

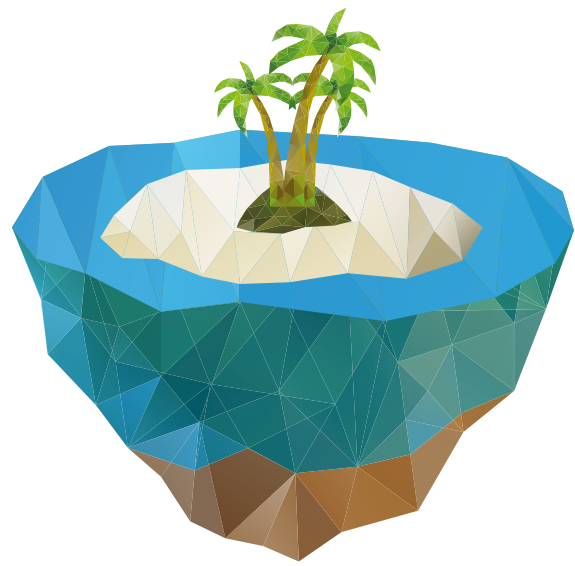


Interprofessional collaboration: easy to agree with, difficult to implement

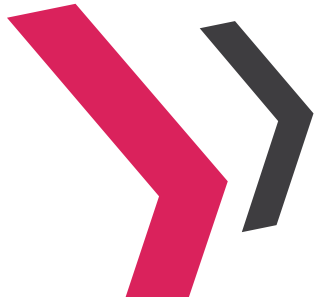
By Lasse Siurala



There's a lot of talk these days about the need for different professions to work together more, to break down barriers and so on. But what does that really mean in terms of youth work? What are the consequences?



Research has shown that it is more efficient to work through interprofessional co-operation than through sectoral organisations. Literature has also identified the key success factors (see below). However, the list of successful practices is much shorter than the list of failures. Typically, professionals often express their willingness to co-operate, but when it comes to actually engaging in that practice, they withdraw to the safety of their respective professions. The public sector, and not least the youth field, has praised integrated policies and interprofessional collaboration for decades. Most recently, the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention strongly emphasised the importance of “working together” and “cross-sectoral co-operation”. However, it still is more rhetoric than reality, as a lot of integrated youth policy plans and reviews remain buried on bookshelves without much impact. Why is it easier to aim at cross-sectoral co-operation than to implement it?



What do we mean by “interprofessional collaboration”?

There are different levels of collaboration. The most modest form may be called a “division of work”. In my capacity as the Director of Youth Services for the City of Helsinki, I remember a meeting with other directors of the city during which I proposed cross-sectoral co-operation to promote youth employability. The Director of Education was immediately against any collaborative measures and said: “When all sectors do their respective work well we arrive at the overall best possible results.” Thus the best form of collaboration is acknowledging the existing division of labour between the sectors and the belief that the sum total of them produces the optimal outcome. A more ambitious form of co-operation can be called “co-ordination”. When all relevant public and third sector actors agree to run their substance-abuse prevention campaigns at the same time, this co-ordination of simultaneous intervention produces, according to research evidence, better results than an unco-ordinated set of the singular activities. A third form of co-operation is “work in the interfaces of sectors”. Promoting active citizenship is an important objective for formal education and youth work. It is natural that the education authorities and youth services work together. In the City of Helsinki, they organise together, under the leadership of the direction of both departments, joint opportunities for young people to have their voices heard in Helsinki. Similar joint initiatives exist between youth work and social work, health work, cultural work, employment authorities and so on. Ideally, work in the interfaces is based on joint objectives with youth workers working together with teachers, social workers and health workers – learning from each other. Following this, Audrey Leathard, in her pioneering book *Interprofessional collaboration – From policy to practice in health and social care* (2003), has defined interprofessional collaboration simply as “working and learning together”.

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The success factors of “working and learning together”

The literature on interprofessional collaboration has identified the following success factors.

Tolerance and an unprejudiced attitude: readiness to listen to and respect diverse professional approaches, and being receptive to new ideas arising from them.

Sharing: capacity to share responsibility, power, philosophical assumptions, values, competences, data and work.

Training for interprofessional collaboration:

Interprofessional education should be part of the basic professional training in health, social and youth work, preferably in working life contexts. At work, interprofessional teams should be provided proper training.

Management: WHO health field experts find it imperative that managers in charge of interprofessional collaboration focus on questions specific to multi-agency teams (WHO, “Framework for Action on Interprofessional Education and Collaborative Practice”, 2010).

Crossing the borders between professional education, professions and administrative sectors: Practical experience suggests that educational and professional borders can be crossed through working together, but crossing the administrative borders is the more difficult nut to crack.

Accepting mutual dependency: Learning to understand complexity and admitting, for example in youth work, the limits of one’s competences and the need for the competences of others.

Power: Membership in a multi-agency team is not based on education, degree, position or job title, but experience and competence shared in an atmosphere of reciprocity.

Developing new services as the mission: The interprofessional collaboration team should perceive their task to be the development of innovative services, rather than just offering one’s own (unquestioned) ways of working with, say, young people.

Client participation: Professionals running their projects or activities sometimes are so engaged with them that listening to young people and their ideas tends to be forgotten or superficially dealt with.



In the youth field we often say that we are ready for co-operation, but that the others are unwilling or unable. This may be partly so, but there is also room for self-criticism. Looking back at the criteria above, do we personally as youth workers meet the criteria? Does the organisation we are working for do its part in the promotion of co-operation?

Furthermore, are youth workers ready to take the risk that, through intense interprofessional collaboration and conscious efforts to blur and break down boundaries, their own professional competences become questioned and changed as new ones are created. A few years ago I interviewed a youth worker who had been working for a year in a multi-professional team with social and health workers (sharing an office) to develop practices to work with young people on the Internet. When I asked her how her professional competences had changed during the year, she replied: “There is no return to youth work only!” Apparently, the cross-sectoral team combined their disciplinary competences into something more than their added effects, perhaps on a road to new professional competences. Thus the question, are we as youth workers ready to change or renew our competences and perhaps our identity?

An example of successful cross-sectoral co-operation

A good part of the above success factors are actually related to organisational problems. How can a small service like youth work find its role in the cross-sectoral co-operation of a siloed bureaucratic city? This is how it happened in the City of Helsinki through the Children and Youth Welfare Plan 2009-2012. The plan was based on the recent Child Care Act which said that the social services must prepare a four-year plan to be adopted by the City Council. The result was a joint effort by Social and Health Affairs, Youth Services, the Education Department and the Sports and Culture Department. It consisted of 22 concrete point-of-service activities. Youth workers worked in many of them together with social and health workers and sometimes with staff from schools, sports and culture with a lot of enthusiasm, mutual learning, a good atmosphere and a number of new working methods.

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The main reasons for success

1 Legislative support – Two recent acts, the Youth Act and the Child Care Act both strongly recommended that services co-operate with each other in designing their respective strategies. As a consequence, youth work was taken on board in the Children and Youth Welfare Plan of the Social Affairs Department. As this was a top priority plan to be adopted by the City Council, the Steering Group consisted of directors responsible for the sectors mentioned above. The legislative backing essentially made it possible for the youth workers to sit around a table with the most powerful directors of the city.

2 A joint start to create trust and shared understanding – It took a year of almost monthly discussions within the Steering Group to become acquainted with each other's approaches and strengths to agree on general objectives, priorities and the concrete activities. Most importantly, it was agreed that the sectors had to **work together** to respond to the needs of children and young people. Furthermore, the aim was to develop new services through point-of-service co-operation between social workers, health workers and youth workers. The process offered the smallest sector, the youth sector, the opportunity to contribute its competences and to see to it that its key interests were taken into consideration. Overall, top-level commitment to shared responsibility sent a clear message to the staff of the services about what was to be done.

3 A good choice of the process owner – The assumption behind integrated youth policies, is that due to its experience with youth and through its “comprehensive approach” to young people's

lives, the youth field should be in the driver's seat, or to use the language of management, the process owner. However, in this case the process owner was the Social Affairs Department. It was very clear that under the leadership of a small sector (youth work) the plan would not have attracted the other sectors, or policy makers. Working in conjunction with a bigger department, youth work had better chances to be recognised and to get its programmes and messages through.

4 Involving political decision makers – A number of planning phase seminars were organised for the City Council members to get their reactions – and equally importantly, to get them committed to the plan. The City Council was excited to have the sectors finally working together and decided that the plan was a priority programme within the council's own four-year strategic plan (and assigned an additional €6 million for the Children and Youth Plan).

5 Linking measures to budgets – There is a long history of municipal youth policy plans all over Europe. As a rule they have not been very successful. In addition to the difficulty of engaging other sectors and gaining political recognition, one key problem in their implementation has been insufficient links between the proposed activities and budget heads. The plans may have been drafted in enthusiastic co-operation with other services, but when the time came to implement them, most people withdraw due to a lack of funds. A study with similar results in 10 Swedish cities concluded that “good will isn't enough”. In the case of the Helsinki City plan, all activities were integrated in the annual budgets of the participating sectors.



The impact of interprofessional collaboration on youth work and youth workers

Of course, everything did not go as expected. Some joint activities were a success, others did not work out. Many things could have been done differently, such as more training and coaching in interprofessional work, particularly for managers, and more could have been done with the third and private sectors. Overall, four years is too short for big public sector bureaucracies to properly change their working cultures and to adapt to new working methods. The programme also lacked continuity. When it was over, many projects and their funds stopped. The youth work budget followed this path. During the programme, funds sharply increased, but when it ended in 2012, the additional budget allocations also ended. Despite this drop, the Youth Service budget has risen from €28.7 million in 2012 to €30.2 million in 2015. At the European level, this is a satisfactory development. The impact of this experience on youth work was manifold. First, it significantly increased the visibility and recognition of youth work within the City Council, City Hall and among the other sectors. Youth services were seen as an integral element of the welfare of children and young people.

Second, youth work became integrated into the cross-sectoral structures of the city. Many of those kept functioning even after the programme had ended, and youth work retained its position in them. The Youth Services also continued to play a key role as new interdepartmental bodies were established. Even if many might consider this only as useless bureaucracy, the fact remains that organisational influence is a survival factor for a small sector. Furthermore, how can youth work carry out its “bridging task” – as strongly emphasised by the 2nd European Youth Work Convention – if you don't have access to the bridges?

Third, at the point-of-service level where youth workers worked side by side with other professionals, the competences of youth workers became better known. The practical collaboration opened the eyes of many professionals. Youth workers' capacity to create a true dialogue with young people, to motivate young people to take action, their ability to work with youth groups and utilise peer dynamics were greatly appreciated. All this contributed to youth workers becoming better networked. Many interprofessional networks and personal contacts were created not only during the programme, but also after it. As a result of these connections “the bridging task” of youth work was essentially facilitated.

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Fourth, the programme offered an opportunity for youth workers to develop working methods in co-operation with other professionals. One example is the above-mentioned work with young people on the Internet as a joint effort of youth, social and health workers. Another example is the cross-sectoral team work with vulnerable youth and their parents.

(For more information see: <http://luotsi.munstadi.fi/luotsi-in-english/>)

The City of Helsinki Children and Youth Welfare Plan demonstrates that cross-sectoral co-operation is possible – when all the pieces fall in the right places – but necessarily takes time. It also shows that it is beneficial for youth work to build alliances.



Smells like teen spirit



Wendy Salmon interviews Dermot O'Brien

photos courtesy of Dermot O'Brien

What really makes you go into youth work? The young people with whom you work? How do you change? Where do you see the benefits of bringing an international dimension to your work? Dermot gives some well-thought-out answers and even looks at the convention.

You've been involved in the youth work and education sector in Ireland for more than 20 years. What led you to this field of work?

These days I am a freelance trainer/facilitator/consultant in the national and international youth work field. Alongside that I am a voluntary youth worker with Celtic Youth Bray, Be Well Bray and Phoenix Youth Project.

When I look back at my own teenage years I was very fortunate to be involved in youth work as a teenager in Bray and I have nothing but fond memories of Bray Summer Project and Adventuring Youth. For me, when I reflect on the starting point of this journey I find myself at the moment when I was invited to be a "helper" in Bray Summer Project. Being recognised as someone with "leadership potential" and having significant adults affirm that was hugely significant for someone who would normally be involved in troublesome activities! Being named as "Leader of the Year" as a 15-year old was the icing on the cake!

My first step into youth work as a potential career option came unknowingly when at 22 years of age. I decided that the kids of the summer project deserved more than just three weeks of fun in July. A group of young leaders and I set up Celtic Youth Bray (CYB). We were adventurous, idealistic and feeding off the positive energy of the 50 young people who would be our first group of members in September 1996. The success of CYB was the springboard for the youth work career of Daisy (oh did I mention my nickname is Daisy?! That's a whole other story!)

So, from setting up a voluntary youth club in 1996 (which is still going) I have managed to carve out a career in this field to the point where most recently I was selected to be one of 20 facilitators at the 2nd European Youth Work Convention in Brussels where some 500 delegates from across Europe came together to reflect on this profession of ours and where it's going.

