The History of Youth Work in Europe and its relevance for today's youth (work) policy

A brief reflection on the 6th seminar
[held in Malta, September 2016]

In order to learn from our past the Youth Partnership (between the EU and the Council of Europe in the field of youth) has, since 2008, organised a series of seminars on youth work history in Europe. This seminar series was initiated and supported first by the Flemish Community of Belgium (seminars 1 to 3), then by public authorities in Estonia (seminar 4) and Finland (seminar 5). Most recently, in 2016, Malta took the initiative to host a 6th meeting on youth work history in Europe and lessons for today's youth work and youth policy.

These workshops are not intended to construct and conclude a pure and essential concept of youth work irrespective of historical and cultural context. Tracing back the roots of youth work and identifying different evolutions (and sometimes revolutions) within and between countries helps to feed a fundamental debate on youth work's multifaceted and multi-layered identity and to address in a purposeful way the recurrent and pervasive dilemmas facing youth work in many very different parts of Europe (for instance, targeted versus universal, institutionally driven or lifeworld oriented, connected to or disconnected from wider policy directed towards young people). Historical consciousness also enables us to go beyond restrictive discussions driven by the issues of the day. In that sense the history seminars seek to clarify what youth work is, without confining youth work's identity to a description anchored in current priorities and methodologies.

Previous seminars encouraged the presentation of numerous country histories and covered almost all member states of the Council of Europe. All seminars have shown unequivocally that youth work is a 'social' animal – connecting young people both with each other and with the environments and circumstances in which they live. This finding therefore raises the question, notwithstanding strong assertions that youth work is an educational process derived from commitments to personal and social development, about the links there might be, both in the past and perhaps now, between youth work and social work. As a result, the 6th seminar focussed on this question, as well as welcoming Spain, Italy, Moldova and Slovenia to add their country histories to the extensive file that has already been produced.

The connection between youth work and social work was not necessarily an evident question, for youth work in many countries – including in Malta – has been fighting for decades to emancipate its practice not only from the (formal educational) school system but also from the

(individualised casework) traditions of social work. That was perhaps the reason that many contributors to the seminar sought to define youth work as a distinctive professional practice. This clearly restricted definition of youth work was also, arguably, motivated by the desire for a social recognition equal to social work (a 'parity of esteem'), although the ensuing discussion between participants confirmed that youth work in all countries is in the first place driven by young (and sometimes older) volunteers, though in many cases supported in a variety of ways by paid workers. This engagement is one of the greatest strengths of youth work and one of the main characteristics that differentiates youth work from social work. Other differences between youth work and social work were identified, points of 'divergence', though many points of 'convergence' could also be detected. Both practices are in a sense pedagogical and are practices in which people through informal and non-formal learning and dialogue define and handle social problems. Youth work, however, takes place in the so-called third educational milieu, in young people's leisure time, and is about having fun as well as learning, whereas social work more likely engages in the milieu of family life. Both have uneasy but possible connections with formal schooling. Besides that, participants emphasised that youth work, much more than social work, is about group work and connects to social action. Youth work is (theoretically) open to young people from all kinds of backgrounds and circumstances, while social work tends to focus on the most vulnerable.

But too much separation and distinction between youth work and social work can, too easily, produce false dichotomies. There is much that could connect them and perhaps should re-connect them. Indeed, a somewhat surprising conclusion of the seminar was that there should be more re-investment in the connections between social work and youth work that, historically, sometimes prevailed. The global definition of social work emphasises the never-ending struggle for human rights and human decency. Both youth work and social work are adversely affected by neoliberal developments such as marketization, austerity, technocraticization and new public management. This has produced a climate in which governments tend to impose externally defined solutions that oversimplify the many dilemmas of our practices, initiated by the inevitable tension between control and emancipation (and the ubiquitous question of 'whose side are we on'). The outcome-focused and problem-oriented policies that many governments pursue contribute to the disempowerment of both youth work and social work and tend to reinforce the pistachio-effect that emerges in many social practices – the 'cherry picking' of the easy-to-reach at the expense of those young people who most need support, intervention and opportunity.

This is therefore a plea for forms of practice – whether in social work or youth work - that focus on (different combinations of) positive development, social action, participative engagement, process and dialogue, fun and non-formal and informal learning. This is what makes progressive youth work a strong and indispensable practice in the struggle for an open, just and inclusive society. In this struggle youth work and social work have their own roles and position, but they need to acknowledge that their complementarity overrides their differences, and develop their potential to inspire and support each other.

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