Youth work, a social practice!

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The European Commission adopted, in 2009, a new EU strategy for youth policy for the coming decade entitled 'Youth – Investing and Empowering'. In this document, young people are seen as a resource that should be protected and in which we should invest for the future. The new strategy also emphasises the importance of youth work and the need for strong policies aimed at further professionalisation of youth work as well as increasing participation of young people. These objectives have been welcomed with open arms by most players in the youth sector. There are some arguments for that warm reception. Young people and youth work have risen on the political agenda and long-term policies have been given shape. Yet, it is also somewhat ambiguous because the protection of young people and investing in young people for their future are not really core elements of today's youth work agenda. Most youth workers would rather emphasise youth work as providing room for experimenting and for enjoying being young together, here and now. These somewhat ambivalent objectives and the incongruent reception by the youth sector need further critical analysis. The constant references in policy documents to 'new challenges' for youth work tempted us to put our present youth (work) policy in an historical context. And then, there is also the concept of 'youth work' which does not have an unequivocal meaning across Europe. Therefore, an historical framework can show the shared roots of a very diverse field of practice. Above that, it can inspire us to critically revisit our current youth policies and youth work practices.

Defined by history, blinded by 'presentism'

In many countries youth work has been established as a 'third pedagogical environment', next to family and school. In some, it is a field entirely driven by volunteers; in others, the youth work field has been professionalised. In southern Europe youth work is less well established as an integral part of the welfare system and is also less professionalised. In most southern European countries one tends to speak about informal education or non-formal learning instead of youth work. So, in some countries, 'youth work' could be a somewhat misleading term for it is not directly connected to the situation of young people in relation to the labour market. However, in a welfare state under pressure, the other pedagogical environments increasingly fail to support young people's inclusion and give them access to education and the labour market. This means that some forms of youth work increasingly deal with unemployment, educational failure, marginalisation and social exclusion (Lauritzen, 2008: 370). This situation forces some people, especially younger youth workers, to ask the question: 'Is this still youth work?' This is an interesting question. Not because we should identify one single concept of youth work. We did that before and history shows us that this can only work if society also defines one single concept of childhood. Luckily, we know by now that there is no such thing as 'the normal child'. So, a single concept of youth work obviously is not needed to support a diversity of young people. Still, it is an interesting question because the search for the answer helps us to identify the main characteristics of youth work. This is a quest that goes beyond defining the 'best youth work method', and moreover, asking the question makes us think and discuss. That is much more important than answering the question and closing the discussion. This fundamental discussion gives us tools and a framework to turn a critical eye to prevailing youth policies.

An instrument for empowerment and investment?

Looking at the new EU youth strategy we can easily indicate some parts which need critical analysis that investigates how far it reflects young people's actual lives and their social positions. It is said that 'young people are targeted as the main priority' and that 'youth work is recognised as an important actor to contribute to objectives', but which objectives? The strategy points out that: 'Promoting the social and professional integration of young women and men is an essential component to reach the objectives of Europe's Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs, at the same time as promoting personal fulfilment, social cohesion and active citizenship.'

We can safely say that there was no period in our recent history where this ideal situation existed. Realising growth and jobs at the same time as promoting personal fulfilment, social cohesion and active citizenship? This is not as evident as it is assumed in the new EU framework. Why not? One of the reasons is possibly that there have always been nasty people who do not seem motivated to work hard for low wages in indecent working conditions. However, we tend to call that 'social inclusion'. This raises the uncomfortable question of whether 'social inclusion' is in the interest of all young people. Could it be that some young people are better off in a situation that we would define as 'social exclusion'? While people in situations labelled as 'socially excluded' may be less than happy, this does not mean that their individual inclusion into the mainstream – if this is attainable at all – is the only and final solution. Let's not pretend that 'the mainstream' is a bright and rosy place to be. As Pitts (2001) pointed out the routine, alienation, exploitation and discrimination are inherently part of the bottom of the mainstream. The argument of some all too enthusiastic adherents of social inclusion, positive youth development, prevention and many other 'positive', but ill-defined concepts and strategies often shows a very uncritical thought process, stating for instance that society has to support vulnerable young people for them to undergo a 'normal development' and to become 'gainfully employed individuals, not reliant on public funds' (Roth, 2004).

Therefore, if we take our own principles seriously, youth work is not in the first place an instrument for social inclusion. Youth work should start where young people are, and not where we want them to be. But youth work is not just about 'being happy and playing around' either. Youth workers should not run away from social problems or turn their backs to 'instrumental policies'. Youth workers may safely recognise that they really are instruments. At least then youth workers can choose the objectives for which they want to be an instrument. Youth workers should for instance help young people to develop lifestyles and cultural spaces, whether or not oppositional, that have personal meaning for them (Pitts, 2001). Moreover, youth work can also be significant in terms of societal learning processes, showing us the lived realities behind labels as social inclusion and social exclusion.

A social practice between system and lifeworld

In the Blankenberge conferences that laid the foundations for the 1st European Conference on the History of Youth Work and Policy (preceding the 1st European Youth Work Convention) youth work was identified as a social practice between the system and the lifeworld (Verschelden et al., 2009, Coussée et al., 2010). This way of approaching youth work opens up paths to accept diversity and most of all to maintain and even cherish the existing tensions in the youth work field.

Current policies tend to neglect those tensions and plead for a more structured, individualised, professionalised and outcome-focused youth work, especially with regard to vulnerable young people. So going back to the EU's 'Youth – Investing and Empowering' document, it becomes more obvious that we should turn a constructive, but critical, eye to the objectives and targets of European youth policies. How does this strategy relate to the new public management discourse that gained ground in the 1990s? In that discourse youth work is increasingly constructed as a transit zone between the lifeworld and the system, focusing on individual development and smooth integration into existing society.

Between system and lifeworld

Private — SOCIAL — Public

Transit zone — Forum
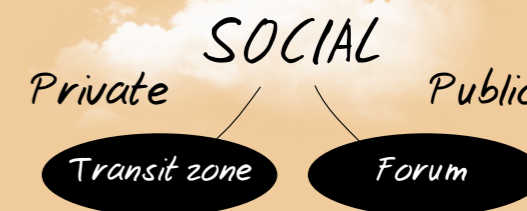
What should we do about this? One thing is sure: a defensive withdrawal into our own private youth work island makes little sense. Youth work is and has always been a social practice. If youth workers withdraw from the social field, they help to restrict the social field to nothing more than a transit zone. In fact, they reinforce the further 'desocialisation' of society. So, it is true that youth work is not a school or an employment bureau fed by, and feeding itself, the myth of young people as young entrepreneurs taking up their own future without reference to the future of other people. This social construction of young people, which became dominant in the 1980s (see Beck, 1986), has not bridged the gap between the haves and the have-nots, on the contrary. But youth work is also more than a playground or a place to have fun with like-minded young people.

Youth work is a social forum. This is a rather uncomfortable position for youth work, in the midst of a field of tensions. Should we help young people adapt to social change? Well yes, but at the same time we should question these changes, together with young people. What are the consequences of a changed and changing society? Are they in the interest of all young people?

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Celebrating tension and diversity

Should we try to eliminate those tensions? History teaches us that the 'social' will be eliminated itself if we do. Post-communist countries and post-colonial countries, but also Western neo-liberal (post-fordist) countries are all searching for a re-establishment of the social, but so far we do not seem to be getting much further than the ongoing colonisation of the private lifeworld through the public system or the other way round. There is nothing very social about 'social work' anymore. The social is a forum to negotiate power relations, to get to know and understand each other and the interest of others. It is not a transit zone to adapt to public expectations, nor is it an instrument to claim private rights.

So the 'resocialisation' of youth work shows us that the most important question is not how to lead young people into youth work, but rather how young people can and may be present in society. What counts is not so much the access to youth work, but the access through youth work. How does youth work increase the accessibility (and the usefulness!) of the educational system, the labour market, sport associations, dance halls, etc.? How does youth work support young people in their orientation in society, in their search to find their own place in society? How can we connect to processes of informal learning that are shaped in the daily conversations and relations between people? Therefore we do need that huge diversity of youth work forms and in a broader sense, all forms of 'social' work. We have to take into account a large diversity of people and the situations they live in. This is the social pedagogical task connecting all social work units to each other: youth work, community work, welfare work, street work, health work, arts, sports, cultural projects, etc.

WE MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING.

The power of youth work

The power of all youth work is its ability to create free spaces for young people that are characterised by safety, a sense of belonging, bonding and bridging, the art of conversation, challenges, friendship and relations. Different from schools, youth work creates places where young people want to learn. Perhaps this may not concern, in the first place, measurable skills. Most central to these learning processes are identity development and 'defining their own needs' (Miles, 2003). This is the starting point from where 'cultural action' (Freire, 1995) becomes possible. Cultural action is not focused on a static concept of education: educating young people starting from predefined realities. Cultural action is focused on questioning the obvious and takes for granted certainties that structure the lifeworld of young people. We should not limit their horizons, but broaden those horizons. And we should not forget what Freire taught us long ago: 'We make the road by walking.'

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Paper planes

by Marlies Pöschl

Paper planes

My new ideas are:

1 Write down our history – document more of what we do.

2 Youth work as a friendly dog.

3 Continuum in learning between formal, non-formal, vocational from a young age onwards.

6 I am so tired, but it was great.

5 Have a better exchange between youth workers and youth: collaborate and work together!

4 Don't be afraid of further formalisation of non-formal education.

My needs for the future are:

1 to have more than an hour and a half to make recommendations;

2 to have more spaces (but real ones) where we can all sit on the same level and can build a dialogue together... share realities!!! (youth workers, ministries, researchers);

not to have only (really!) male keynote speakers; 3

6 sleep.

5 more inter-cultural competence in Europe (and in South Africa)

4 to make young people with disabilities more visible in the EU;

My new questions are:

1 Youth work vs. volunteering. Do we need this division?

2 How will we develop diversity in the kinds of youth work (volunteer/professional, general/social) without throwing away the baby with the bathwater?

3 Why are people so scared of written values and criteria? Why are young people so scared of losing their influence – insecurity of participation structures?

4 How can we work more for youth work and not only youth workers?

6 Is Europe really able to create a canon of youth work policy? Aren't our experiences too different? Our needs? And is this convention the beginning of a close co-operation between adults and youth in other aspects?

5 If you want to co-operate with other sectors, you need to have a clear idea about your own goals. Does youth work manage to transport its objectives?

My suggestions for the future

1 Continue these conventions.

2 Increase the space for participation in this kind of event. It's a unique opportunity to have policy developers, researchers, youth workers, come together and this should be explored further.

3 Organise more specialised meetings for going into detail and depth.

6 Give more of a European dimension to the training of youth workers.

Have specialised international conventions that come together in the end. 4

5 Don't exclude the Council of Europe so much from structured dialogue.