



YouthPartnership

European Commission and Council of Europe

&

Flemish Community
Agency for socio-cultural work for youth and adults
Division on Youth Policy
Arenbergstraat 9
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2ND WORKSHOP ON THE HISTORY OF
YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE AND ITS
RELEVANCE FOR TODAY'S YOUTH WORK
POLICY

*25 - 28 May 2009
Blankenberge*

CONCEPT PAPER

Key Issues

“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 honorable 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.’

Moreover, 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 organisers

The Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe has 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.

The workshop is co-organised with Flemish Community. Flanders has a longstanding youth work tradition and voluntary engagement in Flemish youth movements up till now very strong, but that is not the only reason. The Flemish Government will take the reports of the two workshops as a starting point to organise a bigger conference on this theme under its European presidency in the 2nd half of 2010.

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.

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. 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 (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 first workshop on youth work history 26-29 May 2008

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'. This means

we had speakers from so called social-democratic welfare systems (Finland), as well as histories from countries typified as liberal (UK) or conservative welfare regimes (Germany, France, Flanders). Poland brought a story from a post-communist countries (as well as Germany for a part) and Malta exemplified a more southern-European welfare type (although strongly influenced by the UK).

For preparation of the participants a booklet was disseminated in advance: 'A Youth Work History' (Coussée, 2008). A rapporteur, dr. Griet Verschelden (University College Ghent), summarised the discussion (see Verschelden, Coussée, Van de Walle & Williamson, 2009).

A second workshop on youth work history 25-28 May 2009

In the sequel there is a need to complement this landscape and to pay explicit attention to for instance South-East Europe and Russia (see programme).

We start with some brief introductory notes from the organisers, a presentation from outside Europe (South Africa) and a presentation concerning the role of historical research in youth work policy, research and practice. We will also have a brief overview of the conclusions of the first workshop.

The two morning and afternoon sessions on 26 and 27 May 2009 will focus on seven different countries and cover particularly the relationship between youth work and youth policy; the key issues will be introduced by invited experts and commented by participants; each session will be facilitated by a chair / convener.

The last session on Thursday, 28th we will give attention to the preliminary summary of the most important findings and conclusions.

For their preparation the participants will be provided with 'A century of youth work policy' (Coussée, 2008) and 'The history of youth work in Europe and its relevance for actual youth work policy (Verschelden et al., 2009).

Literature

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