

# **Undervalued or Misunderstood? Youth Work and its contribution to lifelong learning**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the relevance of non formal educational experiences associated with youth work practice in Northern Ireland. It argues that while youth work is distinctly educational and involves constructive interventions with young people its role and contribution is often undervalued or misunderstood. Youth work plays a vital role in supporting young people through the increasingly prolonged and complex transition from youth to adulthood. While youth work sits within a theoretical framework of non formal education, its contribution to lifelong learning is perhaps of greater significance than has previously been recognised.

## **The nature and purpose of Youth Work**

The roots of youth work as a method of non formal education has its origins in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Milburn, et al, 2003). Whilst it is difficult to say exactly when the term youth work became prevalent, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) set up in 1844 has been identified as the first dedicated youth organization (Smith, 2002). Other significant factors in the emergence of youth work were increasing public interest in youth as a distinct category with specific needs and a more scientific theorising of the term adolescence by psychologists such as Stanley Hall (1904).

Despite its history, the concept of youth work can be difficult to define and therefore has produced competing views as to its fundamental purposes and nature (Tucker, 1994; Harland, Morgan and Muldoon, 2005). While Smith (1988:51) argues that it is helpful to think of there being 'different forms of youth work rather than a single youth work with commonly agreed characteristics,' Jeffs and Smith (1999:48; 2010:3)

identify several distinctive characteristics that have been present to differing degrees in youth work practice since the early 1900's:

- Youth work is directed towards young people;
- Youth work has an educational and welfare purpose;
- Youth work is a commitment to association, relationship and community – working with young people in community so they may better relate to themselves, others and the world;
- The personality or character of the worker is of fundamental importance
- The relationship between a youth worker and a young person is voluntary

It is worth mentioning that the concept of 'youth' is problematic when deciding on intervention. For example, the youth service in Northern Ireland is charged with young people between the age of 4 and 25. Agreeing on what constitutes 'youth' is an important part of the current discussion in Northern Ireland in terms of what should be offered by the Youth Service. Some practitioners have suggested that under 10's should be offered 'play work' and that Youth Service should only deal with those between 12 and 18 years of age, i.e mainly adolescence. The main point is that although youth workers categorically work with young people, there is no agreed definition of the concept of youth.

### **Underlying youth work principles.**

Jeffs (2001) has commented that it is the voluntary principle that has distinguished youth work from most other services to youth people. Participation and group association is not compulsory and therefore a young person retains the right to freely enter into relationships with youth workers and other young people and to end these relationships when they choose. This contrasts with problem based interventions and deficit models which have been so dominant within social policy directed at young people (Davies, 2005). Increasingly deficit models have orientated youth work towards supporting vulnerable, excluded or 'at risk' young people in negotiating more successful youth to adult transitions (Mizen, 2003; Jeffs and Smith, 2006; Spence, 2007). This is an important consideration as youth to adult transitions have become more prolonged and

complex and characterised by greater risk and uncertainty (Shildrich and MacDonald, 2007).

Smith (1982:24) suggests that youth work is the, 'conscious attempt to help young people gain for themselves, the knowledge, feelings and skills necessary to meet their own and others developmental needs.' Williamson (1995) argues that there is a developmental process in all youth work practice, beginning with a focus on the individual, developing into group formation, consolidation and growth. This is reinforced by Spence et al (2006) who purport that youth work processes begin with non formal, person-centred approaches that develop into planned structured interventions as a means to achieve predetermined outcomes. Research has shown that young people on youth work programmes learn more effectively in settings where they feel safe, valued, supported and involved in decision-making processes about issues that affect their lives (Harland, 2001; Harland, Morgan and Muldoon, 2005).

Young (1999:61) posits the view that, 'youth work engages young people in the process of moral philosophising as a function of their identity development and responsibility as social beings in a social world'. She further asserts that the 'uniqueness' of youth work is not found in its methods, curriculum content or targets groups, but through its ability to support and enable young people to explore fundamental questions about their own identity - principles that are also present in much of the literature around lifelong learning.

Like formal education, youth work is essentially part of a lifelong learning educational process (Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice, 2003). One key difference, however, is that youth work occurs in non-formal settings as opposed to formal structures within schools, colleges and universities. The notion of the 'learning environment' is given serious consideration within youth work. Mahoney (2005) suggests that youth workers can be identified as informal educators through the unique way in which they engage in the daily lives of young people in a range of informal settings. Mahoney argues that being conscious about how and where youth workers engage young people, and reflecting upon this, contributes to the development of youth work practice. Youth workers seek to work in ways which encourage young people to use their experiences of everyday living as opportunities for learning about themselves and others'

(Crosby, 2005:54). Spence et al (2006) state that youth work practice is inextricably linked to the realities of young peoples' lives and is affected by local culture and the relationships that young people have with other people and institutions such as the family, school and police. These authors suggest that 'these realities are given conceptual cohesion in the language of non formal education, which encapsulates both the informal, relational aspects of the work and its intentions towards constructive learning and development' (Spence et al., 2006:134). Importantly however these authors argue that while youth work sits within the theoretical framework of non formal education, the language of youth work has not been fully developed.

### **Youth Service in Northern Ireland**

The social and political troubles which began in 1969, significantly altered the shape and direction of youth work in Northern Ireland. In the early 1970's youth workers were increasingly employed to deliver diversionary programmes aimed at keeping young people, particularly young men, off the streets and away from violence. Subsequently youth work in Northern Ireland took a different direction than youth work in the rest of the UK and Ireland. In 1973 as part of local Government reorganisation, Education and Library Boards were established that were responsible for the statutory provision of youth services in Northern Ireland.

The Youth Service (NI) Order 1989, which succeeded the Recreation and Youth Service (NI) Order 1973 and the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 Article 37, stated that youth service could be provided either directly by Education Boards themselves or through assisting, both financially and non-financially, other youth service providers in the organisation of activities. This evolved into the creation of three distinct statutory, voluntary and community youth sectors. The statutory sector consists of youth clubs, area projects and residential centres. The voluntary and community sectors are made up of a greater variety of community groups, organisations, including church based, uniformed, headquarter and umbrella groups. Since the late 1960's youth work has also been significantly shaped by the fact that young people have grown up in a deeply divided and contested society. Sectarianism and the effects of the 'troubles' have been shown to have a significant influence upon young people growing up in Northern Ireland

(Bell, 1990; Smyth, 1998; Harland and Morgan, 2003). Connolly and Maginn (1999:97) found that sectarianism amongst children in Northern Ireland was rooted in their day to day experiences and by the age of three, children had not only developed an understanding of the categories of 'Protestant and Catholic,' but were able to apply negative characteristics each to the other.

The Youth Service in Northern Ireland encompasses a broad diversity of provision that includes; services for children under 10 years of age; services for young people aged 10-16 years old and services to young adults. The Northern Ireland Strategy for Youth Work 2005-2008 stated its vision in a post conflict society was to promote the development, well being, rights and participation of young people by ensuring all young people in Northern Ireland:

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

In order to understand the underpinning philosophical and ideological concepts of youth work in Northern Ireland, it is important to take cognisance of the core principles permeating youth work. These core principles led down by the Department of Education (2003:11) are 'a commitment to preparing young people for *participation*, the promotion of *acceptance and understanding of others* and testing *values and beliefs*.' These core principles underpin the personal and social development of young people and ideally should be reflected in all youth work.

Northern Ireland is a society emerging from a period of prolonged violence and reflection on any aspect of life must be considered in the context of the conflict that has been prevalent since 1969. Contemporary youth work takes place within the context of 'a legacy of violence and communal strife, alongside other issues that affect modern society' (Department of Education, 2003:16). Providing support to young people, often at the forefront of community and sectarian violence, has been a major aspect of youth work practice in Northern Ireland for over three decades (Harland, Morgan and Muldoon, 2005).

One of the most powerful influences in encouraging young people in a contested and divided society is to engage in reconciliation work. Youth workers have potential to be valuable role models and by their example can encourage acceptance and understanding of others. The promotion of acceptance and understanding of others are an important aspect of youth work curriculum seen within broader principles of equity, diversity and interdependence. These principles promote appreciation of the difference between, and interdependence of, people within society and builds upon community relations practice developed in response to the Northern Ireland conflict since 1969.

### **Youth work and employment.**

Youth work has a role in the development of social capital while increasingly being drawn into the debate about human and economic capital. One of the challenges for youth work has, and will continue to be, the role played in training for employment. The transition from school presupposes the belief that school has prepared young people for the world of work or indeed civic society. Pohl and Walther (2007) refer to a process of ‘activation’ i.e. the transition of disadvantaged young people from school to work. They state (p533),

“...is it possible to specify whether activation implies adaptation to mechanisms of selection in education, training and the labour market, or whether it increases young people’s potential to take action in shaping their own biographies (i.e. through participation and lifelong learning).”

Whilst policies driven by education, training and the needs of the labour market are extremely influential they often miss those young people on the margins of society. and MacDonald (2007:591) state that the most damaging problem with the ‘transition debate’ is that it has tended to take young people out of the youth equation by treating young people as troubled victims of economic and social restructuring without enough recourse to the active ways in which young people negotiate such circumstances in the course of their every day lives.

This is a sentiment and goal that youth work practice attempts to redress. In Northern Ireland youth work programmes are designed in response to the issues that

young people consider important. Examples of this include informal education programmes focusing on sexual health, sexuality, mental health, violence, community relations, anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol awareness, sport, peer education, leadership (Harland, Morgan and Muldoon, 2005). Youth work occurs in many informal settings ranging from youth centres, community centres, schools, street work, churches, residential centres and hired accommodation. Crucially however, these environments are secondary to the nature and purpose of youth work. Conversations between youth workers and young people can occur anywhere. It is this non formal aspect of youth work that to date has been misunderstood or undervalued in analysis of lifelong learning. In particular is absent the role that youth work plays in 're-balancing' the lives of marginalised young people towards more realistic, rather than idealistic youth to adult transitions (Morgan et al, 2000).

### **The role of Youth Work.**

In Northern Ireland youth workers increasingly find themselves attempting to redress the disadvantage experienced by young people due to extraneous factors such as low academic achievement, peer pressure, drug use, alcohol abuse, trends in mental health and suicide, relationships, community expectations, racism, violence, sexuality, ethnicity, sectarianism, religion and anti-social behaviour. Shildrick and MacDonald (2007:589) suggest that the 'linear' movement from youth to adult that focuses narrowly on educational and employment prioritises normative and policy-focused assumptions and often de-prioritises the actual lived experiences of young people.

Many youth workers would agree with Shildrick and MacDonald's sentiments as they facilitate and work alongside young people as they navigate themselves through a complex set of societal domains. Youth workers have had to become a sort of 'community entrepreneur' in terms of redirecting time and resources to redress these complex issues in young people's lives. This focus has also had a considerable impact on shaping the delivery of youth work, particularly with marginalised young people.

A recent study by Harland et al (2005) found that youth workers had difficulty articulating outcomes from their practice. Many illustrated their understanding of youth work as a process rather than a product. Youth workers spoke of outcomes in terms of

raising self-esteem, building confidence and challenging negative attitudes – what they termed “bite-size” results. While these are important outcomes, youth workers struggled to demonstrate outcomes more grounded in a language associated with current policy demands. In addition they were concerned that youth work was moving away from its historical and core objectives in order to meet the demands and language of ever changing funding bodies and government youth policies. This has been particularly evident in Northern Ireland throughout the ‘peace process’ as European Peace and Reconciliation funding mechanisms have increasingly demanded more robust outcomes as an expression of value for money.

Measurement of tangible outcomes through the concept of ‘capital’ is a move towards meaningful understanding in this regard. In *Social Capital: Key Ideas* (2003) Field describes the theory of social capital as “at heart, most straightforward - its central thesis can be summed up in two words: relationships matter.” Field says that maintaining these relationships over time individuals can achieve more than they would have expected if they did not have a strong relationship. If we agree that youth work offers young people, particularly marginalised young people, social capital in the form of relationships and support, then the movement of this form of capital into useful, human/economic capital could prove useful as a vehicle for moving youth to adulthood. However, there are acute differences in regard to how formal and non formal education supports young people through this transitional phase of their lives. Shildrick and MacDonald (2007: 597) state,

“...the young and disadvantaged now face a series of revolving doors, unstable, non-progressive youth transitions in which chronologically arranged government labour market programmes are central components.”

Pohl and Walther (2007:535) discuss ‘yo-yo’ transitions in which young people experience aspects of youth and adulthood simultaneously and feel ‘stuck’ somewhere in between.

Youth work, if it is to continue as a non formal educational activity outside the formal system (schools and higher education) may, according to Field (2002: 209), have to start using the language of markets and competition. He says that if this is the case then there may be negative unintended consequences,



“.....output-related funding, rather than improving performances of service-delivery agencies such as colleges, *youth service (authors' italics)*, has often distorted their behaviour.”

Field (2002:210) further warns that the ‘fuzzy’ nature of soft outcomes will create problems if they are used by Government to achieve certain political objectives. Field adds however that it is unlikely ministers or civil servants will feel confident in their capacity to develop clear criteria for judging success (or failure). This is important to youth work in that many of its outcomes are perceived as ‘soft’ and by nature difficult to quantify. Governments fund programmes that can offer transparency, measurable outcomes and quantifiable outputs. Field says that governments will only offer small amounts of finance partly because of the difficulties they face in establishing whether the results offer value for money. For Field (2002:211) intangible factors invariably present policy makers with measurement problems. He says that pursuing soft objectives through partnerships with non-governmental actors also lays government open to the charge of throwing money away.

Field and Schuller (2002: 86) discuss the pursuit and development of adequate measures for assessing the accumulation or erosion of social capital. They suggest that rather than think of alternatives or competing sets of measures, a concept of ‘nested’ sets may be useful; “...from the narrowest qualifications-focused to the broadest set of social indicators, each fulfilling different roles.” (p. 86). They acknowledge the importance of both social and human capital which at times may mean ‘a trade-off between specificity and focus on the one hand, and contextualisation and scope on the other’ (p. 86). They argue that building such a nested structure should help avoid, “the quantitative spuriousness of the human capital approach on the one hand and the over-inclusive vagueness of social capital on the other.”

Irrespective of the rationale for funding programmes that offer soft outcomes Field and Schuller (1998) suggest that there is a correlation between social capital and participation in lifelong learning and a direct relationship between future study and low educational achievement. Indeed Field (2003b) goes much further when he suggests that most people in Northern Ireland think that their school did not help them prepare for learning in adult life. When asked specifically if school taught them the skills and

knowledge they really needed later in life 70% of women and 71% of men said no. Asked the additional question if school opened peoples minds and made them want to learn, 74% of women and 79% of men in the sample said no. Field's conclusions appear to be positive for those that avail of it in terms of the contribution that 'education' can make to people's lives. In Northern Ireland the standards at 'A' levels are exceptionally high as is, interestingly, the percentage of young people leaving school with no qualifications. Paradoxically many people are not convinced that school provides an adequate preparation for learning in adult life (Harland, 2000; Field. 2003a).

### **The contribution of youth work to lifelong learning**

Whereas formal education focuses primarily on qualifications (product driven human capital) youth work focuses heavily on personal and social issues (process driven social capital). The non formal nature of youth work also enables youth workers to address many issues with young people that are not covered within formal educational curriculum. Undoubtedly this position conflicts with the types of hard outcomes that are identifiable in higher education. However, there should be greater recognition of the potential for youth work to complement formal education and underpin personal development and the acquisition of social skills and knowledge amongst young people.

No single profession or discipline can claim to meet all the needs of young people in any society and there are many potential benefits to young people through professional collaboration and multi-disciplinary approaches. Youth work supports and encourages a young person to pursue personal interests and address their everyday lived experiences. In contrast formal education operates within a much more structured and less flexible curriculum. This is perhaps where opportunity and creativity for links between formal education and non formal youth work best lie.

One possible starting point for developing links between formal and non formal education has been identified by (Morgan et al., 2007). This research examined the role of youth work in schools supporting disengaged young people. One finding was that youth work principles were somewhat incongruent in the formal school setting and on occasions youth workers believed that they had to compromise key youth work principles. For example, the emphasis on relationship building within youth work was not

always fully understood by teachers. Other more latent principles underpinning youth work also conflicted, i.e. the voluntary nature of the relationship between young people and adults; flexibility with learning due to the lack of a prescribed curriculum and an emphasis on personal development. Dress code, timetabling and how young people addressed adults were also identified as difficult areas for youth workers and teachers to agree upon. This study noted many benefits and opportunities of schools employing youth workers to work with disaffected or disruptive young people. It also acknowledged that when youth workers moved outside their learning environments, it was more difficult for them to deliver what they considered “real youth work.” Youth work will need to take cognisance of a ‘school ideology’ and what a school expects from a pupil. There are many opportunities for ‘new’ thinking and creativity in the development of strategies that can combine formal and non formal approaches in order to meet the educational needs of young people that link school, work and lifelong learning. Youth workers are undoubtedly skilled in working with young people who may not comply with expected norms. Loughlin et al (2005) outline a multi-disciplinary approach within education that draws upon the skills and knowledge of youth workers. Morgan et al (2007) argue that initial teacher training should incorporate youth work processes in order to enhance the widest educational experience of new teachers. While more research is needed in this area there is no doubt that there could be many benefits from developing a broader educational framework for working with disengaged young people in schools.

This paper proposes that there are many untapped opportunities for combining formal and non formal educational approaches. This may necessitate a change in how education and learning are perceived and how it is linked in the main to human capital with little cognisance taken of the personal developmental aspect of social capital for marginalised youth. What is needed, says Goodwin and O’Connor (2007) is more creative thinking that does not seek answers in past patterns of transitions between youth to adulthood that relate only to an economic imperative. They state,

“Although in the past the outcomes of transitions were seen as largely predictable .....it is possible that the ‘young workers’ subjective experiences were neither predictable, uniform nor unproblematic.”(p.570).

This sentiment suggests three things. 1) Youth work needs to continue to work closely with young people to find answers to complex social issues. 2) Looking for answers in the past may have limited value. 3) We cannot ignore how important it is for young people to be engaged in a process of switching them ‘on’ and not ‘off’ to lifelong learning. Stokes and Wyn (2007:499) claim that ‘forcing normative patterns to become universal would automatically ensure universal success seriously hampers the development of educational processes that could more effectively support young people by facilitating flexible education-work trajectories.’

Young people need assistance to navigate the complex social world of work and survival through projects that acknowledge the need for building knowledge, skills and understanding and subsequent resilience to cope with the compounded difficulties of marginalisation. Stokes and Wyn (2007) take this a step further by suggesting that school should be shaped to facilitate the employment needs of young people while they are still in education as they recognise the importance of work-based learning for future careers. This provides opportunities to work with young people, particularly young people who may be struggling academically, in more creative and realistic ways that better meet their vocational aspirations.

Educationalists may not be ready for concepts such as linking part-time work with the school curriculum even though both engage young people simultaneously. Stokes and Wyn (2007:508) argue that adult and youth practices often blur the boundaries of youth, adult, student and worker. There is no doubt that young people involved in part-time work appear to understand ‘learning’ within this context, primarily as a means of preparing for, and securing advantage, within the labour market as well as financial gain (Brooks. 2006:287). In a rapidly changing world, new and more creative thinking is needed, in regard to how educationalists meet the diverse needs of young people. Part of this creativity must lie in the establishment of more effective partnerships between those whose primary responsibility is the development and education of young people, i.e. youth work, schools and training. This necessitates a holistic approach to learning and recognition that no one profession has the capacity to meet the needs of all young people.

### **Concluding comments**

At the heart of youth work is the unique relationship between youth workers and

young people. Youth work is a distinctly educational process and involves constructive interventions with young people. Its delivery is inclusive and holistic, and facilitates the personal, social and educational development of young people during the transition to adulthood and employment.

Crucially, however, young people's abilities and contribution to society continue to be measured primarily through their experience of formal education. Those who focus on human capital related learning often fail to recognise and appreciate the diverse talents and skills of young people who are not necessarily academic but nevertheless of extreme importance. The fact that youth work places enormous value on social capital, through relationship building, is perhaps a key reason why it has struggled to gain credibility within formal education. Professions such as social work, probation, youth justice and schools are increasingly seeking the skills and knowledge of youth workers and recognising how youth work's holistic approach complements and enhances other educational interventions that aim to re-engage marginalised young people.

Despite its history, youth work appears to be undervalued and misunderstood in a wider educational context. This may be in part due to youth work's primary focus on person centred relationships which contrast and conflicts with the problem centred focus of many youth policies. Other contributory factors may include youth work's underdeveloped language within a theoretical framework of non formal education and the fact that outcomes cannot always be predetermined. These are perhaps some of the fundamental reasons that have contributed to youth work being undervalued and misunderstood. They may also be instrumental in determining why youth work has, to date, been conspicuously absent from critical debate within lifelong learning literature.

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