

Chapter 7

The “social” in youth work: snapshots of Finnish youth work policy and history

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been heated discussion concerning the relationship between youth work and social work nationally in Finland and more widely in the international arena. The fundamental question in this discussion revolves around the professional substance of youth work: Is youth work a field in its own right, or has it merged with the field of social work? A final consensus has not yet been reached, perhaps due to the fact that the question has generated different answers depending on the professional, scientific, political, national or cultural background of the participants. These answers have been connected with various functional, administrative, financial and educational solutions, and social stances.

In Finland, the social nature of youth work has been addressed in several recent reforms of the Youth Act. As yet, it remains to be discovered how far the outreach youth work requirements first included in the Youth Act in 2010 as an amendment, and incorporated in the most recent act of 2017, will push youth work in Finland towards the realm of specialised social work. At the European level, the concept paper (EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership/Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ 2016) for the sixth seminar on the History of Youth Work asked the sessions “to clarify what youth work is, without confining youth work’s identity to a description in terms of current methods”. The paper shows that in many countries, the discussion is coloured by technical discourse that excludes some methods and includes others, defines boundaries between youth work, school or social work or presents new methods of integrating vulnerable young people only. According to the concept paper, “the restriction of the discussion to rather methodical questions with a direct relevance for today’s policies makes youth work a vulnerable practice in these times of austerity”.

In general, the tone of the discussion has not been very elevated. In fact, it has focused extensively on comparing the disparities and parities of youth work and social work. Furthermore, youth work as a concept, profession, discipline and field has been considered dependent on the ability to implement the different aims, ethos and methods of social work. Thus, the analysis of youth work has been relative (comparing youth work and social work), but any analysis of youth work itself has lacked depth. Consequently, although many years have elapsed, we are still somewhat ignorant of the social characteristics of youth work. The basic question, therefore, should shift from the relative to the essential: What is “social” in youth work?

The aim of this chapter is to describe the social aspect of youth work during different periods and to show how youth work has always been connected to everyday policy. The chapter is retrospective in nature. It will start with recent discussion and work back in time to the beginning of the 20th century. This brief contribution does not offer a comprehensive analysis nor does it cover all of the features of the topic in each historical epoch, but it will try to illustrate aspects of the “social” in youth work by means of selected historical excerpts.

The notional challenge of this chapter is the loose, unfocused and non-theoretical use of the concept “social” in youth work and in historical research on youth work. Moreover, dictionaries of the English and Finnish languages provide more than 10 definitions of “social”. In fact, the concept of “social” has, at least, the following meanings:

- ▶ sociality;
- ▶ being extroverted;
- ▶ interactivity;
- ▶ communality;
- ▶ societal.

On the rebound, even in the social sciences the concept of “social” is unclear, and it has been called an “essentially contested concept” due to associated complexity and different viewpoints that are sometimes also contradictory (Dolwick 2009; Fuglsang and Sørensen 2006; Pyyhtinen 2010). Numerous implicit and explicit theories around the concept of “social” exist. For example, according to Georg Simmel, “social” means the impulse to gravitate towards and connect with other human beings. Simmel considers the social as an association, which is a reciprocal process leading, for instance, to an institution or society (Pyyhtinen 2010).

In the following snapshots, a broader standpoint on “social” will lead us to abandon the simple juxtaposition of youth work and social work. Instead of listing the differences, we will chart the different ideas and forms of “social” in youth work. The historical snapshots describe developments in youth work and connect them to the wider concurrent trajectories prevalent in Finnish society at the time. The chapter also mentions selected youth employment activities to illustrate the continuities and changes of the “social” in youth work.

Snapshot 1: Recent social dimensions – outreach off the beaten track (2008-17)

As mentioned in the introduction, a new Youth Act came into force at the beginning of 2017, replacing the previous act of 2006.

In autumn 2016, the Finnish Parliament debated the new Youth Act. During the discussion, MPs from the opposition frequently challenged the government's suggestion of cutting a quarter of the budget allocated to outreach youth work and youth workshops. A contradiction between action and talk was also pointed out: the key action of creating multiprofessional youth guidance one-stop shops would be rendered meaningless by the cuts, if young people could not be reached in the first place and if there were no facilities, such as youth workshops, to which they could be directed (Parliament of Finland 2016).

Later the government amended the budget and it was reduced by €1.6 million in 2017. This sum is approximately a third of the outreach youth work budget from the previous year (€6 million in 2016). Finnish Youth Cooperation – Allianssi, an umbrella organisation of more than 120 youth organisations, stated that the annual debate on cuts puts the whole outreach youth work system in jeopardy (Finnish Government 2016a; Finnish Youth Cooperation – Allianssi 2016; personal exchange with Hanna Sauli, 17 January 2017).

Outreach youth work was an integral part of the amendment to the Youth Act of 2010. The purpose of outreach work as set out in the act is

to reach those in need of support and help him or her to engage with the services that will promote his or her growth and independence and his or her access to education and to the labour market.

In the revised version of the act, the aims are even broader; involvement in society and support of life-management are also mentioned. As is typical in youth work, the co-operation of young people with outreach youth work is voluntary. On the other hand, different authorities are required by law to provide information on discontinued education, military or non-military service, if they consider a need for intervention and support is warranted. Walldén (2008: 3) has aptly described Finnish outreach youth work as “network based work where young people are reached and found ‘between’ public services”.

Outreach youth work has been subsidised by the state since 2008 when €2.5 million was allocated to it. That same year, a total of €15.5 million was allocated to improving youth work, education and employment services in order to better respond to youth alienation and prevent marginalisation. Consequently, more than a hundred outreach youth workers were hired in almost every second local authority: 148 municipalities in all. (Walldén and Häggman 2008: 4)

The history of outreach youth work in Finland also illuminates the lifespan of the Youth Guarantee framework in the Finnish context. The state subsidy package of 2008 saw the start of a process where, in 2013, public authorities were given a three-month time limit in which to offer a young person employment, trial work, a study place, a place at a workshop or a rehabilitation placement after registering as unemployed. In that year, outreach work reached 15 000 young people and the aim was to expand it to cover the whole country (see for example Ministry of Finance 2013: 26-28). Based on the Government Programme (2011-15), €60 million was spent annually on implementing the Youth Guarantee, of which outreach youth work received €8 million. Finland was commended as a good example on which to build the Youth Guarantee European recommendation (European Union 2012, 2013; Finnish Government 2011).

In 2015, outreach youth work was already available in 98% of the municipalities (Finnish Government 2016b). Due to statutory requirements and state subsidies, the outreach youth work system established itself quite quickly. The municipalities were actively hiring outreach youth work employees. However, in the meantime, other opinions worthy of attention were being voiced: in 2012, outreach youth workers had already raised concerns about temporary funding leading to short-term posts and changing team members (Outreach Youth Workers of Southern Finland 2012).

In 2013, despite criticism (see pamphlet composed by more than 50 authors, Gretschel et al. 2014), there was faith that young people would be found, put back on the “straight and narrow” and placed in employment. Yet, it was later noticed by the authorities that the same young people were repeatedly turning up in the nets of the outreach workers, either due to a lack of job vacancies or other problems. The Youth Guarantee working group stated in its report: “The implementation of the Youth Guarantee has been disrupted by the poor economic situation and not all the objectives connected to youth employment have been reached” (Ministry of Employment and the Economy 2015).

So far, the year 2017 has seen a decrease in activity surrounding the Youth Guarantee in Finland. According to the Government Programme (Finnish Government 2015), the Youth Guarantee is still in operation, but it will gradually be transformed into a “Community Guarantee”. This will be implemented with approximately €10 million per year instead of the previous sum of €60 million. As a result of the government programme policy of service deregulation, the municipalities now have more freedom to provide services in accordance with local needs (Youth Act 2016). Had state funding for outreach youth work been cut as planned in the earlier budget drafts for the year 2017, the municipalities would have suddenly been forced to choose whether or not to invest in outreach youth work or general youth work (*Personal exchange from Pirkko Suhonen, 24 January 2017*).

In the Youth Guarantee framework, outreach youth work was considered necessary for reaching young people. In this sense, young people were contacted in a youth-friendly way. What was probably neglected in the planning of such action was the notion that outreach youth work should be based on human relations, as Puuronen (2014) has described. According to her, the main issue is to support young people to reach the goals they have set, including the recognition of needs arising from their life situations. As Puuronen suggests, it seems that after a recession it appears to be difficult to discuss social policy without mentioning economic policy (ibid.: 10-11). Rooted in the European discussion of “social inclusion” (for example European Union 2003), the Youth Act of 2006 declared the social empowerment of young people to be one of the main aims of youth work. It could be considered that in earlier years, the scope of youth welfare support and inclusion within communities (see for example Gretschel 2007: 246) was broader than the process of targeting youth “not in employment, education or training” – or NEETs – in the name of the Youth Guarantee 10 years later (see for example Gretschel et al. 2014).

It was noted earlier in this chapter that the effects of outreach youth work on the development of youth work in Finland are, as yet, unknown. In recent years, developments in youth work have mainly occurred in outreach and targeted youth work

in the spirit of the Youth Guarantee. At the same time, the evaluation and development of universal or “open” youth work services meant for all young people have been less apparent (see for example Ministry of Finance 2013: 26-28). However, the worth of the Youth Guarantee as a political focus now seems to be decreasing in the national debate, which may affect the funding of outreach youth work in the future. In one sense, this turning point could be useful: it provides an opportunity to treat and plan youth work services as one entity. Further, it could lead to the growth of youth work availability in environments which fall between or are excluded from the agendas of universal and targeted youth work.

Snapshot 2: The social dimension of youth work in the welfare society of the 1960s and 1970s

In recent debate, the concept of societal change has almost become a cliché. In reality, according to numerous studies (for example Ojala, Eloranta and Jalava 2006), rapid changes in Finnish society had already occurred in the 1960s. The change from an agricultural to industrial and service-based occupation structure was faster than in most industrialised western countries. The mental ethos of society also altered: the fabric of post-war reconstructive society was seen as a part of the structures of old power and culture. Gradually, these structures were challenged by the modern concepts and practices of democracy, equality and welfare. The pressure of the baby-boom generation, more or less elitist youth radicalism, mass communication and the strengthening of youth cultures made room for the rising generation.

New strategies for integrating a large group of young people into society were required because of the demographic pressure of the baby-boom generation. Besides conventional educational and small-group-work-based youth work, it was also necessary to define new measures to steer and allocate resources to young people. Youth employment, schooling and training, housing and health, family welfare and conscription, as well as a culture of participation and self-motivation, were among key issues. Economic growth, the strengthening ideology of the egalitarian and collectivist Nordic welfare state (see Kananen 2014) and favourable political trends created auspicious circumstances for the state at the centre of youth policy and youth work.

Comprehensive youth policy had tried to influence young people’s growth environments since the 1960s (see Nieminen 2016a). Political youth movements and youth advocacy organisations became the key actors of youth policy, and gradually integrated youth policy was adopted as a strategy of public administration by the state and municipalities. The basic idea was to influence young people’s growth environments through research, rational planning and local decision making. Politically aware young people, though in the minority, attempted to influence society with the help of youth policy strategy, youth organisations and municipal youth boards.

The question of youth employment also found its place in youth policy. The Parliamentary Youth Committee, which sat from 1977-80, saw mechanisation and automation as the biggest changes in working life. The economic recession in the middle of the 1970s created significant youth unemployment in Finland, and the committee made some suggestions to improve the employment of young people.

One of the proposals was “the youth education and job guarantee”, which was implemented as an experiment in the 1980s (Komiteanmietintö 1980a, 1980b). It is noteworthy that the committee’s proposals concerning youth unemployment were aimed at the fields of education, social policy, employment authorities and careers counselling, and less at youth work.

The rise of youth policy in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a reassessment of the “social” in youth work. Youth work was seen as a means of implementing the welfare state and as a trailblazer of youth policy, because it had to contribute to different sectors of society affecting youth. It was assumed that in the welfare state, society would take greater responsibility for youth welfare. The strategy of integrated youth policy broadened the concept of “social” to mean “societal”, in addition to interactional and communal. This society-integrated interpretation of “social” did not replace the fundamental meaning of social as communal in youth work, but simply added a new dimension. The idea of community and communality had already taken a strong foothold in youth work during the previous decades.

Snapshot 3: Community in rebuilding society in the 1940s and 1950s

After the Second World War, Finland as a nation faced the challenges of paying war reparations to the Soviet Union, rearranging internal and foreign policy (see Rainio-Niemi 2014), resuming economic life and creating a feeling of security.

During the age of reconstruction (from 1944 to the beginning of the 1960s), Finland used youth work as a means of rebuilding society, engaging its citizens and calming post-war restless youth, while simultaneously developing co-operation between different social circles and re-establishing the balance of peacetime life. The intention of these measures was to ensure that young people would learn civic ideals and practices in small groups within voluntary youth organisations. Youth work saw young people as future citizens who were expected to acquire social and citizenship skills involving mutual trust, responsibility, participation, co-operation and public spirit; standing for election to voluntary posts; and working in a group without adult supervision.

This vision was also validated by research and youth work theory. The most influential scientific theory of youth work was constructed by Rafael Helanko. (1953; see also Nieminen 2013). He was a Scout leader in the Finnish Boy Scout movement, but also a teacher and scientist. His sociological dissertation *The boys’ gangs of Turku during the years 1944-1951*. It was a significant youth study dealing with the basic features of boys’ peer groups. Helanko found regularities in the progress and structure of the boys’ socialisation in peer groups. The most important general conclusion of the study was that peer groups are not always a source of antisocial or criminal behaviour, but they are an essential agent for the socialisation process as a whole. Social interaction is an important feature of becoming civilised – humans are social by nature.

Helanko (1960) saw youth work primarily as a pedagogical institution. According to him, the main function of youth work was to guide, supervise and direct the natural peer groups of young people. Youth work had to adapt its activities to the regularities

of the natural socialisation process: the phases, rhythm, expanding nature and continuity of the peer groups. Helanko's theory of youth work offered the foundation for group work in many youth organisations in spite of their ideological differences. For example, according to one case study (Nieminen 2016b), the significant meaning of youth work to young people in the 1940s and 1950s was the social character of youth work's immediate surroundings. Close peer relationships held a fundamental meaning in youth work. Communities formed by settlement youth work gave young people shelter, confidence, and feelings of acceptance and shared experiences.

Besides communality in youth work, alternative seeds in the social aspect of youth work had begun to germinate. At the beginning of the 1950s, there was considerable youth unemployment in Finland. A state committee was appointed in 1954 to find methods of rectifying the situation. Also, the national Council of Voluntary Youth Organisations made plans and proposals to address youth employment opportunities. In 1954, the council revealed proposals to improve the poor employment situation and to develop vocational education and vocational courses for jobless young people. At the end of the 1950s, the Council of Voluntary Youth Organisations appointed a new youth employment committee (Nieminen 1995: 278-80). Although youth unemployment was acknowledged, it was not yet generally considered a significant social issue. The initiatives in the field of youth work concerning youth unemployment therefore expressed a wider understanding of the social situation of youth at the time.

Nevertheless, group work laid the methodical foundation of youth work, and it became the main environment for social interaction in youth work. Youth group activity became more widely accepted and it occurred within the socially limited world of youth organisations.

Snapshot 4: Social problems and uniformity in the nation state 1917-44

Finland became independent in 1917. In 1918 there was a violent civil war between the right wing (the Whites) and those close to the labour movement (the Reds) (see Tepora and Roselius 2014). The violence and terror of this war resulted in a deep chasm between the victors (the Whites) and the losers (the Reds), which was also reflected in youth work. The huge number of orphans, a shortage of food, the bad living conditions in cities and deep class distinctions led to the development of child and youth welfare practices. Young people were often seen as potential loafers and criminals, and this interpretation led to child and youth welfare interventions to deal with social problems. The Child Welfare Law was passed in 1936, but it belittled voluntary and preventive youth work done by contemporary youth organisations (Nieminen 1995: 157-61). However, the law was a significant turning point in the differentiation between youth work and social work in Finland.

Working-class youth epitomised typical youth of the 1920s and 1930s. At that time, the number of working-class young people in the cities increased. First, they attended elementary school and then worked in industry. They were second generation workers, growing up as members of their social class (Haapala 2003). Not all of them found employment and many were employed as casual labour (such as errand boys

or girls, shoe shiners, newspaper vendors). The depression of the 1930s also affected young people. Some youth work organisations worked with urban youth. In 1915, the Young Men's Christian Association of Helsinki had founded an office known as the "Mars express office", which offered jobless and impecunious youths monthly paid jobs, care and leisure activities (see Nieminen 1995: 107). The City of Helsinki also used its services. "Mars" operated for decades and it was a "workshop" of its time. The aim of the office was to help boys and prevent social problems.

Besides addressing social problems, youth work also played an active role in the unification process of the Finnish nation state after the traumatic civil war. The emphasis of Christian youth work moved from diverse voluntary youth organisations to the established Finnish Lutheran Church. Finnish-speaking youth organisations dominated the scene and Swedish-speaking youth organisations profiled themselves as a means of support to the national minority. To advance the unity of the nation, the state resorted to forms of extreme power in preventing communist youth movements. For example, communist youth organisations were disbanded by the authorities. The aim of many youth activities was to infuse a mutual notion of patriotism into young people and a will to defend their country. The Anglo-American Scout movement and the Young Farmers movement also espoused nationalism during the 1930s.

During the interwar period, the societal dimension of youth work was represented by the new Finnish nation state. Future generations were prepared for the duties of the nation state. National defence challenged the young nation since the existence of Finland depended on the ability to defend itself. During the interwar period, youth work became the national answer to a "boy problem", including the issue of defence. Finland saw a noteworthy growth of work with boys: boys' clubs, boys' sports and outdoor games. Furthermore, work with girls trained them in housework, caring and nursing. Eventually, the fear of war was realised in 1939, when the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union broke out.

Before the Second World War, youth organisations did not co-operate closely, and there was a social gap between the "white" and "red" organisations. One of the first experiences of broader co-operation was gained during the war years in the "Nuorten Talkoot" child and youth movement (Varjo 1979). The word "Talkoot" is an old Finnish word meaning mutual voluntary help, mainly in agricultural work. In English, the corresponding word is perhaps the American expression "bee".

The aim of "Nuorten Talkoot" was to stimulate children and young people to participate in voluntary gathering, picking, agricultural and assistive activities to help the household and neighbours. The representatives of federal youth organisations formed a joint council to plan and lead such activities. This work and other activities were highly valued and appreciated. They not only provided economic benefits but also had an obvious educational function. More than one million children and youths participated in the "Nuorten Talkoot" during 1941-47. Such collaborative activity meant that youth organisations were prepared to accept the idea of co-operation for the sake of national uniformity.

In "Nuorten Talkoot", wartime society used the know-how of existing youth organisations. By means of voluntary work, the younger generation joined in the battle for the homeland. The "social" was realised both at the nation-state and small-group

level through “the bee”. Some voluntary activities were carried out individually but they were permeated by the ideology of patriotism and unification.

Citizenship as social at the turn of the 20th century

In Finland at the turn of the 20th century, the stable society of land estates collapsed and a modern class society began to emerge. The new era created new opportunities for ordinary people, but the wake of industrialisation, democratisation and liberalisation also brought problems. The concept of “human” transformed slowly from “humble” to “citizen”. Basically, the rights of a citizen gave everyone the opportunity to participate in societal issues and to establish and join an association. Generally, formal associations and pressure groups are typical in societies where industrialisation, urbanisation and democratisation are sufficiently developed. At the turn of the century, several groups with different intentions and status in society existed. Social participation through social movements and formal associations became a sign of a developed democratic state.

As the commonplace saying in Finland goes, Finland was the “promised land of associations”. The seeds of this rich field of associations were sown at the turn of the 20th century, as also in the case of youth movements and youth work organisations. For instance, Finnish Labour women founded the “Ideal Union” for the children of workers’ families. After the general strike of 1905, Labour youth became active, and the Social Democratic Youth Federation was founded in 1906, in Tampere. The Social Democratic Youth Federation adopted socialist enlightenment as a means of youth work, and the class struggle was an important part of the programme from the beginning. The non-political League of Finnish School Youth was founded in 1906, and the aim of the league was to develop a good spirit among school clubs. But the school authorities criticised the league because they thought schoolboys and girls had no right to manifest their aims. In this emerging political-corporative tradition of youth work, young people constituted a pressure group and united around a political idea or field of study.

According to the dominant culture of the time, politics was not suitable for minors, and young people were expected to form political opinions only on reaching maturity. In the Labour youth movement there was a more positive attitude to direct political youth activity. Non-political youth work was also accepted as a useful means of general civic education required by the new civic society.

During this period, Finland was an autonomous grand duchy of the Russian Empire (see Jussila, Hentilä and Nevakivi 1999), and the Russian emperor followed Finnish civic organisations closely. Freedom of association was a potential arena for promoting national aims and separatism, and the first youth organisations were monitored by the emperor’s regime. Therefore, the early activity of home-grown Finnish youth associations, social-democratic Ideal Unions and the Anglo-American Scout movement was rejected. The birth of the modern civil society infused the “social” into the lives of both the population and the authorities in new ways.

However, many Finnish young people did not actively follow the spirit of the time. They did not have social or cultural interests, nor did they have much time for leisure

and recreational pursuits. The majority of youth lived in the countryside (see Haapala 2003), and farmwork as well as other pressures to earn a living consumed their time. Young people's social life and interaction were limited to their immediate natural surroundings, and the need to socialise was fulfilled by family, near relatives and the household. There were loose youth groups in the countryside and a growing number of well-knit youth groups in the cities, but the group as the basis of interactive youth work was only just taking shape.

Merging snapshots – Connecting young people

Youth work has played a significant role in building Finnish society throughout its history, but its societal context has varied. At the beginning of the 20th century, social participation in youth movements and associations started to offer an escape from a traditional class society, by broadening the circles of social life. The societal framework for the "social" in youth work changed from an old privilege-based class society to a modern civil society. The inter-war and the Second-World-War period saw the development of a divided people into a unified nation capable of defending itself. The objectives and operations of youth work were connected with these developments, and different organisations implemented activities from alleviating social problems to supporting a nation at war. In the reconstructive nation state of the 1940s and 1950s, youth associations were seen as platforms for developing co-operation between different social circles and learning civic ideals. For the first time, research-based knowledge on the educational value of peer groups became available, and the small group became the established social form of youth work.

Since the 1960s the societal feature of youth work has broadened. Earlier, if youth work had participated in building civil society and the nation state, now was the era of the welfare state and society. This period also sought to discover the role society could play in the life of the younger generation: what were the interests of young people and how did the welfare state acknowledge them? As the newest example of the relationship between youth work and society, the role of outreach youth work was described in connection to the Youth Guarantee framework. This time, the motivating power of change was the gross domestic product (GDP), a indicator key was used in showing how well the welfare state has been maintained. A typical trend of this era was the adoption and application of definitions and frameworks shaping youth work prevalent in European discussion. Likewise, Finland has also been an example to other countries, for instance in how it invests in youth services development in the context of Youth Guarantee, for example.

Nonetheless, youth work is also valuable in itself, without its economic, political, national or any other implications in society. Threats in the societal sphere, such as unemployment, have an impact on the personal. Throughout its history youth work has been meaningful for individual young people. It offers interactivity, trusting relationships and a multitude of groups and communities. Youth work connects young people to other human beings as well as to society. Youth work is never unsocial.

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