Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies
Est 1998. Published by Social Care Ireland

Volume 2 | Issue 2 Article 6

2000-01-01

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Recommended Citation
Jenkinson, Hilary (2000) "Youth Work in Ireland: The Struggle for Identity," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 6.
Available at: http://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol2/iss2/6

Youth Work In Ireland: The Struggle for Identity

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Abstract

This paper discusses the struggle the youth work sector in Ireland has experienced in forming a conceptual and practice-based identity. Youth work in the Irish context is a relatively new discipline both in theoretical and practical terms and its development on the ground has been severely hindered by "the erratic and fitful evolution of policies...insecure employment conditions, inadequate resources and a constant search for funding from a bewildering array of sources" (Gilligan 1991 p.89). This article outlines some central principles that are fundamental to youth work practice, and identifies practice contexts which adhere to these tenets. The article provides an overview of agencies in Ireland that work with young people, and locates the voluntary youth work sector within this broader context. Factors influencing the development of this sector are explored and the article concludes with a brief outline of the background and aims of three voluntary youth organisations.

Introduction

Over the years youth work in Ireland has been struggling to develop an identity of its own; an ethos and conceptual framework that is particular to that discipline, as opposed to being seen as an offshoot of social work, probation work or even sport and recreation activities. There is a need to clarify what is central to youth work as there is much confusion, even within youth organisations, as to what it entails (Banks 1994 p.2-3, Godley 1996).

This article aims to discuss some of the issues involved in defining youth work and identify the principles that inform youth work as a profession. It then provides an overview of services in Ireland for young people specifically focusing on the nature of the voluntary youth work sector, including an overview of three youth work agencies.

A Definition of Youth Work

Youth work has been defined as; "informal education work with young people aged roughly between 11 and 25 with the aim of promoting their personal and social development" (Banks, 1993,p.78 quoted in Banks 1994,p.3). This definition sees youth work primarily in terms of the development of the young person. However some would argue that this is a limited view and that central to a definition of youth work is the notion that youth work should aim to engage with society and bring about social change in an unequal society (Taylor 1987, Rosseter 1987, Smith 1988). Those who take this view emphasise:

> the position of the young person in society in terms of their class, gender and race. It looks at external factors that may be affecting them as a result of their position, such as poverty, sexism and racism. It views young people as active participants, themselves having the potential ability to affect change.

A development in thinking regarding the nature and purpose of youth work is reflected in the numerous policy documents produced in Ireland over the past twenty-five years. The beginnings of youth work were characterised by the explicit aim of the social and moral development of young people. A shift in emphasis at a policy level can be detected in both the Bruton and O'Sullivan reports, to a model of youth work that focuses on the development of the young person while accepting and promoting the norms of society 'The aim of youth work should be...to enable young people to develop personally, to appreciate society and to contribute to it' (Bruton 1977, p.7)

> Youth work provides opportunities and support to young people, for association, the development of personal autonomy, and the essential values and competencies to participate effectively in a changing society (O'Sullivan 1980, p.12).

The Costello Report conveys a further shift in thinking regarding the purpose of youth work as it emphasises the importance of the empowerment of young people. It advocates the social and political education of young people and encourages young people to be critical participants of the society they belong to. It acknowledges the inequalities in society and claims that greater equality can be

achieved through greater degrees of participation in political, economic and social institutions.

It must be emphasised that this shift in thinking at a policy level does not necessarily mean that this is being translated into practice. Too much youth work practice has remained at a recreational level and not enough thought has been given to standing back and evaluating the work, asking; "why do we do what we do?", "what is the purpose of it?", "what is its aim?". This is not to take away, however, from the many examples of excellent youth work there are around the country, with well-defined aims and clear direction based on principles of real participation, liberation and empowerment.

Youth work organisations in Ireland vary in relation to the degree in which they adopt this political dimension of youth work practice. This is due to several influencing factors:

1. Ethos of Organisation: i.e. whether the organisation is conservative or radical in its orientation. In Ireland, most youth work agencies would tend to lean towards the conservative end of the spectrum. This is possibly due to the religious orientation of many.

2. Requirements of Funding Agencies: most funding for youth work originates from State Departments and is insecure and short term in nature. This continual dependence and lack of security limits the potential scope of organisations in relation to overtly challenging statutory institutions or government policy.

3. The Nature of the Work: some types of youth work lends itself to having a political focus i.e. work with marginalised groups such as with women or Travellers; development education work; or work around environmental issues. In such contexts a political approach incorporating consciousness raising and social action techniques are often seen as the most effective modes of intervention.

Principles of Youth Work

Even though there is a lack of consensus regarding a precise definition of and the boundaries of youth work, it is possible to identify several principles underlying the discipline:

- youth work is an informal education experience
- it is based on participation and partnership with young people
- it is young person centred
- young people are involved on a voluntary basis
- it is based on experiential learning

Informal Education:
"first and foremost youth workers are educators" (Rosseter, 1987, p.52)

Youth work has been identified strongly with the concept of "informal education". That is a process of education which takes place outside of the formal education (school) system, and is concerned with the development of the whole person. According to Hurley and Treacy in this process of learning occurs in three ways:

- the social relationships in the group between the adults and the young people and between the young people themselves;
- the contents of the programmes;
- the opportunities provided for young people to be involved in the decision making and taking responsibility (Hurley and Treacy 1993 p.1).

Partnership and Participation:

Participation and partnership are of key importance in the youth work process. Staunton describes youth work as a 'partnership between adults and young people involving adults working with and not for young people, in a manner that prioritises the active participation of young people as equal partners in the process' (1996 p.56). The aim is that young people have a sense of control and ownership of the project, club or whatever the context may be. In this way youth work is proactive in facilitating the active involvement of young people in taking on responsibility and in decision making.

Young Person Centred:

'The starting point of a youth work process are the individual and collective needs of the young people' (Godley 1996). Youth work should be "youth centred" as opposed to being driven by the needs of the agency, the youth worker, or indeed the requirements of funding agencies. Of course these other needs will influence the work carried out with young people but the primary focus should be the needs of the young people.

Voluntary Participation

Staunton (1996 p. 56) suggests that youth work involves people on a voluntary basis where they can withdraw at any time A distinctive feature of youth work is that young people participate voluntarily; that is, because they choose to, not because they are required or obliged to. In this way it differs from probation work, most types of social work and the formal education system.

Experiential Learning

Tell me and I may forget
Show me and I may remember
Involve me and I will understand
(anon)

A key element of youth work is the principle of learning by doing. According to Smith (1982), experiential learning is based on three assumptions:

- people learn best when they are personally involved in the learning experience;
- knowledge has to be discovered by the individual if it is to have any significant meaning to them or make a difference in their behaviour; and
- a persons commitment to learning is highest when they are free to set their own learning objectives and are able to actively pursue them (Smith 1982 p.15).

Services for Young People in Ireland

At this point it is important to make the distinction between organisations working with young people and youth work organisations. Not all agencies who work with young people ascribe to the youth work principles outlined above; for example a significant proportion of the work of the Probation and Welfare Service is carried out with young people, yet the principle of voluntary participation is clearly not in operation and young people are certainly not equal partners in the process. Similar assertions may be made in relation to Community Care Social Work where participation with the service is often involuntary, and statutory power rests firmly with the Health Board. The formal education sector, while primarily concerned with the education of young people, rarely employ experiential learning techniques or methods. So while these organisations do have young people as their target group they could not be described as youth work organisations as only agencies that work according to these core youth work principles can be described in this way. That is not to say that other services do not take on board some tenets of youth work, undoubtedly they do, however often due to agency restrictions, legal requirements, or statutory obligations such agencies operate according to principles that are contradictory to those of youth work. Youth work organisations are found in the youth service sector which operates within the remit of the Department of Education, Youth Affairs Section.

In order to outline the context of Irish youth work, it might be helpful to provide an overview of organisations working with young people, and specifically identify where youth work agencies are located.

Diagram 1 gives a general outline of the main agencies that provide social services for young people. It shows that the main Government Departments responsible for youth provision are; Education, Enterprise and Employment, Health, and Justice.

Juvenile detention units, special schools and the Probation and Welfare Service are all under the remit of the Department of Justice. The Department of Health has responsibility for child welfare and protection through Community Care Social Work, which is located within the Health Board structure. Psychiatric services are also provided by the Department of Health and includes child guidance. Neighbourhood Youth Projects are funded by the Health Boards and work with young people at risk. Community Training Workshops provide vocational training for long term unemployed young people, and those who have left school early. These are run by FÁS which is under the brief of the Department of Enterprise and Employment . The Department of Education is probably the biggest provider of services for young people and is responsible for schools, Youthreaches, and Youth Encounter Programmes. Youthreach Projects are targeted at specifically meeting the needs of early school leavers, and Youth Encounter Projects originally catered for the special education needs of youths in the 10-14 age range who are at risk of offending, but have expanded their brief (see McElwee, 1996).

The Voluntary Youth Work Sector

Youth work organisations (i.e. those that ascribe to the principles of youth work outlined above) are under the remit of the Youth Affairs section of the Department of Education. However, apart

from Comhairle le Leas Oige, these organisations are voluntary in nature and the government as yet has no effective statutory responsibility for them. It is envisaged that this will change with the forthcoming Youth Work Amendment Bill which would effectively place youth work on a statutory footing. However, to date, this sector has primarily operated in the voluntary sector and is characterised by an ethos of "volunteerism". Volunteerism is not exclusive to the field of youth work but reflects a general ethos in Irish society. This ethos, according to Devlin and Lorenz, is based on "an understanding of the relationship between state and society that limits the state role to matters of "last resource" (1994 p.61). Help and support should come from the family, the community, and religious or charitable organisations. Within youth work volunteerism has been a fundamental principle informing work with young people. This is reflected strongly in the O'Sullivan report:

> Irish youth work is characterised by being predominantly voluntary in nature. We value greatly this characteristic and wish to see volunteerism maintained and even further developed...We value it as a process which enriches our society...It involves people in taking on an appropriate degree of responsibility for various aspects of their community life and in diminishing an unhealthy dependency on bureaucratic institutions (O'Sullivan, 1980, p. 17).

The role of volunteers has remained a strong feature of Irish youth work; however in recent years the focus has lessened somewhat. This is due to increased state intervention; the publishing of policy documents proposing the youth service be placed on a statutory footing; the increased use of Community Employment Schemes within youth organisations; and the increasing professionalisation

of youth work. Other difficulties associated with volunteering have been identified by Ruddle and O'Connor (1992) and Hurley (1993). According to Ruddle and O'Connor, those who do volunteer often have a sense of being taken for granted and of being seen in a negative light by others in the organisation. In her study of volunteers in the National Youth Federation, Hurley found that many volunteers find themselves over extended in terms of their time commitment and the range of activities they are involved in. In light of this Hurley states, 'A key challenge for youth service managers, therefore, is to develop recruitment, induction and retention policies aimed at volunteers which seeks to harness the natural enthusiasm of volunteers in a focused and manageable manner' (1993 p. 49). This would help further enhance the valuable contribution to youth work made by volunteers.

Funding for youth services comes from a myriad of sources including lottery, E.U., grants, fundraising, various government departments, and private sources. Most funding is short-term which can make it impossible to plan for the long or even medium term. It is very difficult for youth projects and clubs to develop a secure sense of identity when, due to the insecurity of funding they do not know if they will be in existence beyond the current financial provision. This also leads to a lack of job security and a high turn-over of staff; factors which also lead to insecurity and uncertainty. The continual search for finance also means endless time and energy is invested in compiling funding applications and fundraising efforts. This is clearly very unsatisfactory in terms of trying to provide a professional, co-ordinated and planned service, incorporating a stable and consistent approach in working with young people (Jenkinson, 1996).

Another factor mitigating against the development of identity for youth work is the absence of a trade union in Ireland specifically for youth and community workers. In Britain, the Community and Youth Workers Union (CTWU), is a union dedicated to the interests of youth and community work and has been proactive in supporting the development of identity of the profession, providing practical advice and assistance to professionals, including publishing guidelines relating to employment practice and policies in these fields (see Nicholls 1995, 1997). Such a resource and support structure would be a valuable asset to youth and work in Ireland.

The National Youth Service of Ireland was originally set up as an umbrella representative body for voluntary youth organisations. The history of this organisation however has been characterised by several of the larger youth organisations disaffiliating from the N.Y.C.I. for a variety of reasons. This has left Irish youth work without one unifying lobbying voice and consensus within the field of youth work became fragmented (Devlin and Lorenz 1994, p.68). One the key proposals in the White Paper on Education was for "a single representative body for all voluntary youth organisations. In a speech given at a youth work conference in 1995, the then Minister of State for Youth Affairs, Bernard Allen, referred to this issue when he said:

> I am strongly of the view that a lack of unity has had a negative impact on the development of, and the funding of, the Irish Youth Service. I am strongly in favour of unity among the national voluntary youth organisations under the wing of a single representative body...Lack of co-operation can dilute the effectiveness of the Irish Youth Service. I

acknowledge that there is co-operation in certain areas but more could be done and indeed must be done (Allen, 1995).

Recent years however have seen the re-affiliation of all major youth organisations to the NYCI, thus restoring the original representative role of this organisation.

Let us take a more detailed look at the aims and objectives of some of the main Voluntary Youth Work organisations in Ireland. Most of the youth services, youth clubs, and special youth projects in the voluntary sector in Ireland are affiliated to one of the following umbrella organisations.

The National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland was set up in 1967 as an umbrella organisation that would act as a policy making and a co-ordinating body for voluntary youth organisations. The NYCI is officially recognised as a social partner which has allowed them to participate in the formulation of the National Programme and gives them the right to consult with Government on matters relating to young people. NYCI also has representatives on bodies such as the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), the National Economic and Social Forum, and An Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS). At international level, NYCI is represented on the Council of European National Youth Committees (CENYC), the Youth Forum of the EU, and the Youth Directorate of the Council of Europe.

Objectives:

The main objective of the NYCI is to work on behalf of voluntary youth organisations to promote the development of services for all youth young people.
The priorities of the NYCI are:

- ensuring the necessary funding for youth organisations from Government;
- Lobbying Government for more comprehensive services for young people;
- Promoting the work of voluntary youth organisations;
- Representing the views of all member organisations on a national and international level;
- Providing the necessary information and services to all member organisations;
- Providing a voice for young people (source: NYCI An Introduction (leaflet))

The National Youth Federation

The National Youth Federation was established in 1961 when it was called The National Federation of Youth Clubs. Its original purpose was to act as a co-ordinating body for its affiliated youth clubs, which then numbered 12. This organisation has developed considerably since its inception and today it is the co-ordinating body for nineteen regional youth services.

Objectives:

The objectives of the NYF are:

- to promote and facilitate personal development and social education for young people, enabling them to take active roles in their local communities;
- to promote comprehensive, community based youth services throughout the country;
- to constantly improve youth work practice by, with , and for young people; and
- to be a national focus and source of inspiration for quality youth work.

Foróige:

Formally named Macra na Tuaithe, Foróige was founded in 1952 and its aim was the development of young people in rural Ireland through their participation in youth clubs. Throughout the 50's and 60's Macra na Tuaithe had close links with Macra na Feirme and received much financial support from the W.K. Kellog Foundation. 1969 saw the appointment of the first Regional Youth Officers and the development of the organisation's Curriculum Development Service, which has evolved into Foróige's current Eight Education Programmes. In 1981 Macra na Tuaithe changed it's name to Foróige, The National Youth Development Organisation. Today in addition to operating over 500 youth clubs around the country, the organisation also operates general Youth Services and Youth Development Projects in a number of areas in association with localV.E.C.s

Objectives:

Foróige has the following objectives:

Principle Objective:

a) To develop and implement a youth education programme complementary to the home, school and work to enable young people involve themselves consciously and actively in their own development and the development of society.

Ancillary Objectives:

b) to provide learning experiences designed to enhance the human potential and foster the personal development of its members, leaders and others through involvement in its programmes, activities and events.
c) to foster the development by its members of essential knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for effective living, especially in the areas of family life, vocational development, recreational activity, and democratic, civic and social activity.
d) to involve, as volunteers, young people, parents and other adults in facilitating the development of themselves, of others and their communities.

(source: Rules and Constitution of Foróige, National Youth Development Organisation)

Inherent in these objectives are the principles of self empowerment ('to enable young people'); learning by doing ('to involve themselves consciously and actively'); human development ('in their own development'); and community development ('and in the development of society') (Foróige Annual Review 1996 p.1)

Conclusion

This article has been a discussion around the development of identity in relation to the discipline of youth work in Ireland; a development which is still at the early stages both in terms of practice and theory. The article has also attempted to locate youth work in the broader context of organisations providing services for young people and outlines the ethos and objectives of several voluntary youth work organisations. The development of youth work services in Ireland has been piecemeal and haphazard in nature and the scarcity and short-term nature of funding is a significant factor in hindering the integrated and co-ordinated development of the sector. There is a dearth of documented youth work theory and practice, especially in an Irish context, there is a strong potential for cross fertilisation of ideas and many benefits could be gained from sharing examples of good practice and pooling of knowledge and resources.

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