

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



“CONNECTIONS, DISCONNECTIONS AND RECONNECTIONS - THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF YOUTH WORK, IN HISTORY AND TODAY”

CONCEPT PAPER

6TH SESSION IN THE SERIES
“THE HISTORY OF YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE & ITS
RELEVANCE FOR TODAY’S YOUTH WORK POLICY”

MALTA, 21ST - 23RD SEPTEMBER 2016

“The past is a foreign country: they do things different there” (LP Hartley)

Background

In order to learn from our past the partnership between the EU and the Council of Europe in the field of youth organised since 2008 a series of seminars on youth work history in Europe. This organisation was initiated and supported by first the Flemish Community (#1-2008, #2-2009, #3-2010), then by Estonian (#4-2011) and Finnish (#5-2014) government. Now Malta has taken the initiative to hold a 6th gathering on youth work history in Europe and lessons for today’s youth work, organised jointly by the EU-CoE youth partnership, the Maltese authorities and Agenzija Zghazagh, Malta.

These workshops do not aim at purifying an essential youth work concept irrespective of historical and cultural context. Rather it was the aim to identify the close links between youth work developments and broader social and cultural trends. Tracing back the roots of youth work and identifying different evolutions within and between countries must help us to feed a fundamental discussion on youth work’s multifaceted and multi-layered identity and to cope in a constructive way with recurrent youth work dilemmas (for instance targeted versus universal, agency driven or lifeworld oriented, ...). Historical consciousness also enables us to go beyond restrictive discussions driven by the issues of the day. In that sense the history sessions want to clarify what youth work is, without confining youth work’s identity to a description in terms of current methods.

From an institutional perspective the history sessions aim at contributing to the political objectives

- *“to promote and support research in youth work and youth policy, including its historical dimension and its relevance for youth work policy today” as highlighted in the Resolution of the Council of the European Union on youth work¹ and*
- *“to encourage national and European research on the different forms of youth work and their value, impact and merit” as stressed in the draft recommendation of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers to member States on Youth Work².*

Or, to put it more simply, as Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said in her speech at the Culture Forum in Brussels on 20th April 2016: we should be “proud of our heritage, open to the world. There is no other way to navigate a globalised world. If you don’t know where you come from, you get lost very easily”.³

All history sessions have extensively shown that youth work is a ‘social’ animal (Williamson, 2009). The current discussion in many countries however is coloured by rather technical discussions on excluding some methods and including others, on defining boundaries between youth work and school or social work or on (supposed) new methods to contribute

¹ Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on youth work (2010/C 327/01) [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A42010Y1204\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A42010Y1204(01))

² 6th Draft recommendation of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers to member States on Youth Work

³ http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160420_03_en.htm

to the social integration of vulnerable young people. This restriction of the discussion to rather methodical questions with a direct relevance for today's policies makes youth work a vulnerable practice especially in these times of austerity.

The seminar "CONNECTIONS, DISCONNECTIONS AND RECONNECTIONS – THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF YOUTH WORK, IN HISTORY AND TODAY", intends to look at social inclusion of young people through youth and social work. It aims at identifying concepts, tools and support measures for socially excluded young people and promoting a common understanding of youth work as social practice; further it invites a couple of countries which had not been part of earlier reflections to tell their (hi-)stories about youth work.

Conceptual reflections

Youth work in times of austerity

Youth work as a practice and a discipline has a very different status in different countries all over Europe. These differences have their origins in distinct social, cultural and political histories. It is interesting to see how the erosion of the nation states leads to parallel mechanisms in various countries, but also how youth work practices react in a diverse way to policies that demand increasing efficacy of youth work supporting policy domains that are not seen as typical youth work areas, as schooling, employment, risk aversion and social work. In some places youth work as a distinct, almost autonomous even statutory practice has almost disappeared. It has been restricted to a mere voluntary sector or the youth work labour force has been largely integrated into the social work field.

The previous history seminars and two conventions have taught us that youth work never and nowhere has had an autonomous position in a strict sense. A practice that works in splendid isolation does not meet the expectations of a youth policy that inevitable has to question the existing social order while integrating young people into it. In that sense the participants in previous occasions identified youth work as a semi-professionalised, semi-autonomous practice and a pedagogical practice that works in the social sphere, in between the private and the public sphere. This does not mean that youth work is synonymous to social work. Youth work does have an autonomous identity. As many social work practices today are focusing on individual and therapeutic work this does not meet youth work principles based in recreation, association, social action and dialogue. Although, youth work practices and practices of social work today sometimes seem to take each other's place, sometimes they seem to overlap or youth work is reframed as a social work intervention.

There is in itself nothing wrong with close relationships between youth work and its neighbouring social and pedagogical practices, but these tendencies should strengthen the position of youth work (and of young people – in all their diversity) and not weaken it by questioning its autonomous identity, its professional principles or its mere existence. It seems too often that youth work is about solving (or preventing) individual problems of individual young people and not about promoting and creating social space for learning and development of young people. Of course this should not lead to an isolation from youth work from its own roots in social work and schools. These partners could even enable youth work and young people to gain access to social resources that are inaccessible to (some groups of) young people now. There might be a case for youth workers serving as bridge to prevention, therapy or other forms of individual remediation, but this may not overrule the mere social, pedagogical and developmental function of youth work in our democracies.

The second European Youth Work Convention has emphasised this, youth work is about spaces and bridges, but as the previous seminars also taught us: there is no vast youth work essence that does not evolve through changing times and changing space. As Williamson (2008) would argue: there might be 'sacred cows' to be slain, but there are definitely 'cherished values' to be defended. It might well be that identifying cows and values would be different depending on the perspective of the one who defines. Therefore it is important that youth work actors themselves play a crucial role in this defining process. In that sense it

might be interesting to explore the historical relations between youth work and social work in different countries.

Resocialising the youth question

Previous seminars illuminated that youth work always has been shaped by considerations from two perspectives: the social question (how to preserve social order given the big diversity in society?) and the youth question (how to shape young people so they can integrate in the given social order?). Both questions create dividing lines in policymaking. The first question focuses almost automatically on those groups of people that seem to drift away from the mainstream (working classes, migrants, disabled, ...). The second question establishes a dividing line between young (or not yet) and adult. A mere focus on the youth question hides the diversity within the group of young people. This approach tempts us to define one single concept of youth work in accordance with a single concept of youth. Therefore the rapporteurs of the first couple of history seminars emphasised – deliberately somewhat confusingly in an international context – that youth work is '*social work*'. It is not only about leading young people into the world of adults and opening up adult world for young people's views. That is an important impetus for youth work and youth policy, but we should not neglect the huge diversity between young people and their starting point, living situations, capabilities, aspirations, lifeworlds, cultures, ...

As we concluded after the first workshop in Blankenberge: the *social question* has been framed into the *youth question* (Verschelden et al., 2009). Developments in youth work were increasingly inspired by the ideas that live in the minds of policymakers and youth workers (and often in the mind of young people themselves) on the potential, desired, imagined, ...meaning and significance of youth work for the positive development of young people. The individual, harmonious transformation of young people into creative and autonomous adult citizens in the cockpit of their own development and smoothly finding their place in society became from utmost importance. These ideas were increasingly underpinned by academic research, mainly in developmental psychology (focusing on youth as a life stage) and youth sociology (focusing on youth as a social category). Policymakers, youth workers and researchers found each other in the construction of ideal developmental trajectories and transitions for the young. And so, as other forms of social work (in a broad sense), youth work has increasingly been constructed as a tool to integrate young people in the prevailing adult society.

It is striking how in many European countries '*social inclusion*' (or exclusion) was constructed as an individual asset, not as part of the social quality of society. As a consequence youth policy runs the risk to become a '*normalisation*' policy: abstract desired outcomes became a norm to reach for all young people. Paradoxically, these kind of integration and prevention policies could unintentionally lead to the increasing marginalisation of young people growing up in conditions that are quite distant from the desired outcome. Youth work is treated as a transit zone, leading young people to the norm, but does not reach out to the most marginalised and/or does not reach the desired outcomes with the most marginalised young people. This makes youth work as vulnerable as the young people it should serve.

The sided emphasis on the youth question and the approach of youth work as a mere transit zone has led to a situation today in which youth work in many countries has lost its function

as a forum for young people's voices, an essential feature of a living democracy. Youth work – as social work too – seems to be an instrument to push smooth integration into the existing system. The question for today's democracy might be how youth work and social work could be partners in reframing their own practice as a social and pedagogical practice instead of a therapeutic practice or an instrument to control young people's development. Without doubt this is not a new question but probably has been identified in many other ways, languages and contexts. This sixth seminar will focus on the relationship between youth work and social work, their status in society and their coalitions or rivalries.

Time, Place and Space: boundaries blurred and boundaries held?

Tracing back **the converging and diverging roots of youth work and social work** and identifying different evolutions within and between countries must help us to initiate a fundamental discussion on nowadays youth work identity and cope in a constructive way with the recurrent youth work paradoxes.

Therefore we need to go beyond the boundaries between different youth work and social work practices. Transcending even other boundaries will enable us to come to some general insights that will shine a new light on today's seemingly mere technical questions:

- Boundaries of time: it is clarifying to shine a light on aspects that self-evidently structure our discussion, but are themselves not open to critical inquiry, in youth work and in social work.
- Boundaries of place and space: there was a time in the UK when you could do a social work qualification and automatically be a youth worker. As social pedagogy is an emerging paradigm – even in the UK – it seems that youth work training and theories increasingly are conceptualised as an integral part of social work, in a broad sense. In countries with a social pedagogical tradition (e.g. Germany) the relation between youth work and social work has a completely different nature than in countries with a social policy tradition (e.g. UK). Bringing together these two perspectives (and others?) can lead to a fruitful discussion.
- Boundaries between policy, practice and theory: In all countries there is a risk that the youth work discussion disconnects from youth work practice. We lack a youth work theory that grounds in practice (Jeffs and Smith, 1987).

Technicalities

Organisers: The workshop is organised by the EU-CoE youth partnership, in cooperation with Agenzija Zghazagh, Malta and with support of the preparatory team (Tanya Basarab, Filip Cousse, Hanjo Schild, Miriam Teuma, Jan Vanhee, Howard Williamson).

Programme (see extra paper): Following an introductory session by organisers and a brief overview of the conclusions of the previous workshops first inputs in the opening session will explore the relationship between welfare regimes and youth work and compare principles of youth work and of social work. In a further input Malta will inform on historical developments of youth and social work till today. General country (hi)stories will be presented in an evening session by four countries (Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Moldova) that did not present any history of youth work in the previous events. In the core of discussions (four sessions on 21st and 22nd September) will be the presentation of country stories focusing on connections, disconnections and reconnections of youth work and social work, and the hybrid links of youth work to various disciplines and policy areas (like schools, health, justice, VET...). The countries presented in four consecutive sessions will be (in this order) (1) Scotland, Wales, France, (2) Sweden, Estonia, Finland, (3) Hungary, Croatia, Germany and (4) Slovakia; in view of its current EU Presidency the latter will be presented in three diverse contributions. In the last and final session on 23rd September the rapporteurs will present the preliminary summary of the most important findings and conclusions, focusing on lessons learned for today's youth work concepts, followed by conclusions drawn by representatives of the organising team. All key issues will be introduced by invited experts and commented by participants; each session will be facilitated by a chair / convener.

Participants: The 50 international and national participants will represent the political arena (Youth Working Party / CDEJ), youth organisations (Advisory Council, European Youth Forum), the researchers community (PEYR and other researchers), youth agencies (National Agencies Erasmus+/Youth in Action), youth and social work representatives, previous hosts and editors of the history book series, presenters of country stories, keynote speakers, organisers and preparatory group, other institutional representatives.

Budget: The EU-CoE youth partnership covers travel, accommodation / full board of participants plus preparatory costs.

Literature

- Coussée, F. (2008) *A century of youth work policy*. Gent: Academia Press.
- Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. (1987). *Youth Work*. London: Mc Millan Education Ltd.
- Williamson, H. (2008). Youth work is a social animal, whatever its form. *Children & Young People Now*, 10 September 2008.
- Verschelden, G., Coussée, F., Vandewalle, T. and Williamson, H. (eds.) (2009) *The history of youth work in Europe and its relevance for today's youth work policy*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- The series on History of Youth Work in Europe (issues # 1-5), documenting the previous sessions, is available online:
<http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/knowledge-books?inheritRedirect=true>
- Further preparatory documents will be available on the website of the EU-CoE youth partnership: <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/knowledge/-/ekcyp>