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Youth work and social exclusion: learning from history?

In most European countries, youth work has become an important topic on the youth policy agenda. This growing attention is partly spurred by the European youth policy agenda and partly stimulated by the renewed belief that youth work contributes positively to individual and social development. This belief is underpinned by an overwhelming body of academic research stating that participation in positive, structured youth activities appears to be of great advantage to a number of areas: it contributes to academic results (Fletcher et al., 2003), to the development of social and cultural capital (Dworkin et al., 2003), to a stronger position in the labour market (Jarret et al., 2005), to the nurturing of democratic skills and attitudes (Eccles et al., 2003)... To put it briefly: youth work contributes to social inclusion. This finding inevitably leads to one central priority on many youth policy agendas: ‘Tackling the problem of becoming accessible to non-organised or marginalised young people is now felt by all key players to be essential to increasing participation by young people (Commission of the European Communities 2006: 9).

► The youth work paradox: Empowering the powerful?

Youth workers who invest in the programming of structured activities face big difficulties to reach socially excluded young people. Given this problem of accessibility it seems as if the positive relation between youth work and social inclusion fulfils itself. Youth work contributes to the inclusion of young people who are already fairly close to prevailing standards of social inclusion (Coussée et al., 2009). For sure, there are youth workers who succeed in reaching the hard-to-reach. They set up more open and accessible forms of youth work without pre-programmed activities and explicitly outlined schemes of intervention (Williamson, 2005). Rather ironically, the increasing political

attention for youth work seems not in the interest of this kind of open youth work initiative, since they are often blamed for not producing the same positive outcomes as the more structured youth work initiatives. Academic research finds these open initiatives ineffective (Feinstein et al., 2006) or even counterproductive with regard to social inclusion (Mahoney et al., 2001). As a consequence youth workers working with excluded young people are increasingly confronted with demands to concentrate on measurable, individual outcomes in order to prove their effectiveness. This “what works” logic goes together with a tendency for standardisation, individualisation and formalisation of youth work and thus leads to paradoxical consequences: the hard-to-reach are excluded from youth work because it’s too hard to reach something with them.

► Learning from history: how to counteract the pistachio effect?

This paradoxical consequence of strategies that concentrate on individual solutions to social exclusion has been described as a ‘pistachio effect’, in which the harder nuts to crack are, at best, left until later, or, at worst, simply disregarded (Tiffany, 2007). It’s nearly impossible to go beyond this pistachio effect if the youth work discussion remains confined to a straightforward logic in which non-participation in structured youth work activities is seen not just in correlation to other social problems, but rather as cause to their effect (see Colley & Hodkinson, 2001). To a large extent the actual youth work discussion in most European countries seems to focus on ‘who comes in’ and ‘what comes out’ questions. These questions are as old as youth work itself, but the historical consciousness in youth work has never been very high. Rightly, it has been argued that the restriction of the discussion to these rather methodical questions makes youth work a vulnerable practice to those ‘who would foist on it warmed-over policies that have been tried and found wanting in the past.’ (Gilchrist, Jeffs and Spence, 2001).

In order to learn from our past, the Youth Partnership, together with the Flemish Community, organised two workshops on youth work history. The workshops organised in May 2008 and May 2009, definitely did not aim at purifying an essential youth work concept irrespective of historical and cultural context. Rather the purpose was to identify the close links between youth work developments and broader social, cultural and historical trends. What are the beliefs and concepts that underpin youth work? How do they relate to the recurrent youth work paradox saying that youth work produces active and democratic citizens but at the same time seems inaccessible for young people who are excluded from active citizenship? Tracing back the roots of youth work and identifying different evolutions within and between countries must help us to initiate and stimulate a fundamental discussion on youth work’s multifaceted identity and to cope in a constructive way with the recurrent youth work paradoxes. In this article we try to reflect some main findings, based on the Flemish story. The whole report is to be published by the Youth Partnership (see Verschelden et al., 2009).

► The social pedagogical roots of youth work

The invention of the social

The birth of youth work in Europe is inextricably related to radical changes in European nation states. The Enlightenment and the French and other Revolutions enforce other, more dynamic views on the relationship between individual and society. The Industrial Revolution definitively denaturalises the maintaining power relations in society. This denaturalization implies that people should learn to behave as responsible citizens. Charity and repression could not be sufficient any longer to secure the social order. The shaping of a social cohesive society is felt as an

urgent political problem. Therefore social pedagogical concerns are at the heart of social policies (Mennicke, 1937). As division of labour and increasing organization of social life have diminished the pedagogical strength of the traditional socialisation milieus (family, local community or guilds and corporations) the need is felt to develop a new and all-embracing network of social pedagogical entities. This intermediary register between individual and society has been called ‘the social’ (Donzelot, 1984). The social functions as a buffer-zone between the private lifeworld, built around personal freedom and exclusivity, and the public system, aiming at equality and cohesion. The social is the field where people learn to participate, where they learn to relate their individual aspirations to public expectations. It provides a democratic forum to participate in the shaping of society, but it also canalizes all too radical political passions (Donzelot, 1984). Through the social, the system also provides support to citizens who need it. At the same time the social protects citizens against too intrusive interventions from the system. The social is the sphere where the inherent paradoxical fundamental values of our capitalist democracies, freedom and equality, are balanced. The social sphere is vital for the cohesion of society. Therefore the social itself is always ‘under construction’.

The social question: social movements, social care, ‘social’ work

This symbiosis of pedagogical and political functions is an essential part of the youth work identity, for it is one of the segments of this ‘social’ field. Many of these ‘social’ organizations came into being in the 19th century, a period of big transformations and consequently also increased concerns around social cohesion. It seemed that flourishing capitalist economies instigated the ‘desocialisation’ of large parts of the working-class. The invention of the social is also meant to find an answer to this social question. In the social sphere different institutions aimed at working-class children and young workers also grow. In many cities patronages or catholic youth groups are installed. In 1843 in Turin Don Bosco was one of the first to start with such an initiative providing a combination of care, recreation and education. Next to these youth groups, often run by priests or people of good will from the bourgeoisie, movements organised by the working classes themselves came into being. In Flanders, as in other countries, socialist young workers organised themselves to fight - next to their fathers - for better working conditions. The Young Guards are often described as a youth movement, but it was in the first place a ‘social’ movement. The emphasis lies not on being young together, but on social issues. The whole spectrum of social care institutions and social movements organised by different groups and layers in society could be called ‘social’ work.

The youth question: youth movements, youth care, youth work

Another perspective on questions concerning social cohesion (or social in/exclusion) manifests itself some decades later and first in the middle and higher classes. The ‘youth question’ is an expression of the tendency to differentiate lower age categories

from adults. Spurred by the fact that school-attendance finds acceptance in large sections of the population, and underpinned by the emerging science of developmental psychology, youth becomes a distinguished population group and adolescence is constructed as a specific stage of life. Like young workers, students organise themselves in a movement. Whilst workers' youth fights against inhumane working conditions, the Flemish student movement fights against things that are seen as a hindrance to their emancipation, for instance the dominance of French language in schools and society at large. So, this second youth movement is also a 'social' movement spending time to study social issues and to undertake social action. **In this sense we could argue that all youth work is social work.**

From 'social' movement to youth 'work'

The start of the 20th century initiates a double evolution. Developmental psychology is more prescriptive than descriptive in construing adolescence as a crucial life stage in which constructive experiment in a fairly isolated youth world is essential. Youth work is designed as a safe place in which pedagogical interventions are inspired by considerations of individual, positive youth development and not of social and political collective action. Moreover it is the development of "middle-class college boys" that is taken as a model for positive development in the direction of an ideal youth stage. This evolution from direct to indirect participation seems to have clipped the wings of the first youth movements. In other words, the individual pedagogical aspect of the work is over-emphasised and the social political component is obscured.

Next to this confinement, the evolution from social movement to youth work means a double jeopardy for the working class young people as their development - and their youth organisations - are now defined as immature, deficient and even undesirable. Youth work is now an educational method. In between the World Wars in Flanders, as in many other countries, the middle class uniformed youth organisations are set as a standard for all youth work.



► The 'resocialisation' of the working-class

In this *pedagogisation of the social question*, youth work has become a powerful instrument to 'resocialise' a part of the de-socialising working-class. The first youth movements gradually are adjusted to adult, middle-class concerns about the desirable development of young people and they are fit into a whole range of youth organisations differentiated according to gender, class and age. Questions about social cohesion are fundamental to youth work's existence, but they are pushed to the background. The youth work discussion now focuses on methodical aspects concerning the acquisition of democratic skills and attitudes. The obscuring of the social political aspects of youth work's identity is consolidated in a new methodical youth work concept, that was initiated in the UK but in no time conquered the world: scouting, an apolitical method (Lewin, 1947) which confirms the shift from social struggle and social justice to cultural renewal and character building.

Most existing youth organisations were transformed and remodelled according to the scouting method. The necessary 'resocialisation' of the working class has turned into a civilizing strategy, with youth work functioning as an 'equalizer', an instrument to clone the middle class. Some organisations, like the Catholic Worker's Youth from Canon Cardijn, did reach out to some working class young people and succeeded in fostering individual social mobility, but it is not surprising that youth work did not appeal to large parts of the working class youth. After World War II the relation between youth work and the so-called socially excluded young people became an issue in youth work policies. In order to increase the attraction for working class kids, some youth workers deliberately dropped the explicit pedagogical aspects of youth work and evolved into providers of leisure activities for young people. In doing so they unwillingly eroded what was left of the social pedagogical identity of youth work. Youth work has become an a-political and a-pedagogical instrument, standing for nothing, falling for everything.

► The death of the social?

Of course this is an over-simplified description of the conception of youth work, but it may have the power to show us how the attention for the 'social' has gradually disappeared from youth work discussion. The social pedagogical perspective on youth work has not only become undesirable, but even unthinkable. The social question has not disappeared, but is constricted in the youth question. This leads to a narrow interpretation of emancipation and an a-political interpretation of social cohesion and thus social in/exclusion. Every now and then concerns about individualisation, uncertainty and the social cohesion of our society crop up (Castel, 1995). These are the moments that a social pedagogical perspective knows a revival and critical voices from youth work practice find a renewed response, but since Thatcher (ex-prime minister in the UK) has proclaimed that 'there is no such thing as a society', it seems very difficult to broaden the discussion: prevention and positive development are key-

concepts of youth policies in most European countries, but the discussion is framed in a discourse that restricts social integration to institutional integration: integration in schools, labour market, youth work, ... All young people are entitled to receive the educational support they need, but entitlements are self-evidently translated to questions of the accessibility of the existing agencies, organisations, institutions... occupying 'the social'. The agencies themselves do not have too much space to play their 'social' role. In many countries youth work's role as a democratic forum has been diluted. Youth work has become a question of risk management, a question of preventing undesirable behaviour and stimulating healthy behaviour. The social in youth work is restricted to a 'transit-zone' from point A (immaturity) to point B (maturity). This seems to be a one-sided interpretation of the essential 'social' nature of youth work. This finding urged Giesecke (1985) to call for 'the end of education' or as Rosseter (1987: 52) argues: 'The essential nature of their work is concerned with bringing about change. It is about moving young people on in some way from point A, not necessarily to point B or C, but to some position beyond A' (Rosseter 1987: 52).

► What's social about youth work? Learning from history

You could argue that the interpretation of youth work's history as described above may be just too depressive or depressing! Of course youth work offers a forum for young people to make themselves heard. Of course we should not keep silent about the thousands of young people who found in youth work a place to shape their identity, to gain unknown experiences, to acquire a distinctive style and to experiment with relations and behaviours, but all this happens on a fairly intuitive basis; which is at the same time the strength and the vulnerability of youth work. It creates the room to maximize the potential of one of youth work's core features: the pedagogical relation. But at the same time it gives youth work a blurred, unclear identity, which makes it difficult to defend open youth work practice with socially excluded young people. Above all however, we fail to reflect on an essential part of our identity. Many youth workers underemphasise the 'social' in their work. Their forum function is often predefined and social divisions between young people are rather consolidated than transcended. Other youth workers are being disempowered (or disempower themselves and the young people) by interpretations of the social as a transit-zone and they are increasingly forced into formalised, methodical and individualised youth work concepts. History can inspire us in the ongoing construction of a youth work theory, that gives us opportunities to revalue youth work as a social pedagogical practice and at the same time prevents us from seeking solutions in formalising the informal. ■

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