



# **The history of youth work as a profession in Finland**

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The aim of this chapter is to describe and analyse the history of youth work as a profession in Finland. Its theoretical background lies in the historical sociology of education and in the theory of professions. The study of the professions has a long tradition in the educational and social sciences, but the concepts are still obscure. At the international level it is challenging to use, for example, English, German, Swedish and Finnish terminology. Concepts such as “occupation”, “vocation”, “job”, “post”, “work” and “profession” carry cultural connotations which are difficult to translate and interpret. This chapter is the result of my historical and pedagogical research on the professionalisation of Finnish youth work (Nieminen 2000), and it is my hope that it will contribute to the debate on the history of youth work across different national and cultural contexts.

## **Theoretical background**

According to Torstendahl (1990), there are three approaches to studying the professions. The first is the description of the professions, professionalism and professionalisation. The aim of the approach is to lay a foundation

for the classification of the professions; it helps us to identify professions. This “essential property” approach starts out from the properties which are thought to characterise professionalism and professionals. The essential approach asks questions like “What are the traits of a profession?”, “Which are the professions?”, and “Is this occupation a profession?”

The second approach analyses the relations and conflicts between different professions. It helps to identify the intentions and professional strategies of occupational groups. This “strategic approach” starts out from the types of collective action on which groups of professionals rely. It asks questions like “Which groups act professionally?” and “Why does this profession have this particular status in society?”

The third approach studies the relationships between a professional group and other social groups over a long historical period in order to observe changes within the profession or in the conditions for the profession in society. The aim of the approach is to clarify both the internal changes of the profession and the social changes of the status of the profession. This “temporal approach” aims to show how professional groups change.

Torstendahl (1990) also notes that these three approaches are not strongly linked to the metatheoretical schools of profession studies. Despite this claim, the essential property approach is linked with the functionalistic analysis of the professions and the strategy approach has some connections with the neo-Weberian paradigm.

The functionalistic paradigm sees professions as a useful part of society. It implies that the effect of professions on the development of society is positive. In other words, functional society needs altruistic professions to get things going and to help people have a good life. In contrast, the neo-Weberian paradigm sees professions more as a means for people to plead their own causes. In other words, professional people want a monopoly over their occupational field, they want to be respected people and they want an income that acknowledges their expertise. Professional strategies are ways to achieve these goals collectively.

This chapter is linked to Torstendahl’s temporal approach: it describes the internal and external changes of Finnish youth work as a profession. In every analysis – whatever approach or paradigm we have – we need criteria to identify the occupational groups in question. In profession theories there are several classifications of professional traits. The following list of professional attributes is a synthesis of several theories. A profession presupposes:

- a jurisdiction within the state and society: the status of the profession should be guaranteed by law and the law should define the qualifications of professionals. A profession also requires a permanent system of financing;
- a differentiated occupational field that can be separated from other fields: it includes a special sphere of activities;
- specialised knowledge and a scientific basis for work;
- an academic (university) education for an occupational field that needs specific scientific knowledge;
- professional autonomy: the profession controls the quality and ethos of the work by means of professional ethics;
- an occupational interest and pressure organisation.

There is a lively discussion going on concerning youth work as a profession. Sercombe (2010) has argued that youth work is a profession whether or not it is

recognised as one and whether or not it organises itself that way. He claims that a profession is not defined by a set of attributes or practices, but by a relationship. As a profession, youth work is constituted by a particular kind of relationship with the young people who are its clients. At a general level, these views are not completely contradictory. The professional attributes of youth work can be interpreted as signs of recognition and identification of youth work professionals' special relationship with young people. Correspondingly, professional strategies can be seen as ways to ensure that youth work based on the special relationship between youth workers and young people as clients can be carried out.

## **First phase: from voluntarism to occupation**

In Finland modern youth work was born at the end of the 19th century. It was a time when traditional class society – based on the privileges of the estates – was being gradually replaced by modern civil society. During those days leading occupational groups – such as doctors, lawyers, military officers and even secondary school masters – were already developing as modern professions. A major, gradual change was taking place: earlier, the professions had been closely connected to the upper class of society, now modern professions had to gain their status themselves. It became possible for middle class people to become professionals within a profession. Expertise and education focused on a special discipline became a legitimating base of the professions (Konttinen 1993, 1998).

The status of youth work, however, was still incoherent. The concept of “youth work” or “youth worker” was not used very often. The earliest explicit definition of youth work I have come across is from 1910: it was formulated by a priest called A.W. Kuusisto in Helsinki. His definition of youth work was born in the context of the Lutheran State Church. However, it captured two sometimes inconsistent general features that have been peculiar to youth work for a century. Firstly, youth work was carried out by organisations and institutions usually led by adults. Secondly, youth work was also carried out and led by young people for the sake of young people (Kuusisto 1910).

During those early days youth work was usually done voluntarily, on a philanthropic basis, often by existing occupational groups such as teachers, priests and officers. But youth work was also carried out by undergraduates inspired by the idea of nationalistic popular education or enlightenment or Christian faith. In Finland, the first professional youth workers were employed by youth organisations like the Young Men's Christian Association, the Finnish Youth Movement (movement of rural youth) and the labour youth movement. In Church organisations and in the temperance movement there were employees who did youth work as part of their job. School clubs were usually led by teachers. From the very beginning, voluntary youth organisations engaged staff to organise voluntary-based youth work. The management of voluntary work was also a job right from the beginning. Early youth organisations and youth movements recruited employees from their own members and these paid workers were the forerunners of professional youth workers.

Though youth organisations and movements had received incidental state grants since the 1890s, there was no statutory financing system for youth work. Freedom of association and assembly, granted in 1906, was crucial for Finnish youth work

to function, but there was as yet no youth work legislation. Furthermore, there was no comprehensive vocational schooling for youth workers until the 1940s. Youth workers were trained differently in different youth organisations, if they were trained at all. Learning by doing and sharing experiences with (often very few) colleagues were still valuable methods of vocational education, but youth work did not have the base of a common discipline, even though some cultivated youth workers proposed that youth work should be based on the scientific knowledge of the day, drawing from pedagogy, psychology, theology and knowledge of society.

In certain historical and social situations, the preconditions for social innovation are in the air, only waiting for an appropriately idealistic and capable person to formulate the idea. In Finnish youth work the crucial moment was during the 1930s and the person was Guy von Weissenberg (Nieminen 1998). He was a Master of Science and a Boy Scout leader in the Swedish-speaking Boy Scout movement of Finland. He worked as a full-time head of youth work in the settlement of Kalliola in Helsinki and in the Finnish settlement movement. In his writings, Guy von Weissenberg outlined the basic features of Finnish youth work that would prevail for decades: a perception of youth organisations as the core of youth work; a claim to state support and grants; a demand for a special law for youth work; and a need for comprehensive schooling for youth workers. Weissenberg saw civic education as a main function of youth work, with group work as the leading social form of youth work. He defended the right of young people to be heard in youth work activities. Generally, Weissenberg felt that youth work should be a profession in its own right and that youth workers should earn their livelihood by doing youth work. His groundbreaking vision exceeded the intentions of individual youth organisations and movements.

Guy von Weissenberg was not just an idealist and theorist; he was also a man of administration and practice. Over the next few decades he tried – and in many cases succeeded – to realise his comprehensive vision of youth work. In the 1940s and 1950s he was a vice-president of the Finnish state youth work board and a chairman of its executive committee. Further, he was the president of the national youth council, the main editor of a youth work magazine and a lecturer in youth education at the Civic College, later the University of Tampere. He knew many languages well, travelled a lot and brought international influences to Finland. His abilities and knowledge of youth work were well known at the international level, too. In the 1950s Weissenberg worked as a youth work expert for the United Nations in India and Egypt. He was involved in many activities of the Unesco Youth Institute in Gauting, Germany.

There was no profession called youth work in Finland before the Second World War. Youth work was hardly a field that could provide a basis for paid occupational activities. Besides adequate social circumstances, youth work needed vigorous persons to take youth work forward as a profession. Guy von Weissenberg was such a person and I have named him the father of Finnish youth work.

## **Second phase: the age of professionalisation**

The human catastrophe of the Second World War had an impact on the professionalisation of Finnish youth work. In wartime Finland, the *Nuorten Talkoot*

(Neighbourhood help of youth) movement involved about 200 000 to 300 000 children and young people. The word "Talkoot" is an old Finnish word which suggests mutual voluntary help, especially in agricultural work. The aim of the movement was to stimulate children and young people to engage in activities such as picking berries, collecting brushwood, recycling and helping out people facing difficulties at home and in the neighbourhood. The movement was led by the leaders of youth organisations. Through this movement youth work got a lot of publicity and respect on the home front, and youth work also proved its competence in working with youth. The other face of the movement was, of course, the mobilisation of children and young people in wartime.

The overall development of the professions after the Second World War is linked to the development of the welfare state. The idea that the state and public authorities will take care of many aspects of social life is connected with the division of labour, with employees working in strictly limited areas to produce state-based services. In the case of Finnish youth work this developmental aspect was also somewhat conflicted. There have been many – paid and voluntary – practitioners of youth work outside of the state and municipalities. There have also been intense discussions, even quarrels, about the role of the public administration in youth work.

From the 1940s to the late 1980s the professionalisation of Finnish youth work gained momentum. Youth work was increasingly differentiated as a field in its own right, various occupational interest groups emerged, higher education for youth workers was developed, legislation concerning youth work was enacted, and scientific research on youth work increased.

In the 1940s public opinion, politicians and state authorities supported the aspirations of youth organisations and youth workers to strengthen the status of youth work. The first post for youth work in the state administration was established in the Ministry of Education in 1944. The national youth work board was also launched. They became the channels through which the aims of youth work were pursued in public administration. The Ministry of Education and the national youth work board took on the establishment of municipal youth work boards as one of their first practical tasks. At the end of the 1940s, there were about 300 municipal youth work boards in Finland and in 1950 there were about 50 full-time youth workers in municipalities. Agrarian Finland also recognised youth work, even if the need and development were strongest in the few growing cities.

The professionalisation of Finnish youth work was advanced by the demarcation of the boundaries between youth work and school, popular education, social work, temperance work and sports. During the 1940s and 1950s the state youth work board made many statements regarding youth work's independent administrative place within municipalities. The board defended youth work's autonomy against local politicians and authorities in the countryside where they wanted to combine youth work with other administrative branches. Youth work people saw school as too inflexible and conservative, and popular education was more oriented towards adults. Social work had limited target groups, different ethos, different methods and it concentrated too much on individual problems. From youth work's view, temperance work was seen as too narrow and the competitiveness of sports was not suitable for youth work. Youth work had to be youth work.

The education of professional youth workers was therefore developed. The comprehensive education of youth workers began in 1945 in Civic College (later the

University of Tampere). The main subject, “youth education”, was taught for 24 years by Guy von Weissenberg. From the 1940s to the 1960s, youth education was the main discipline for the youth work profession. Also in the 1940s, youth workers founded their first professional association, but it did not succeed in attracting participants from different fields and levels of youth work. Youth workers, advisors of the young farmers’ clubs and the students of Civic College had their own associations already. Even today, youth workers have not been able to set up a unified professional association to promote their professional interests.

Alongside the deepening professionalisation of Finnish youth work, the co-operation of voluntary youth organisations was also developed. In 1945, the National Council of Finnish Youth Organisations was established, with Weissenberg as its president. After the World Federation of Democratic Youth was established in 1945 in London, the membership of the Finnish youth council in international youth bodies became a difficult question. The Finnish youth council was a member of the World Federation of Democratic Youth (“Eastern bloc”) but withdrew from it in 1948, though it did not join the World Assembly of Youth (“Western bloc”). Adopting this neutral position, the Finnish youth council succeeded in collecting together all the significant youth organisations in Finland. Finally, however, the Finnish youth council got into trouble because of its relations with the Soviet Union and the council collapsed at the beginning of the 1960s.

One of the most important tasks of the National Council of Finnish Youth Organisations was to organise the Cultural Performance Competitions of Finland’s Youth. The first competitions were organised in 1947 in Helsinki with 600 participants representing 16 youth organisations. The competitions featured drama, dance, music, literature, public speaking, art and photography, among others, and aimed to awaken the interest of young people in cultural activities as well as discover new artists. In the 1960s, after the collapse of the youth council, the Ministry of Education took responsibility for cultural competitions. Under the guidance of the ministry and local communities, competitions were opened up to all young people. Thus cultural youth work formed one of the professional tasks of Finnish youth work.

Regular financing for youth work was made available from the Ministry of Education in 1945. By 1947 there was enough money in the budget to give small state subsidies directly to youth organisations. The Finnish state has supported youth organisations ever since. The professionalisation of youth work reached a peak in the 1970s when legislation on youth work was finally prescribed, 40 years after Weissenberg’s proposal. Because of various disagreements, two separate laws were prescribed: one for municipal youth boards (1972), and one for state grants for national youth organisations (1974). Finally, these two laws were combined as the Youth Work Act in 1986. In the 1970s and 1980s there were defined qualifications for municipal youth workers in the legislation, but these were overruled in the 1990s. In all, however, youth work legislation laid the legal basis for the profession’s funding.

During the 1980s, municipal youth work obtained official permission to arrange youth activities independently of voluntary youth organisations. This tendency arose from the old observation that youth organisations did not reach all young people. Youth houses were the main resources for municipalities to arrange youth activities themselves. There was a growing criticism of what took place in these local youth houses – sometimes they were seen as “municipal rain shelters”

without serious content or pedagogical activities. As a result of this critique, youth houses were developed by means of community education and participatory projects. From the viewpoint of professionalisation this was problematic, because many youth house workers had no professional education. Many of them were part-time workers employed by means of government employment appropriation. On the other hand, the legitimisation and growing number of municipal youth houses and field workers meant that the professionalisation of youth work was progressing.

During the era of professionalisation (from the 1940s to the 1980s), youth work used quite traditional professional strategies to strengthen its status. Youth work tended to distinguish itself from school, popular education, social work, temperance work and sports. Youth work got its own state and local administrative branches, university level education and legislation. All this demarcated the field of youth work and defined educated youth workers as a professional group. Youth work has also, since the 1960s, tried to extend its functions to new areas in the broader context of youth policy: youth work is trying to influence the growth environments and living conditions of young people in every sphere of their lives, including that outside of the control of youth work.

The process of youth work's professionalisation was evident, but youth work, ultimately, only achieved the status of a semi-profession. Its professional status was still far from the ideal, especially when compared to that of doctors, lawyers, teachers, psychologists or even social workers.

## **Third phase: the days of professional contradictions**

In many interpretations the most recent period, starting in the early 1990s, is seen as a time of transition from traditional professionalism towards a new kind of expertise (see, for example, Duyvendak, Knijn and Kremer 2006; Kontinen 1998; Exworthy and Halford 1999). This period is arguably too close for serious historical analysis and general conclusions, but some tentative observations can be made. The social, structural and cultural changes of the late modern information society have undermined the platform of modern professionalism and expertise. These changes may be summarised as follows.

First, professions have finally lost their upper-class nature. Many service professions of the welfare state have been middle class from the very beginning. Professionalisation has also suffered from inflation because so many occupational groups have wanted to become recognised as professions. The "academic drift" of vocational education is evident in many occupational fields. The development of the education of youth workers in Finland is an example of this.

Second, the distance between professionals and ordinary people has diminished because of the increased levels of schooling. People are much more capable of evaluating the work of professionals; it is not so easy for them to hide behind jargon. This is also the case in youth work: everybody has been young and everybody seems to know how to interact with youth. It is a challenge to convince people of youth work's special ability to address young people's issues.

Third, modern professions have produced specialised expertise which can lead to inappropriate or even dangerous consequences for society. The complexity of post-modern society demands that professionals educate themselves continuously and evaluate, for example, the moral and ecological consequences of their work. It is not possible to gain valid professional schooling once and for all in a changing world.

Fourth, expertise nowadays derives not just from national contexts, but also local and global networks. To solve local, global and “multi-filament” individual tasks societies need new kinds of expert groups wherein the narrow cliques of professions are transcended. Experts cannot be tied to their professions in the same ways as before; they have to be capable of working in multi-professional teams or organisations. However, professions must identify what the expertise is that they will bring to such networks.

Fifth, there are social, economic and administrative developments challenging the power of professionalism. Accountability, bureaucracy, consumerism, managerialism and marketisation can restrict or guide the autonomy of independent professionals. This means that the ethical principles of youth work can be replaced for example by the principles of cost efficiency (Duyvendak et al. 2006; Exworthy and Halford 1999). The rise of performance management, professional leadership and evaluation studies are examples of these developments in youth work, too.

Some theorists even talk about de-professionalisation because they think that the status of the professions is weakening. But there is also a lot of evidence that the professions are still alive and well – or at least well enough. It is also possible to find signs of re-professionalisation.

In Finnish youth work we can see signs of both de-professionalisation and re-professionalisation. First, some features of de-professionalisation. During the last 20 years the specific area of youth work has become obscure. For example, since the reformation of the Youth Work Act in the 1990s, the municipal youth work boards are no longer obligatory. This means that authorities and politicians can arrange local youth work as they want. Youth work can be combined with or integrated into other administrative fields. So the boundaries between youth work and other fields are shifting. The qualifications for communal youth workers have also been removed from the Youth Work Act, or Youth Act, as it is now called. This means that it is possible to gain entry into youth work through many educational routes. Church-based youth work retains its own qualifications and independent youth organisations have autonomy in recruitment.

These days, there is a strong drive towards promoting multi-professional networks instead of sector-based youth work. The extension of the Youth Act in 2011 directs youth work towards multi-professional co-operation. Youth workers are also expected to work with more professionalised social occupations – chiefly with social workers, teachers, psychologists and the police. On the other hand, things have always been this way in youth work. Even during the era of professionalisation, many youth workers were employed simultaneously by several occupational branches. One could have been an official involved in, for example, youth work, temperance work and sports. In the countryside, in small municipalities, this was often an economic necessity.

These signs of de-professionalisation do not necessarily imply that the quality of youth work has weakened. Hopefully, they demonstrate that youth work has met new challenges or that youth work has not professionalised fully, whether this is desirable or not.

On the other hand, the last 20 years have thrown up trends in Finnish youth work that suggest strengthening professionalisation. The first is the development of the education of youth workers. While the courses at the University of Tampere ran into changes in the 1990s, the new form of education was established at polytechnic level, in universities of applied sciences. Now, youth work education has been re-started at the university level. University of applied sciences level and university level education mean that the training of youth workers is increasingly established at the tertiary level in the Finnish educational system.

A new professional association has also emerged hand in hand with the new educational system of youth workers. The association has marked its 10th anniversary and is trying to bring together those youth and sport workers who have obtained degrees at a higher level. The new professional association and the Finnish Youth Co-operation Allianssi – a national service and lobbying organisation for youth work – were involved in a project to define the ethical principles of youth work. The principles were published in spring 2012. In the history of Finnish youth work there had been some attempts to define general ethical principles, but they did not succeed because of the disunity of the field. Youth workers of the Established Lutheran Church already had their ethical principles.

Noteworthy also is the development of youth research during the last 20 years. With the support of the state administration, youth research has offered interpretations of young people that have proved useful for youth work. Altogether, the education of youth workers, a professional association, the preparation of ethical principles and the strengthening of youth knowledge through research are very classical means of strengthening the status of this profession.

## Conclusions

To draw conclusions, we need only to look at the outlines of the professionalisation of Finnish youth work. Before the Second World War voluntary-based youth work developed as a paid occupation. From the 1940s to the 1980s the professionalisation process was at its strongest and youth work reached the status of a semi-profession. Late modern youth work has faced the contradictions of late modern professionalism, but nevertheless the process of professionalisation is still ongoing.

Finnish youth work reflects the classical strategies of professionalism. Many strategies represent the “soft closure of youth work markets” instead of hard association-based unionism. Educated and professional youth workers have gained some autonomy or have some advantages over other actors in the field, but they do not have a complete monopoly on working with youth. It is obvious, besides professional interests, that behind explicit or implicit professional strategies there has been the will to do youth work well enough. When we look at the history of Finnish youth work it is clear that professional discussions have paid serious attention to the different possibilities for young people to participate in youth work. Professionalisation seems to have had a positive effect on the accessibility of youth work.

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