

Chapter 8

Youth work and social work relations in Estonia

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Introduction

Estonian youth work has more than 100 years of tradition; it has been embedded into learning and education from the very start by means of non-formal education. Youth work is directed towards the positive development of youth, as well as to the shaping of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The distinction of youth as the period between childhood and adulthood, as well as the emergence of youth work, took place at the same time in Estonia as it did in the rest of Europe, which was at the beginning of the 19th century. The socio-cultural changes that occurred at the time created the premise and need for the conceptualisation of youth as a stage of life and as a social category between childhood and children on the one hand, and adulthood and adults on the other. The emergence of specific objectives and methods related to young people was also one of the development stages that helped define youth and young people (Gevers and Vos 2009).

Early developments in youth work

Estonian national awakening began in the middle of the 19th century under the influence of the French Revolution, the ideas of Romanticism, and the rise of German nationalism. It took place in the same way as among other eastern European nationalities (for example, Czechs, Finns or Latvians) with no experience of statehood in their recent past. Social movements were popular among the Baltic Germans as early as the first half of the 19th century but they did not become widespread among Estonians until the second half of the century. Baltic German singing societies were not merely choirs but organisations with statutes, among the members of which were singers, as well as those handling more functional affairs. Such organisations were status-based and they brought together Baltic Germans of higher status. Singing societies were established in Tartu, Pärnu and Viljandi. Practising music was not the only activity for such societies, as the emphasis was rather put on social interchange, for which many meetings were organised. The first choirs and singing societies were established by German pastors or parish clerks as early as 1866. At first, the activities were limited to singing (Taru, Pilve and Kaasik 2015). In the context of the so-called ancient history of youth work, before the middle of the 19th century, we can mainly refer to the following forms of youth work: student organisations; congregations, voluntary associations and groups at schools (ibid.). The role of congregations in the development of youth work soon diminished and youth work continued to develop through the support of rural schools, educational societies and recreational activities.

In an effort to find a link between social work and youth work, we can, in a sense, speak of their relations in the ancient history of youth work. In the context of Estonia, the structures of both originated from the same place, meaning that, at the beginning, social and youth work were both practised mainly in churches (including church schools, Sunday schools, Christian households, educational facilities and Christian youth associations). However, it should be kept in mind that the practice of youth work at churches was linked to the education provided in church schools rather than the vigorous development of public schools and educational societies.

The practice of social work also began and was largely based in churches, even after the formation of public services. The practice of social work was transferred from churches and associations to local governments in the second half of the 19th century (Kriisk 2014). Youth work developed rapidly alongside and within the education system during Estonia's first period of independence, the Soviet occupation, and the restoration of independence. However, the nature of social work changed according to the ruling regime. For example, the Soviet Union declared poverty officially nonexistent. Social welfare was considered to be secondary (*ibid.*).

Contemporary connections

There are still some connections between youth work and social work when it comes to definitions. For example, "social welfare" means a system of procedures related to the provision or grant of social services, social benefits, emergency social assistance and other assistance, the purpose of which is to support the ability of a person to cope independently, work and participate actively in social life, and at the same time to prevent social problems from arising or deepening at individual, family or social levels (Riigi Teataja [hereinafter RT] I 30.12.2015, 5 Social Welfare Act, 17.12.2016). Deriving from the same legislation, "social worker" means a person with higher education and appropriate professional training employed in social welfare.

The definition of youth work also comprises autonomy and developing active citizenship; this, however, is not done through assistance (as if a young person were the object of an activity) but by creating conditions and unlocking the potential of youth – with a young person as the subject. Youth work is concerned with the creation of conditions for promoting the diverse development of young people, which enables them to be active through their own free will, outside of their families, in formal education and in work (RT I 2010, 44, 262, Youth Work Act, 17.12.2016). In the context of the acts effective in Estonia today, the boundaries of the legal definition may become blurred. For example, the regulation on youth work closely related to social work defined "well-being" in 2016 as the condition supporting the development of the child, in which the physical, medical, psychological, emotional, social, cognitive, educational and economic needs of the child are satisfied (RT I 06.12.2014, 1, Child Protection Act, 15.01.2017). According to this definition, all aspects of life are interconnected, which means that in general they are also connected to the objective of youth work.

Distinctions

Figuratively speaking, however, beyond some legislative convergence, youth work differs radically from social work in terms of its approach. Youth work is directed towards providing a fishing rod (teaching skills, self-confidence, empowerment) and social work is directed towards providing fish: that is, solving the issue at hand. In terms of organisation and practice, youth work and social work have many important differences. For example, youth work is a service that is organised and financed by local governments and provided to young people in places as close to them as possible. Social work is mostly a state regulated and financed service that is organised only to some extent at the local level.

As mentioned above, youth work is a part of learning (or, in the modern sense, lifelong learning) in Estonia; it is, however, separately regulated, because youth work is not only about learning and teaching. It is about active citizenship, employability, social inclusion etc. Youth work is an area of youth policy which defines principles of youth policy; that is why both are regulated separately also on a strategic level. In addition to the Youth Work Act there is a Hobby Schools Act (RTI 2007, 4, 19). Other youth work developments are planned, such as the Youth Field Development Plan for 2014-2020 (Government of the Republic Order No. 572 of 19 December 2013). Youth work is very specifically targeted at a certain target group, has to take into account its peculiarities and, additionally, uses specific methods and measures.

At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, youth work was developed systematically in Estonia, that is, the provision of youth work was regulated as a public service (recreational activities taking place at schools and student councils – legislated in 1922) and conditions were set and a judicial framework was established for activities taking place outside of schools and civil society organisations (educational societies and youth associations were legislated for in 1936, including consultation with young people). Social work regulations entered into force around the same time – 1925 (Kriisk 2014). The Youth Organisation Act (1936) may be considered the first legal measure regarding youth work. The act created several other points of reference for the organisation of youth work. The right and obligation to organise youth work belonged to the Ministry of Education and was carried out by the Department of Youth, the director (Youth Director) of which was appointed by the head of state based on a proposal from the Minister of Education. The establishment of youth organisations outside of schools was co-ordinated with associations and the laws of the unions within the associations, as well as other relevant laws. All the activities of the organisations had to meet the objectives and comply with the rules laid down by these laws (Taru, Pilve and Kaasik 2015).

During the Soviet period, the development of youth work went hand in hand with the development of the educational system, whereby many forms of activity and formats, such as hobby schools, were added. However, some of the youth work options that had previously existed were banned or eliminated, such as youth associations, except unionwide organisations such as the Pioneers or the Komsomol, the Young Communist League. In addition, the Estonian Students' Building Brigade and the Estonian Secondary School Working Brigade were launched. The ideological regime very much valued and invested in youth in Estonia, as well as elsewhere in the Soviet

Union's sphere of influence in Europe. Youth work was practised everywhere. Social work was far less visible, as it was usual to send people with issues that required intervention to large institutions in remote places.

Parallel tracks today

Following the restoration of independence, until today, youth work and social work have developed independently of each other, despite having common points of reference in terms of the people who provide it. For example, in rural areas, a social adviser might have also dealt with issues concerning youth work and, more often, an educational adviser has been responsible for the youth field if a dedicated youth work adviser has not been available. The legal basis for youth work was strengthened in the first decade of independence (the Local Government Organisation Act entered into force in 1993 and the Youth Work Act in 1999/2000). Planning became more strategic (Concept of Youth Work 2001; Youth Work Development Plan 2006; Youth Field Development Plan 2014) and professional (formal education became available from 1992, currently also at master's level; professional standard 2006/2012/2017). Financing was reorganised and increased at the national and local level and the number of structures increased from a couple of hundred to around 1 000 youth work institutions. Estonia is one of the countries with a policy commitment of viewing all young people as a resource – the so-called universalistic model (Schizerotto and Gasperoni 2001). Social work is, in contrast, more protective. But there are, of course, links. A young person who is coping well with themselves and the community is prepared for development. This approach to youth policy, based on the positive involvement and multilateral development of a person, relies on youth work traditions and values (Schlümmer 2013). The strong development of youth work in Estonia has also influenced wider youth policy perspectives, which is why the Government of Estonia declared its commitment to an integrated youth policy in 2006.

Conclusion

Youth work entails supporting the positive development of young people and is a very important investment in the future, not only a solution for an emergency. Youth work is a part of lifelong learning, but not limited to that. Youth work considers a (young) person to be a partner, not a ward or a client.

Due to the strength and clear distinction of youth work as a field and a speciality, different methods can be developed and tested, including giving more attention to young people in difficult situations (often described as those "at risk"). There are enough youth workers and institutions in Estonia to be able to use the methods of youth work to involve more hard-to-reach target groups. In this context, we can talk about the fact that, at the present time, youth work and social work are converging in terms of certain audiences and co-operating in finding and empowering young people and helping them solve the issues at hand. Youth work is focusing more of its attention on hard-to-reach or "at risk" young people due to the fact that the field is developing dynamically in relation to young people and their needs. This means that if youth unemployment is a problem, youth work has to make more efforts to alleviate or prevent the situation, for example, by ensuring that young people are

exposed to the labour market context as early as possible by way of voluntary and other related activities.

The strength of youth work in Estonia is also characterised by the fact that the organisations in the field (the Ministry of Education and Research, the Estonian Youth Work Centre) implement joint programmes at the national level and co-ordinate interventions in education, child protection and the justice system. Some youth-work activities are targeted at youth on the streets, finding young people who are “NEET” (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and making them active; this also involves social work and other activities to alleviate the issues at hand.

Youth work and youth workers are not afraid of co-operation, because the youth-work sector is a partner with a strong and well-established identity. However, it should be kept in mind that youth work is almost the only public service that is still growing while others are shrinking. The number of youth workers is increasing whereas there is a shortage of specialists in other fields. For the future, this might pose a risk of youth-work resources (structures, people) being captured and colonised in order to carry out additional tasks in associated fields. This could include the possibility of being expected to discharge an increasing proportion of what might be called “social-work” responsibilities at the expense of the more universalistic and young-person positive development policy and practice that has characterised Estonian youth work for more than a century.

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