflected them from what they were trying to achieve in their relationships with young people. It may be unrealistic to expect time bound youth work programmes to provide the types of outputs that funders require or alleviate the extensive and pervasive social problems that many young people experience. For the youth workers in this study, the fact that some socially excluded young people actually participated in a youth work programme was in itself a 'product.'
24. The issue of 'product verses process' in youth work presents a significant challenge for the future direction and focus of youth work in Northern

Ireland. Conversely, the ability to offer more concrete and tangible evidence of the effectiveness of youth work, offers enormous opportunity for the status and value of youth work to achieve greater recognition amongst funders, policy makers and other professions. This research suggests that no one profession can claim to meet all the needs of young people in our society. It also claims that there are many potential benefits to young people through professional collaboration. It is important therefore that youth work becomes more articulate in demonstrating what it can accomplish with young people. The three core principles of youth work as outlined by the Department of Education (2003)<sup>1</sup> are broad and inclusive but perhaps too vague to enable specific outcomes to be identified. In order to align itself more strategically with other professions, youth work will need to find better ways to measure its contribution to the young people it claims to serve.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

25. The report makes the following recommendations:

### Professional Issues Within Youth Work:

- ◆ Youth work should move towards a formal registration of all those who work with young people in order to protect youth workers and young people, in particular vulnerable young people.
- ◆ There should be an accredited and sequential pathway from 'novice' to 'professional' that explicitly reveals the stage of development/training/skills of each individual working with young people. (At present the Dip HE in Community Youth Work carries the only necessary qualification for professional status).
- ◆ Unqualified youth workers should carry titles such as 'associate youth workers' that clearly denote they are not qualified to carry out some duties unsupervised and that differentiate them from professionally qualified youth workers.
- ◆ Employing bodies should be explicit about the level of competency required for individuals working with young people, in particular vulnerable young people.

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<sup>1</sup> *Youth Work: A Model For Effective Practice.*

### **Formal and Informal Education:**

- ◆ The potential for tension between informal youth work approaches to learning, assessment and personal development and approaches within the formal education sector should be taken into consideration when planning and delivering youth work in schools. This would involve the school in determining the precise role and function of the youth worker and subsequent programming in the context of a formal educational establishment.
- ◆ Teacher training programmes should include modules designed to familiarise teachers with the informal approaches to learning similar to those on youth work courses.
- ◆ 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.

### **Youth Work Curriculum:**

- ◆ Youth work in Northern Ireland should be underpinned with conceptually-based knowledge on stages of youth development in relation to particular age groups.
- ◆ The Youth Service in Northern Ireland should differentiate between the types of outcomes associated with personal and social development and other outcomes such as numbers and targets for participation and attendance on programmes.
- ◆ The Youth Service in Northern Ireland should seek to offer indicators that can measure youth work outcomes such as self-esteem, confidence-building development and social skills.
- ◆ Consideration should be given to performance indicators, outcomes and targets in order to better assess the effectiveness and impact of youth work with marginalised young people.
- ◆ There should be constant acknowledgement that youth work alone cannot alleviate social and economic ills.

- ◆ Through expertly designed training programmes, youth workers should be enabled to understand their model(s) of work and more importantly to begin the process of reflecting on the concept of sequential 'progression' from the initial relationship-building phase to addressing and supporting the more challenging aspects of young people's lives and behaviour as they move through periods of transition related to age, abilities and gender.

### **Resources:**

- ◆ Youth work should be accepted as an important and complementary prong of educational approaches in Northern Ireland, and funding should be secured on a more permanent basis. This is especially important in the context of educational failure amongst socially excluded young people.
- ◆ Funding bodies should consider 'long-term' investment for continuity and coherence between youth projects and youth development.
- ◆ Increased resources should be made available to support innovative youth work with marginalised young people.

### **Youth work training:**

- ◆ There should be a review of youth work training that includes assessment of the extent to which it needs to take cognisance of specific skills rather than the current broad generalised approach to training.
- ◆ Youth workers would benefit from some initial training before they are required to work in a different context or in partnership with a different profession. This would help identify what skills youth workers need to develop in an unfamiliar context.

### **Future research and discussion:**

- ◆ There should be debate within the Youth Service around the concepts of 'generic' and 'specialist' youth work, particularly in the context of youth work in 'contested spaces.'

- ◆ Research should be carried out to help clarify the role, purpose and contribution of youth work in a post conflict society.
- ◆ Research should be carried out in order to clarify the concept of 'empowerment' (and its underpinning philosophy) to the Youth Service in Northern Ireland.
- ◆ Research should be carried out into the effect of 'short-term' funding on youth development.
- ◆ Research should take place into the role, value, purpose and intended outcomes of youth work within schools.
- ◆ Research should be carried out in order to examine why there appears to be an increasing conceptual reorientation within youth work from a 'process' oriented profession to a 'product' driven profession.

## **METHODOLOGY**

26. The first issue for the researchers was the deconstruction of the concept 'youth work'. To this end the researchers adopted a qualitative approach using four focus groups followed by two in-depth interviews involving experienced qualified practitioners who were involved in youth work in two distinct areas:
- i. Youth work in schools
  - ii. Youth work in a sectarian interface.
27. This evaluative process was chosen because the researchers knew they would be dealing with complex issues evolving from discussion with experts in the field of youth work. The full sample consisted of 65 practitioners, both professionally trained and unqualified within the field of youth and community work. The entire sample was directly involved in practical work with young people either as youth workers or community-based workers with a youth remit.

## THE PROJECT

28. The project was undertaken for the Department of Education by University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast. The cost of the project was £10,000.

## FULL REPORT

29. The full report entitled " The nature of youth work in Northern Ireland: purpose, contribution and challenges " by Dr Ken Harland, Dr Tony Morgan and Dr Orla Muldoon is available on the Department of Education website at [www.deni.gov.uk/facts\\_figures/](http://www.deni.gov.uk/facts_figures/)

*This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.*

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