

The relevance of youth work's history

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“Any profession that fails to learn from its past is doomed to repeat its mistakes. Community and youth work has made a huge contribution to the wellbeing of communities but, with a few honourable exceptions it has failed to produce its own histories. By neglecting to record its successes and its failures, it has left itself vulnerable to those who would foist on it warmed-over policies that have been tried and found wanting in the past.” (Gilchrist, Jeffs and Spence (2001).

Youth work's identity crisis

Youth work is a polyvalent and multi-faceted practice. It 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. This versatility is one of the strengths of youth work. Young people grow up in very different situations. Youth work has the power to respond in a flexible way to this diversity. The fragmentation and methodical differentiation originates in the unremitting attempt to increase the reach of youth work, but at the same time this versatility leads to fragmentation and product vagueness (Thole, 2000). As Williamson (1995) argues: ‘If anything goes it is hard to identify the defining features of youth work.’

Youth work throughout Europe seems to suffer from a perpetual identity crisis. This crisis is spurred by ambivalent attitudes towards youth work. Youth workers and youth policymakers are torn between excited words of praise and obstinate criticisms on youth work practice. Youth work is a powerful educational tool, youth work is a school of life providing the required skills to survive in our risk society, youth work broadens the social environment of young people, ... But youth work does not reach the hard to reach young people and if they do then youth work does not seem to reach big things with challenging or vulnerable young people. Society's ambivalent attitude towards youth work seems to work out different depending on the status of youth work provision. In some countries we can observe a widening gap between voluntary youth work and professional youth work provision. Moreover it seems hard for youth workers to put their work into words which makes it even more difficult to go beyond the statement that *“youth work that works is not accessible and accessible youth work does not work”* (Coussée, 2008a).

Youth work tries to cope with its identity crisis in different ways. In some countries youth workers and even youth policymakers tend to turn their back to their critics. Unintentionally this splendid isolation makes youth work even more inaccessible and/or useless for vulnerable young people. In other countries the attention shifts from an identity crisis to an efficiency crisis. Youth work has to produce certain measured outcomes. In still other countries the identity crisis turns to an existential crisis. Do we still need youth work?

Due to the lack of a clear identity youth work risks to become the plaything of powerful social forces serving goals and functions that are at first glance improper to youth work: smooth

integration in the prevailing social order, individual prevention of all kind of social diseases, removing young people from public space, preventing young people from school drop out, ...

An international comparative perspective has the potential to broaden the view on our national youth work policies and their inherent paradoxes. The Youth Partnership built up some tradition in international exchange. With the attention for the history of youth work this seminar combines the international perspective with the elaboration of another broadening perspective: a historical view on youth work.

Youth work's history

Historical consciousness is not really strong in youth work (Giesecke, 1981; Taylor, 1987; Davies, 1999). That is just part of its nature with quick changes of participants for instance, but it is also an observation that can be made in the broader field of the social professions (Lorenz, 2007). Volunteers as well as professionals tend to concentrate on the order of the day and to make plans for tomorrow. Despite the fact that many questions are recurrent, we tend to turn to the newest publications and the most actual debates (Imelman, 1990).

The workshop definitely did not aim at purifying an essential youth work concept irrespective of historical and cultural context. Rather it was the purpose to identify the close links between youth work developments and broader social, cultural and historical trends. What are the beliefs and concepts that underpin youth work? How do they relate to the recurrent youth work paradox saying that youth work produces active and democratic citizens but at the same time seems inaccessible for young people who are excluded from active citizenship? Tracing back the roots of youth 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 practices, but there are other boundaries to transcend.

- 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 (Heyting, 2001). Therefore seemingly self-evident aspects of youth work need to be situated in their historical context. Evolutions in youth work also need to be situated in their economical, social, cultural and political context, which brings us to the next point.
- Boundaries of place: the different ways in which youth work's identity crisis is conceptualised, can be linked to broader discussions that touch all social professions. In countries with a social pedagogical tradition (e.g. Germany) the discussion is focused on the existential questions, whereas in countries with a social policy tradition (e.g. UK) youth work tends to engage in questions of effectiveness and efficiency. Bringing together these two perspectives can lead to a fruitful discussion.
- Boundaries between policy, practice and theory: the social pedagogical perspective (why do we organise youth work?) seems to develop in rather academic circles, whilst questions of efficiency are mainly being defined and tackled by policy makers and managers. In both cases we can observe the risk that the youth work discussion disconnects from youth work practice. We lack a youth work theory that grounds in practice (Giesecke, 1984; Jeffs and Smith, 1987). The assembly of all three actors (in European context often described as the three angles of the magic triangle (Millmeister & Williamson, 2006) therefore is from major importance in this workshop.

A workshop on youth work history

The organisers (the Flemish Community and the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe) invited some keynote speakers from all around Europe who gave a view on youth work evolutions in their country. The invited speakers represented a wide range of European countries. Consequent to the logic that we need to situate youth work histories in their socio-economical and political context the organisers wanted to highlight youth work evolutions from the different 'welfare systems' (cf. (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Gallie and Paugam, 2000): social democratic, liberal, conservative/corporatistic and Mediterranean. This classification corresponds to the different regimes of youth work defined in the IARD Study (Schizzerotto and Gasperoni, 2001) and also adopted in the ISS Study (Bohn and Stallmann, 2007): the universalistic/parternalistic system, the liberal/community-based system, the conservative/corporatist system and the Mediterranean/sub-institutionalised system.

This means that the programme featured participants from the so called social-democratic welfare systems (Finland), as well as histories from countries typified as liberal (UK) or conservative welfare regimes (Germany, France, Flanders). Malta exemplified a more southern-European welfare type (although strongly influenced by the UK). This categorisation originates in a rather Western logic. Therefore Poland was invited to bring a story from a post-communist country (as well as Germany for a part). In the sequel to this first history workshop there is a need to complement this scope and to pay explicit attention for instance to South-East Europe and Russia.

Key questions for the speakers were:

Concerning youth (work) policy

- When was the concept 'youth work' used for the first time? From what day on can we speak of 'a governmental youth work policy'.
- Youth work is said to be a typical 'third sector intervention'. Youth work seems to have its roots however in the second educational milieu (work or school). How did this change?

Concerning the pedagogy of youth work

- What were the influential theoretical concepts that underpinned youth work? Can we see an evolution in these concepts?
- Youth work is in between emancipation and control. Unfortunately youth work seems to empower the powerful and policing the vulnerable. Has it always been like that?
- Did emancipatory youth work ever work with non-emancipated youths? If yes, did it in a non-individualised way?

Concerning youth work methods

- Some youth workers and policymakers state that real youth work is voluntarily work. Concerning to them in the ideal situation there are no professionals involved. When did the professional youth worker make his/her entrance in youth work? Why?
- Voluntary participation of young people is another key dimension of youth work. Are there examples of "compulsory youth work"? How did they turn out?

Key questions for the discussion were:

Concerning the relation between young people, youth work and youth policy

- What is youth work?
- Youth work follows social evolutions, in some cases youth work may have been ahead. Or is it true that all youth movements and cultures came and come into being outside of youth work?
- Youth workers –although youth work never was a mass activity- pretended to represent all young people. Is that the reason why youth work seems to reinforce a youth divide between organised, well-educated, well behaved, participating young people and the unclubbable, unorganised, marginalised, disaffected, disadvantaged youth?

Concerning actual perspectives for broadening youth work research

- What was the first youth work research? What were the research questions? How did youth work research questions evolve through the years?
- What has been the role for youth work research? Feeding evidence-based policy or delivering policy based evidence?
- Youth work research seems very much influenced by prevailing youth work practices. As a matter of fact youth work research learns us more about the characteristics of the unorganised youths than about the existing youth work practice itself.
- Does youth work have (counter)productive effects? Is youth work –as it is non-formal education – measurable? What does history learn us on these recurrent questions?

For preparation of the participants a booklet was disseminated in advance: ‘A Youth Work History’ (Coussée, 2008b). A rapporteur, dr. Griet Verschelden (University College Ghent), summarised the discussion.

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