

Interprofessional collaboration: easy to agree with, difficult to implement

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.



What are the biggest obstacles to working in this area, and how did you overcome them?

My appearance was a challenge in the early years, I looked a little bit “alternative” shall we say! I never had any issues with the children or youths that I was working with but I wasn’t exactly a pin-up for the likes of teachers, some parents, social workers, etc. Also being a male working with small children was a challenge at times, in one sense being the only man on a team with 13 women had its moments but also there was a challenge in terms of the general perception of who people expect to see in a childcare role. A constant challenge over the years has been getting professional respect and recognition for the value of youth work. Managing your time and energy can be a massive obstacle if you don’t get it right. Finally, accepting that there are unsociable hours and weekends as part and parcel of youth work is vitally important.

What advice would you give to someone looking to start a career in youth work?

If anyone is considering a career in youth work I would say the starting point is asking yourself “why?” “Start with ‘why?’ and don’t use the word ‘help’” is the challenge I set to all potential youth workers or youth leaders I come into contact with. Youth work requires that you give of yourself. You should be very aware of what you can contribute. Feeling sympathy or pity for the poor unfortunate kids who have it tough is not an ideal starting point. Wanting to fix “broken” children is not what youth work is about for me because that suggests that they are passive recipients of your almighty intervention. Young people should be “actors” in youth work, at best we are collaborators with them as they transition from childhood to adulthood. If you have a good sense of who you are and what you’ve got and can place that alongside a strong belief in the potential of young people and are passionate about sharing positive spaces with all types of youths as they journey through adolescence, I would say come and talk to me and then explore which youth studies course is best for you!



Are there any lessons your work life has taught you?

Working with young people has taught me the power of empathy and the value of authenticity. In my work first and foremost you get me, Dermot O’Brien/ Daisy/Daiz. I don’t have a “work mode” or a persona and I don’t play a role. Yes I have knowledge, skills, attitudes and qualifications relevant to my field and I am a professional, however, my biggest asset is me. Good day me, bad day me, tired me, sensational me, passionate me, challenging me but always the real me and therefore the real “you” is always welcome and accepted in my youth work spaces.

Young people know if you are genuine, they know if you are happy to be there, if you are committed and if you really do have passion for the work you do with them. They respond to sincerity in such a positive way. The youth work philosophy that I subscribe to is rooted in relationships with young people. This is our magic! Everything grows out of the relationships we create with young people while we share spaces with them. Two phrases you will hear a lot from me in my work are: “Do you know what I mean?” and “I know what you mean”. There is something quite symbolic about checking in with people when you are sharing on any level and when you can say, “I know what you mean” to a young person and they believe you then you have empathy!

Having the tools to reflect and to maintain a healthy perspective on life both in work and outside work has been fundamental to sustaining my involvement in this field for so long. Especially when your own children eventually come on the scene! Suddenly the life you have dedicated to other people’s kids, days nights, weekends, etc. has a new dimension with some new expectations! Striking the balance in a way that I can constantly reconcile with myself, my partner, my children and the young people I work with is a fascinating process.



What or who has inspired you along the way?

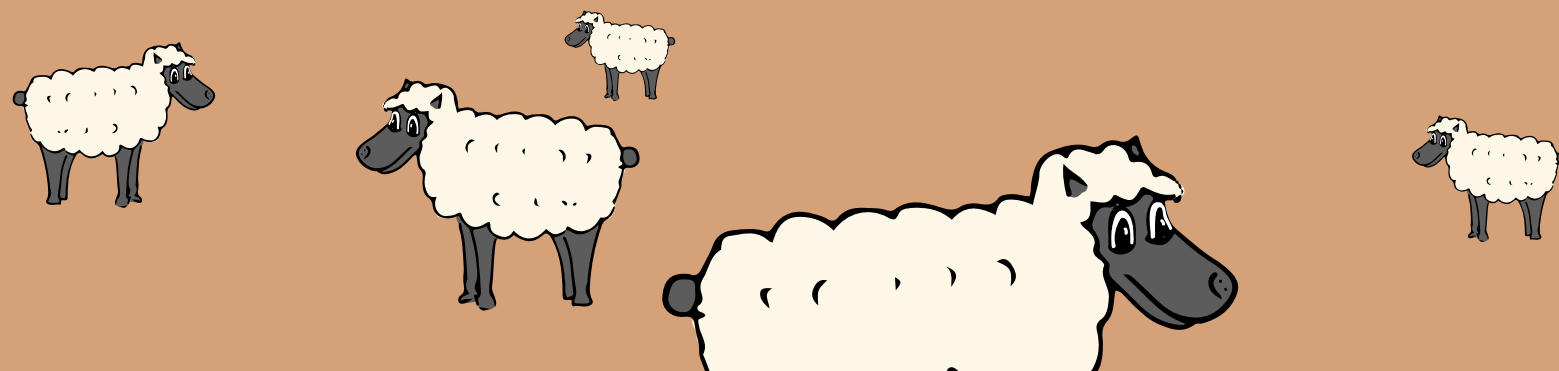
Wow! This is where I get to reveal the hugest and most phenomenal aspect of my work which has literally nourished my soul for the past 20 years! I consider myself to be the most privileged man in Bray! My primary inspiration comes from the family who have always supported me to follow my passion, be it my mother whose pride in me knows no bounds or my partner Susana who understands me and my needs more than I do myself! Beyond that I could do a roll of honour that would stretch to infinity. In many ways I see myself as an “extra” in the heroic stories of so many young people’s lives. How can one not be inspired when surrounded by heroes? Heroes who are striving to find their place in the world, heroes who are doing everything to overcome unbelievable challenges and obstacles. Heroes who in spite of those obstacles will always find a space in their heart for positivity and laughter while in the youth work environment. I get to play a small cameo role in the story of these lives and for that privilege I am eternally grateful because if I found myself stranded on a desert island tomorrow with no possibility of human contact for the rest of my days there would be more than enough stories to fill every minute of my existence with joy!

What do you see as the biggest challenges faced by young people in Ireland today?

I could list all of the multiple issues that cause struggles for young people in this modern world in which we live and some you might agree with and others you might dismiss but in an overall sense I believe that young people are faced with an unprecedented challenge in terms of how they navigate the journey through adolescence. Never have they been more stimulated, never have they been more exposed to technology, never has there been more expectation, never have they been more aware of the damage previous generations have done to their planet, never have they been more tuned into events happening across the planet, never has there been more pressure about who you are and how you look. At 10 years of age children can tell me about obesity, depression and suicide. The biggest challenge young people face, I believe, is that we as adults become deceived into thinking that they don’t need help with this journey.

What is it about our younger generation that you find the most inspiring, that keeps you coming back?

There is a resilience among young people and a willingness to take responsibility if given the opportunity. There is nothing more rewarding than seeing the growth and development of young people generation after generation. Then you get to meet them as adults and they still have fond memories of their times in youth work. It truly warms the heart!



Can you tell us some more about your most recent venture, the Phoenix Youth Project in Bray?

Phoenix Youth Project is a new adventure that I am involved in which, in many ways, is the ultimate test for a group of young people to build something from scratch. Its mission statement says: “Phoenix Youth Project is a local organisation with a global mindset working with young people to create positive opportunities for growth and development through innovative and inspiring youth work experiences.” The tag line is “Young people rising to their potential”. We aim to develop a youth project that invites young people to come along and explore who they are, what they are interested in, how they can contribute to the world while constantly rising to their potential. We don’t offer to carry young people to their potential but we do offer them an opportunity to be involved in something that supports an exploration of their potential. Whether you want to be a rapper, a human rights activist, a footballer or to play Xbox and hang out with friends, Phoenix will welcome you!

What can we do on a smaller personal level to support the younger generation coming up?

The best thing that we can do as parents or significant adults is to support their navigation through adolescence. Comparing our teen years with theirs literally serves no positive purpose, but remembering the spirit of what it meant to be a teenager can help. Whether we like it or not our teens must do three things during those years; they are unavoidable and in fact they are key to their development! Our job as parents or significant adults is to manage the boundaries while our children explore the world of 1. risk taking, 2. pleasure seeking and 3. impulsivity! You cannot avoid adolescence; you cannot skip it; we have all been through it. We cannot carry them through it either but if they allow us to co-pilot every now and then or at least to help them process some of the major events then the navigation support we offer will minimise catastrophes and chaos throughout the journey.

If you could do it all again, would you do anything differently?

If I could do it all again with a magic wand and perhaps remove the pain and suffering I’ve witnessed then, yes, let’s go again. If I could have prevented the untimely deaths by suicide, overdose and tragic accident then I would happily do it all again! Otherwise I consider myself blessed to have been able to work in my home town for 20 years and have such positive relationships with so many generations of young people. They truly should get all of the credit for who I am today within the youth work field.

How important is your involvement in international youth work for you and your youth work?

I am sitting here in Riga wondering about this question. I am in a room surrounded by a group of young people from Ireland, Finland and Latvia who are here to share and learn and explore and reflect and ultimately do something about LGBT and human rights. I see young people from Ireland presenting a timeline that represents a story that brings us to this moment in time when their country has achieved marriage equality by popular vote and a Gender Recognition Bill strongly influenced by those working in the field. Young people who recognise the significance of the journey and the people on that journey but are not content to sit comfortably because Ireland is “sorted”. Young people who see this European project as an opportunity to learn about other realities and to explore how the Irish example can support the journey of others and how words like solidarity and activism have an international context that can be real if you are brave enough to engage when the opportunity presents itself. These guys are change makers, they will carry the achievements of previous generations and they will continue the work begun by others because they choose to see the world through an international lens and they are willing to take responsibility for their role in that world! At the same time back home in Ireland four young leaders from Phoenix Youth are attending a Sustainable Development Goals seminar where they will bring a youthful perspective and continue our involvement in that critically important process for the future of our world!

So, when I think about the international dimension of my “evolution” as a youth worker I am reminded of another great moment of recognition in my career. The moment when my application was accepted to participate in the 3D Training of Trainers. Essentially this acceptance said to me: “We would like to endorse what you are doing at local level but you really need to check out this whole other world of youth work out there across Europe!” And so Arturas Deltuva and Mark introduced us to the concept of non-formal learning and this unique role of youth work trainer!

For just over 10 years I have been weaving these threads into my youth work existence. One thread has been about me developing as an international trainer and being supported by the Irish National Agency “Leargas” that took this locally based youth worker and made an investment in my growth as a trainer. Leargas opened a gateway for me into the European field of youth work, beyond this gateway lay opportunities for me as a trainer but also for me as a youth worker and for the young people that I have worked with over these years. One of the current trendy topics in the world of work is continuous professional development (CPD). I have been getting this on the European stage for 10 years. Being part of the Network of Irish Trainers (or rather a wonderful group of my peers and friends) supported by the National Agency to develop training courses for young people and youth workers, to attend trainings, to reflect on our growth as trainers, to explore new methods and possibilities, to meet and work with international colleagues (or rather a wonderful group of new peers and friends), to set goals for myself as a trainer, to support the implementation of the strategic development of international youth work and to ultimately contribute to the conversation about the recognition of the European youth work trainer as a valuable actor in the field of youth.

So, in terms of importance, the international dimension has a core place in the complex weave that represents who I am as a youth worker and trainer as well as how that impacts my work with young people. In truth, if we were to erase that aspect of my professional growth and all of the youth initiatives, youth exchanges, seminars, conferences, EVS hosting and sending, youth week, structured dialogue, etc., etc. there would most certainly be a chasm of missed opportunities on all fronts.



Can you give an example of a highlight from your experience in international youth work? (If the answer is “yes”, what would it be?!!)

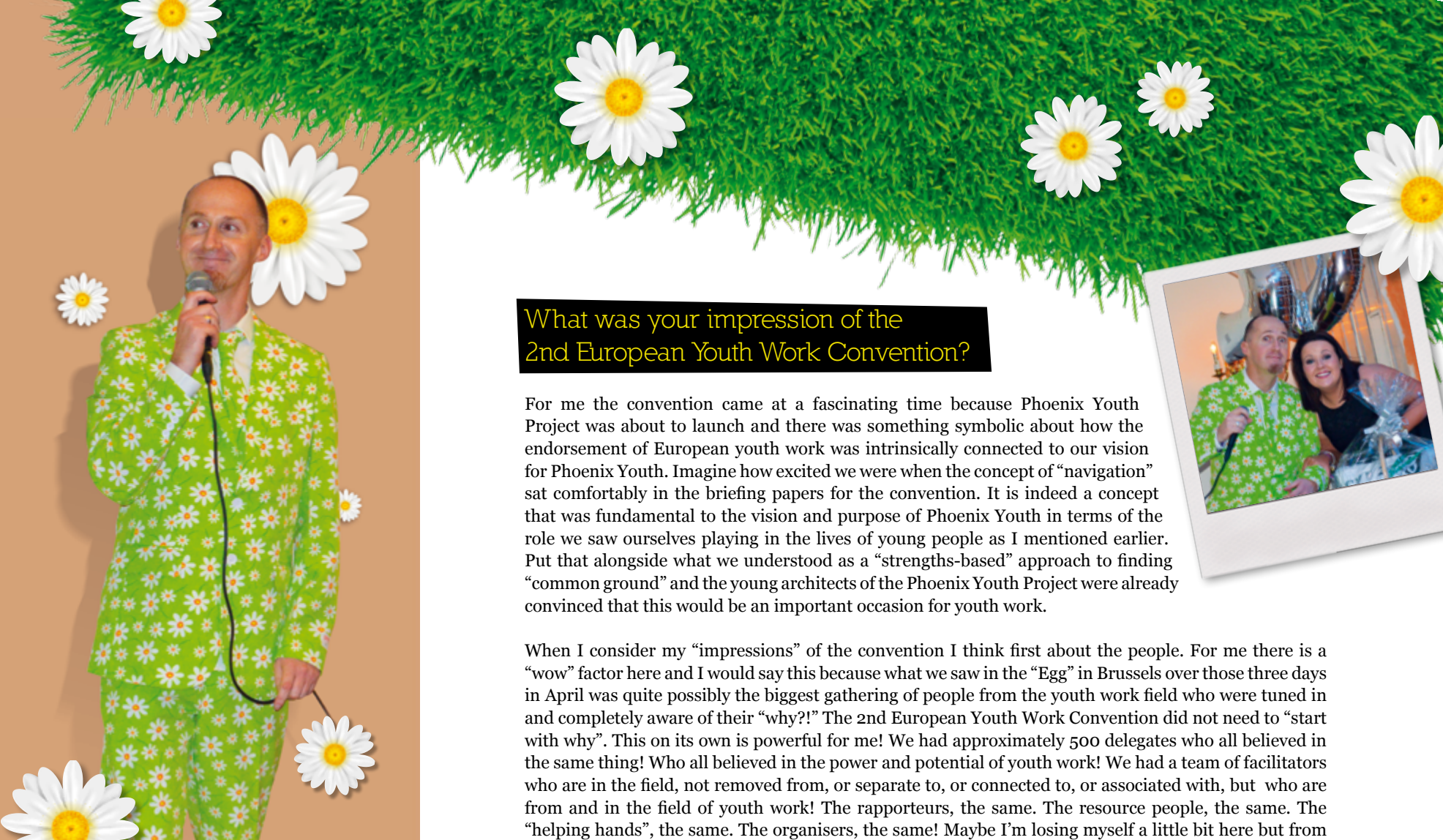
Oh come on! “A” singular highlight? Sometimes I think that the last experience should always be the highlight because it’s the most recent reminder of the positive potential of international youth work. That would be the launch of the new Inclusion and Diversity Strategy where it would probably be fair to say that a particular presentation from a particularly inspirational young Irish guy from the Travellers community reminded every single one of us why we do this work!

Otherwise, could it be when three young people from our youth project presented at the EU Youth Conference in Ireland in front of 250 delegates from across the EU? Or when we sent our first EVS? Or maybe hosted our first EVS? Or when some of our young leaders did a Junior Training of Trainers? Perhaps the European publication in 2014 that recognised our model of youth centre as an example of best practice because of how it authentically engaged young people in all aspects of development and delivery of youth work.

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Or, that memorable evening when I sat down with my first group to ever fill in a youth initiative application and they heard words like “disadvantage” for the first time and expressions like “European dimension” and the uncomfortable reactions to that and yet the honesty that went into that application: “We have no idea what the ‘European dimension’ means but we are willing to explore and find out!” Maybe the highlight was when Leargas sent the letter saying that the application was successful and that they would be funded to train as youth leaders and take a proactive role in their own communities?! Or maybe the highlight is that 10 years later these same guys come to the launch of the new Phoenix Youth Project!? While some of their own children are at home in bed, they are coming out to show their commitment to supporting something that they know will benefit young people. This is the return we get when we invest in young people.

The ultimate highlight is really when I get to stand back and immerse myself in the positive glow that emanates from young people who have taken an opportunity to explore this European youth work landscape and finally get to share their stories. Whether that’s on a couch in a youth centre, a coffee table, a kitchen table or at a seminar or conference, or even a post on social media! Those are my magical moments because I know that they are truly passing the torch to the next adventurers and genuinely making my role as enabler or facilitator so much easier!



What was your impression of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention?

For me the convention came at a fascinating time because Phoenix Youth Project was about to launch and there was something symbolic about how the endorsement of European youth work was intrinsically connected to our vision for Phoenix Youth. Imagine how excited we were when the concept of “navigation” sat comfortably in the briefing papers for the convention. It is indeed a concept that was fundamental to the vision and purpose of Phoenix Youth in terms of the role we saw ourselves playing in the lives of young people as I mentioned earlier. Put that alongside what we understood as a “strengths-based” approach to finding “common ground” and the young architects of the Phoenix Youth Project were already convinced that this would be an important occasion for youth work.



When I consider my “impressions” of the convention I think first about the people. For me there is a “wow” factor here and I would say this because what we saw in the “Egg” in Brussels over those three days in April was quite possibly the biggest gathering of people from the youth work field who were tuned in and completely aware of their “why?!” The 2nd European Youth Work Convention did not need to “start with why”. This on its own is powerful for me! We had approximately 500 delegates who all believed in the same thing! Who all believed in the power and potential of youth work! We had a team of facilitators who are in the field, not removed from, or separate to, or connected to, or associated with, but who are from and in the field of youth work! The rapporteurs, the same. The resource people, the same. The “helping hands”, the same. The organisers, the same! Maybe I’m losing myself a little bit here but from the perspective of a small-town youth worker who gets to dance on the European stage every now and then I feel a genuine sense of immense pride in my “sector” when “we” put on an event like this. I have no doubt in my mind that the convention was organised because it was needed. This was not a case of “oh we have some funding, what can we do with it”. Neither was this a self-indulgent youth work sector taking an opportunity to congratulate itself (in my view it doesn’t do that enough but that’s a different story).

My impression was that we were gathering with purpose. It was time to check in. For a sector that is not inclined to stand still for too long, it was time to pause and to look over our shoulders and to take a moment to nod approval at the progress that has been made and at the same time to capture the issues that need to be addressed. It was time to consider our future. Through dialogue, discussion and debate we would plot our pathway with passion!

And what did we end up with? We have the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention “Making a world of difference”. It’s ours, we have ownership of it and responsibility for what is in it. Finally we have an obligation to use it as a tool which will fuel the next phase of progress and also feed the “why?” of the next generation of youth workers!

The first version of this interview was published in Wendy Salmon's blog, "How to be an adult".

