

Chapter 11

The relationship between youth work and social work in Sweden

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Introduction

In this chapter the relationship between youth work and social work is considered in relation to the Swedish context. In Sweden, with its long history as a welfare state, almost all professional efforts to address the social conditions of young people are organised, regulated and financed by the public sector. For reasons discussed in the chapter, the concept of social work has come to be the general category used to identify these efforts. Therefore, few people call themselves “youth workers”, although some social workers certainly perform tasks and relate to young people in ways that in other contexts would be understood as youth work. This situation opens up the possibility of both specific patterns of agreement and conflict among groups of youth workers and social workers, which illustrate the complex and contextual character of the relationship between the two.

Youth work in Sweden

One should not expect to find much youth work in Sweden. Certainly, there are lots of social and pedagogical efforts throughout the country that are directed towards young people, but few of them would be identified by the concept of “youth work”. Likewise, it is difficult to find any books reflecting on the general practice of youth work or to find university courses educating people to become a youth worker. So in spite of the fact that there are quite a number of people, both volunteers and professionals, who actually work with young people, few would say that they are youth workers in a sense that connects them to a collective identity. The term is not much used as a general categorisation, so reasonably youth work does not represent what has been called a “moral occupational community” (Evetts 2006: 136).

People in this occupational field would rather say that they “work with young people” and specify by describing the organisational setting where they work, the group of young people they work with, or the specific activity they engage in as the basis for categorisation.

There is, nevertheless, definitely a “youth issue” in Sweden. The living conditions, the habits and the morals of young people have been discussed and investigated for hundreds of years (Olson 1992). Young people are often understood in relation to different social and psychological problems and described as a group that is very sensitive and vulnerable to the troubles of contemporary society.

One expression of this is the national youth policy governing all state efforts directed at young people. This is recognition of the importance of being aware of the special needs of young people and of directing efforts to support youth as a collective. The policy was first adopted in 1997 (Forkby 2014) and has since then been reworked twice. In the last version, adopted by the Swedish Parliament in 2014, it says that:

The objective of the Government’s youth policy is for all young people to have decent living conditions, the power to shape their lives and influence over developments in society. (Government Offices of Sweden 2015)

Furthermore, the policy states that the general goal applies to all central government decisions and measures that concern young people between the ages of 13 and 25. The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society is responsible for the follow-up and evaluation of how public services actually live up to these policy aspirations.

One aim of the national youth policy is that all public administration should apply a “youth perspective” when they plan, organise and implement their efforts. Much of this work is carried out by municipal administrations; however, the municipalities are not obliged to adopt the national policy. They are expected, however, to follow the intentions of the policy.

Social work

One general category that many of the professionals working with youth issues in Sweden would relate themselves to is “social work”. There has been specialised training for social workers in Sweden for decades; the first course started in Stockholm as early as 1921. For a long time the training was organised by public educational institutions outside the university, but from the late 1960s integration with the university system took place. In 1977 this was completed when social work was established as a university discipline in its own right. The social work programme encompasses undergraduate studies for three-and-a-half years, with the graduation title *socionom*, and then there are master’s programmes as well as doctoral studies available.

Through these developments, social work has been given a privileged position. Other educational provision in, for example, “care” and “social pedagogy”, have been integrated as part of the training to become a social worker. The practice field of social work is in Sweden a part of the welfare system and is mostly organised within the public sector. It is within this sector that much of the work with young people and on youth issues is done. So, when discussing the relationship between youth work and social work in Sweden, this is not so much a question of connections and disconnections between two different occupational areas, but rather it is about different positions within the field of social work.

Areas of work with young people

In order to discuss the relations between different types of work with young people, I will present six areas where work can be identified that is directed towards meeting the needs of young people or where work is done on issues labelled as “youth problems”. I will then discuss which areas and efforts can be seen as equivalents to youth work in the Swedish context.

Youth movements/associations

As in many other European countries, work with youth issues in Sweden started in the early youth movements and associations (Verschelden et al. 2009: 159-63). On the one hand, there is a tradition of autonomy and young people’s self-organisation with roots stretching back into the social structures of rural society (Mitterauer 1988). On the other hand, there is a tradition of idea-based associations, for example Christian association or the Scouts, that were led by adults and in the early days often had a programme where moral education and the accentuation of sound values were prominent elements. The two traditions still exist, but a very general trend is that many of the movements have turned into associations and become increasingly adult-led. At the same time, the understanding of young people’s needs and the importance of involving them in organisational work has increased.

There is a huge variety of activities among these associations, but sports activities dominate (MUCF 2014). The number of young people taking part in activities organised by associations has been decreasing for several years. Mostly these associations engage volunteers as leaders of the activities. There are, however, a number of organisations that also employ professional workers. Many of these associations get financial support from public resources.

Recreational and activity-orientated youth centres

Some of the youth associations started meeting places for young people labelled “youth clubs”, “recreational centres” or “settlements” (Brange 1982). From this emanates a tradition of activity-oriented youth work starting out from young people’s leisure time and the social rituals and cultural expressions connected to young people’s everyday lives. From the beginning this was rather authoritarian in style, but eventually participatory qualities were introduced and young people took part more on their own terms. During the 1950s these youth recreational centres were taken over by the municipalities and a number of new ones were started. Normally these recreational centres are set up in special localities or as part of a school building. They are usually quite well equipped and have a focus on young people in the local area. Sometimes they are aimed at specific target groups, such as young people with disabilities. These centres have employed “youth leaders” and, for more than 50 years, there has been some level of training for “recreation and leisure-time” leaders, for example the two-year training course run by the Folk High Schools, an educational body that offers education for adults, but which does not have university status. This, as a result, ranks the youth leader (youth work) qualification lower than the social work degree, which in practice has consequences for job opportunities and salary level.

Outreach and “field work”

Outreach and detached youth work in Sweden is called “field work”. This was introduced in the larger cities during the 1950s and has since then established a stable tradition. Today, there are about 500 “field workers” across the country who provide an outreach or detached approach to making contact with and relating to young people in outdoor meeting places. The field workers link young people to other services, but also run activities and provide support directly. These include activities at all levels: individual, group and community work. These field workers either have the three-and-a-half-year university degree in social work (the *socionom*) or they have completed the two-year training course as a leisure-time leader. The field workers are often organised in special teams and are employed by the public services. Often the team is part of the social services department, but sometimes it is connected to a department responsible for recreational and cultural services.

Investigative/support-oriented services

Most social work in Sweden is organised and carried out in local social services centres. The municipalities are responsible for these services; however, they are partly regulated by national law and regulations. So, to a certain degree the municipalities are required to offer social support, but aside from that they can provide supplementary services. One service that must be delivered is investigating and reporting on circumstances where young people may be involved in or experiencing, for example, crime, abuse, truancy and family problems. The social services have, in some cases, the possibility to resort to coercive measures, but there is an overall emphasis on endeavouring to find voluntary solutions and there are a number of support- and treatment-oriented approaches that social workers adopt. Aside from that they often link to other services and available specialist units. In general the work at these social services centres is regulated and reactive work, but the centres may also organise more proactive and preventive measures. Almost all social workers in this field have the three-and-a-half-year university degree in social work.

Residential care

Sweden has a tradition of working with young people in residential and foster care. This has long historical roots, but has declined in recent years in favour of less intrusive solutions. This work is organised by the state, the municipalities or by private initiatives. Those who work in the area of institutional care of young people have quite diverse backgrounds. Many do have a degree in social work, particularly those at a managerial level, but those who work most directly with young people often have a shorter education. This is often understood in terms of social pedagogy and for many years there was specific training for social pedagogues. For the past 15 years, however, this has been incorporated into the university social work programme.

Therapeutic work

There is a possibility for young people to get advice and therapeutic care within the framework of youth psychology and psychiatry, at youth guidance centres or in privately owned psychotherapeutic practices. There are also specialised units offering

support and treatment to young people with, for example, drug-related problems or eating disorders. The psychodynamic tradition has for many years been strong, but cognitive methodology has increased significantly in recent years. There is also medical treatment available. Those working in these fields of practice would normally have had quite extensive training. Most of them have a university education, usually in psychology or social work, and on top of that additional therapeutic and other relevant specialist qualifications.

So what is “youth work”?

The six different areas of work with young people that I have pointed out above are not based on any universally accepted classification. It is my interpretation of the field, and others would certainly advance different perspectives.

It should also be underlined that the list is not exhaustive. Linked to other areas of activity, such as school and health care, there are often special social workers that deal with social issues in relation to the organisation’s core mission. There are also examples of professionals working with young people in specific projects or focusing on a specific theme. One such example is the participation of young people in society, which manifests itself in the form of local youth councils and youth parliaments. However, people working in activities not directly referred to in the six areas have largely the same educational background as mentioned earlier and they often have, through their jobs, considerable contact with other organisations that work with young people. So in many ways, there are connections.

What the classification indicates clearly is that work with young people in Sweden is carried out in a number of different ways that are compatible with the general description of youth work, which is work that:

takes place in a wide range of settings, it varies from unstructured activities to fairly structured programmes, it reaches a large diversity of young people, touches a lot of different themes and is on the interface with many other disciplines and practices. (Coussée 2009: 7)

The interesting question is, of course, which aspects of the work with young people listed in the six areas should be categorised as youth work on the basis of how this concept is used in a European context?

It has often been pointed out that youth work is not easy to define (Coussée, Williamson and Verschelden 2012: 253-5), but in the *Official Journal of the European Union* of 14 June 2013, it says that: “Youth work belongs to the area of ‘out-of-school’ education, as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders.” (EUR-Lex 2013)

Further, the following defining features are from a study issued by the European Commission:

The term “youth work” is used to describe a diverse range of activities, topics and measures provided by a range of actors in assorted fields and settings. However, at the heart of youth work there are three core features that define it as youth work distinct from other policy fields: a focus on young people, personal development, and voluntary participation. (European Commission 2014: 4)

Starting out from these characteristics of youth work it seems reasonable to argue that the Swedish work with young people that best corresponds with the European understanding of youth work are the activity-oriented and outreach sectors, but also parts of what associations do. Based on my experience, it is also in these areas where one finds professionals who easily tie in with the European discussion on youth work.

Professionals in the other sectors would predominantly see themselves as social workers, though, as mentioned earlier, often with supplementary occupational specifications. For example, many of those working in the therapeutic sector would probably rather see themselves as “psychotherapists” and refer to their connections with a therapeutic community. By comparison with many other European countries, Sweden arguably has a comparatively broad concept of social work. It is not just the statutory sector that defines social work, but the concept is embraced by a number of different approaches and services. Therefore social work in Sweden is the statutory sector plus a number of other approaches, and the vast majority of this is organised within the public sector and seen as part of the welfare state provision. Important in this context is the establishment of social work as a university discipline in 1977. This has given the profession occupational status and a fruitful connection to further education and research.

Connections and disconnections

In the following discussion of connections and disconnections I will discuss the relationship between social work and youth work in Sweden, but I will also give examples of disconnections within the youth work sector. For simplicity, I will refer to the “youth work” sector in Sweden following the distinction made earlier.

One important level has to do with the organisational affiliation and the regulations that frame youth work. Although almost all social work and youth work is organised within the public welfare services, this sector is divided into different organisational areas with specific tasks and traditions. As mentioned earlier, the basic structure of the Swedish welfare system is that the national state decides about general laws and regulations, while it is up to municipalities to execute and design the services. Municipalities must, therefore, follow the general rules, but at the same time there is room for local solutions. Municipalities may also add activities that are considered important, based on perceived local needs and circumstances. The area of youth work typically contains tasks that the municipalities are not required by law to maintain, though many of them actually have legal support. For example, municipalities are required to operate proactively and to be well informed about the social conditions of people living in the municipality, but how this knowledge should be obtained and which measures should be taken are not generally regulated. For this reason, municipalities are not obliged to set up detached youth work or to provide recreational centres for young people.

One consequence of this is that youth work tends to be subject to cuts when savings have to be made in public finances. The mandatory interventions through social work do not suffer from this in the same way. This creates a feeling among youth workers of belonging to an area that is easy to dispose of and this functions as a cohesive factor that creates solidarity among youth workers; an atmosphere of “us against them”.

At the same time, the organisational affiliation of youth work operates in a divisive way. For a long time the municipal activities were administered in specific task-structured departments. Social work then belonged to the social services department, while the recreation centres delivering youth work were part of the recreation department. These organisations were significant in building up different identities and traditions. One contributory factor in this was educational background, where people in social services departments in general had a higher level of education, recognition and, consequently, remuneration.

For the past 30 years, however, the organisational situation has been quite different. During that time, most municipalities have changed to a political and administrative structure based on districts, where all activities are organised at a local level. The organisational arrangements for social work and youth work are therefore now the same, holding some promise for greater collaboration and convergence.

Interestingly, however, the old organisational belongings and affiliations have proved tenacious. There is still an identity gap between youth workers belonging to the recreational field and youth workers connected to the social services. The difference in educational background probably remains one of the factors behind this divide, but work tasks and career possibilities also play a role.

One thing experienced by youth workers with organisational connections to social work, for example most detached youth workers, is the contagious effect of the reputation that social workers are keen to use coercive measures against young people. This affects the ability to create trusting relationships; and detached youth workers, when approaching new groups, therefore often have to deal with an initial hesitancy from young people.

A second important level of distinction between youth work and social work has to do with job tasks and the structure of the work. Youth work has its focus on young people's leisure time and the life they live outside socially controlled and rule-oriented institutions like the school. The youth work mission is often formulated in broad terms. In this respect there is a clear difference in relation to many of the tasks social workers carry out, which are far more narrowly defined.

One obvious difference between social work and youth work is the office-dependence and bureaucratic organisation that characterises much social work. Youth workers are spatially focused either on environments where young people informally congregate or in arranging accessible meeting places. Social workers are more tied to routines where young people are referred to them and to working with individual investigative and treatment processes.

An important aspect of this has to do with what proportion of the working hours are devoted to direct contact with young people. A study initiated by the National Coordinator for Children measured this among social workers working with children and youth. The results show a diminishing trend when it comes to time spent with young people. Only 10 minutes per day, which represents 2% of the daily working hours, was spent on individual calls with children and young people. Time spent on documentation was 35% (Regeringskansliet 2016).

This can be compared to a similar study I conducted a couple of years ago concerning how detached youth workers in Gothenburg spent their working hours (Andersson 2014). The result was that the youth workers on average spent 42% of their time in direct contact with young people. There can be little doubt that youth workers spend, in comparison with social workers, a lot more time in direct interaction with young people.

One question that has been discussed for many years within the field of youth work, especially among those working in recreation centres, concerns how the “target group” should be defined (Ungdomsstyrelsen 2008: 7-10). One tradition holds that the centres should be aimed generally at young people; they should be “open access” and everybody should be welcome. The important mission in this view is that the centres can help young people to meet across borders of age, sex and social background. According to another tradition, recreation centres should primarily direct their endeavours to meeting the needs of young people who live in risk environments and show signs of socially problematic situations. One consequence of the latter orientation is that it connects youth work in recreational centres with social work, generating arguably a more “therapeutic” function even for “recreational” youth workers.

Finally, the theory and methodology that informs practice is important for the relationship between youth work and social work. Generally, there is a similarity in youth work concerning its general orientation and its emphasis on the voluntary nature of engagement, and young people’s participation in the work being carried out. This has to do with how young people should be understood and has implications for how the work is organised and what kind of methods that should be used. In many respects, these are uniting factors for youth work.

At the same time, however, there are theoretical and methodological issues that cut across the field of youth work. One example is how youth workers should relate to young people’s drug-use habits. The official view in Sweden is very strict and all substance abuse is criminal. Within the field of youth work there are strongly differing opinions on how youth workers should relate to young people’s drug use. Some hold the view that every sign of drug use should be notified and reported to the police, while others advocate a much more liberal standpoint and underline the importance of keeping a working relationship with the young person. In general terms, this has to do with the question of how youth workers should relate to crime among young people. It also applies to other similar topics such as graffiti, but the drug issue is a particular one in Sweden since it is linked to personal values. It demonstrates the ideological and moral component that is present in all human service organisations (Hasenfeld 1983).

Conclusion

In spite of the very limited use of the concept and category of “youth work” in Sweden, there is no problem identifying a professional field of activities directed towards young people that clearly possesses all the attributes of youth work. However, for a variety of historical reasons, social work has become a collective term used for a variety of social activities covering a broader field than what is common in many

other countries. It is much more than just social casework. What we can see, however, is how Swedish youth work is kept together – and distinguished from other forms of social work – through its basic mission and fundamental approaches, such as the voluntary relationship and an orientation towards the informal lives and spaces of young people. Also, the position in the organisation is of importance. Youth work effort is often considered as a voluntary commitment on the side of the municipality and therefore exposed to cutbacks in times of limited public resources. Also, youth work is to a much lesser degree dependent on bureaucratic procedures and office spaces. Youth workers spend more time in the field in direct contact with young people.

These characteristics disconnect youth work from social work, but there are also connections through proximity in organisational and administrative arrangements, and possibilities of shared views on important youth issues.

Irrespective of the relationship between youth workers and social workers, there are also things that disconnect youth workers from one another. This has to do with traditions and organisational affiliation, differences in education and views on specific youth issues. Here we can see the formation of groups that cut across the fields of youth work and social work, paradoxically renewing or establishing other forms of connection. This indicates that the discussion on youth work should not only be concerned with how representatives of this professional category relate to others, such as social workers, but also on the differences and possible transformative relations within youth work itself.

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