

Chapter 9

The past made us: perspectives on the development of youth work and social work in Malta

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Introduction

There are interesting similarities and dissimilarities in the development of youth work and social work over the past century in Malta. While both had their origins in the Catholic culture of the region and the British imperial presence, they took different paths for most of the 20th century. Social work was gradually integrated into, and was to become an important feature of, the emerging state welfare system, while youth work remained largely the preserve of the Church and the voluntary sector. Both social work and youth work were relatively late in achieving professional recognition and status. By the 21st century, the common features that both came to share – state-supported, clear training and career paths, and professional recognition and status – served only to further highlight the differences between the two. While it would be simplistic, in the case of Malta, to describe the role of social work as “solving problems” and youth work that of “developing potential”, there is some substance in the claim that this is how the Maltese state and the wider public have come to see them. And this is also, in part, how the two professions have come to see themselves.

This chapter will explore the different paths social work and youth work have taken in Malta. It will portray how they gradually came closer together and how their growing similarities in terms of professional parity and a blurring of the lines in terms of professional purpose and practice, paradoxically accentuated inherent differences. These differences have in turn given rise to both challenges and opportunities for the roles social work and youth work play in supporting young people.

Context

Following the Treaty of Paris (1814), Malta came under British imperial rule. The British role in Malta was essentially strategic and did not tend, in general, to interfere with or disrupt local customs or traditions. Nor did it seek to wipe out the local language or culture. It also avoided serious disputes with the Catholic Church that had for

centuries played a pivotal and defining role in Maltese culture and society. However, the British had a significant influence in shaping modern Malta. The English language was adopted almost universally by the Maltese people and Britain played a formative role in the emergence of the country's political and administrative governance as well as in its education and justice systems.

Both the Catholic Church and the British presence were also to shape and influence the development of youth work and social work in Malta.

Youth work (1900-90)

Youth work in Malta had its antecedents in the work of the Catholic Church and its voluntary organisations such as the Society of Christian Doctrine, Catholic Action and the Salesians, all established in Malta at the beginning of the 20th century. The British presence brought about the Malta Scout Association, which applied for membership of the British Scout Movement in 1908. Until 1966, the Malta Scout Association was a branch of the British Association. Following Malta's gaining of independence in 1964, the Maltese Catholic Scout Association became a member of the World Scout Conference in 1966. The Girl Guides were established in 1923 and proved to be one of the most active and widespread voluntary organisations in Malta.

The role adopted by both the Catholic Church and voluntary youth bodies associated with the British presence in youth work practice and activities was essentially paternalistic, directional and what was deemed character-forming in the light of Christian morals and mores. While the influence of the Catholic Church and the British presence was dominant and pervasive up to the 1960s, the following decades saw the emergence of different trends and approaches.

The reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1963-65) saw the emergence of a more socially conscious and oriented Church. In the 1970s and early 1980s, youth centres run by local parish priests and youth-led groups run by Catholic Action were established. New movements also started running local or national youth groups, some of which embodied what has been described as an overtly sectarian vision of Catholicism with very hierarchical structures, while others, such as the Focolare Movement and Comunione and Liberazione, tended to be somewhat selective in their choice of members (Teuma 2009).

The youth-work ethos and underpinning values and principles fostered by Church groups and voluntary youth organisations, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, has had an enduring influence on the subsequent development of youth work in Malta. This ethos comprises a number of defining features. First, youth work was a voluntary activity on the part of both adults and young people who participated, organised by the Church and voluntary youth organisations, and independent of the state. This had a dual effect; one positive, the other less so. Free of state involvement, youth work developed its own vision and dynamic. Whatever differences in aim and method that existed between the Church – and sometimes within the Church – and voluntary youth organisations, they shared common ideals and aspirations. However, without state support, youth work lacked financial resources and training and remained entirely voluntary throughout the 20th century. Second, youth work

reached out to and sought to engage all young people. It was educative, aspirational, idealistic and holistic and sought to prepare young people for both this world and the next. While it readily perceived dangers and problems confronting young people's material and spiritual well-being, its prevailing spirit was to promote and articulate what was best in young people both as individuals, social beings, citizens and children of God.

Social work (1900-2004)

Until the end of the Second World War, social work in Malta had been pioneered by the Catholic Church and charitable foundations. The first known Maltese to study sociology was a priest, Maurice Grech, who became the founder of the Diocesan Children Homes' Office that oversaw homes for foundling and orphaned children which were a feature of late 19th-century and early 20th-century Malta (Schembri 2002).

The emerging welfare state in post-war Britain also affected Malta, and from the 1950s onwards the role of the state in the development of social work was to be paramount.

The government-commissioned Ross Report of 1959 (Ross 1959) made recommendations for action across a wide range of perceived "social problem" areas: childcare, the supervision of children, schooling, adoption, probation, the juvenile court and the treatment of what were described as "delinquent minors".

Prior to this, in 1957, a new division was set up in the Department of Emigration, Labour and Social Welfare which was responsible for social welfare services. The following year, the department appointed a number of family welfare officers whose responsibilities included "childcare, probation, family casework and other problems that fall under the umbrella of social work" (Schembri 2002: 14). From the late 1950s until the late 1970s, the Welfare Division, as it came to be known, worked with families, including single mothers, focused on issues such as childcare and juvenile delinquency and employed various interventions such as aftercare and casework. Throughout this period, social-work practice in Britain greatly influenced social-work practice in Malta, primarily because social workers continued to be trained in Britain and the legacy of British institutions continued long after Malta had secured its independence in 1964. However the training, employment and recognition of social workers by the new Maltese state continued to be both uneven and fitful.

Sociology was first taught at the University of Malta in the early 1970s and by the middle of the decade a Department of Social Studies had been established with the help of the Open University. Subsequently reconstituted as the Department of Sociology, it went on to offer courses in sociology and social science from primary degree to PhD level.

The 1980s also witnessed a number of important developments. Legislative changes, including the Children and Young Persons (Care Order) Act of 1980 and the Juvenile Court Act of 1980 were the catalyst for increasing interest in, and demand for, trained social workers. In 1984, the Institute of Social Workers was founded by social workers and academics. It drafted a code of professional ethics; while the Institute did not last, it contributed to an increasing state and public awareness of the need for trained

social workers. In 1987, the Department of Welfare was established, which became the main provider of social welfare services and employer of social workers.

In 1990, the Ministry for Social Policy published the Green Paper “A caring society in a changing world”, which proposed reforms to the provision of social welfare services. The 1990s also saw the establishment of the Maltese Association of Social Workers and the first collective employment agreement between social workers and the state; the agreement gave social work professional recognition while also specifying that social work could only be practised by appropriately qualified social workers with at least diploma-level qualifications. These developments culminated in the Social Work Profession Act 2004, which provided for the formal recognition and regulation of social work as a profession.

One of the most significant differences in the development of youth work and social work in Malta was the involvement of the state. The state was the main institutional player as regards social work. In contrast, the Church was the main institutional player as regards youth work. This does not mean that the Church was disinterested in social issues: it has always had its own social agenda, was a leader in the study of sociology and employed social workers through Caritas Malta. The state, however, showed no interest in youth work until the 1990s. While the state first employed social workers – family welfare officers – in the late 1950s, it was to be over 50 years before it employed its first youth workers, following the establishment of the national youth agency, Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, in 2010. The Maltese state also tended to see social work as a means of addressing perceived “social problems” associated with families, such as single mothers, adoption and juvenile delinquency. Social work was at once more contextualised and issues-driven than youth work and more focused and rigorous in its methodologies and practices, while at the same time broader in scope in terms of the age profile of its clients and the ways in which it interacted with fellow practitioners and professionals.

Youth work (1990-2010)

Until the 1990s, the Maltese state had displayed little or no interest in youth work and provided no support, financial or otherwise. However, the decade was to usher in a number of significant changes in the state’s attitude to youth work.

In 1992, the University of Malta established an Institute of Youth Studies (now the Department of Youth and Community Studies) to provide training for those who wished to pursue a professional career as youth and community workers. The first group of graduate students founded the Maltese Association of Youth Workers (MAY) in 1998. MAY subsequently published a code of ethics for youth workers in 2001. Following a national youth conference, the first of its kind in Malta, the National Youth Council was established in 1992.

In 1993, a new Ministry for Youth and the Arts was established and published the first document on youth policy. Malta’s first national youth policy in 1993 (Ministry for Youth and the Arts 1993) was followed by others in 1999, 2004 and 2010. These series of policies, while reasonably comprehensive, were largely aspirational, weak on specifics and lacking detail, and it was not until 2010 that the issue of how a national

youth policy might be coherently and effectively implemented was addressed. There was, however, a noticeable shift in tone over time, from one that was patriarchal, circumspect and cautious to one that was more positive and supportive of young people.

In 2003, as a result of Malta's participation in the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Youth, a review of youth policy in Malta was conducted by an international panel of experts, and its report (Ciorbaru et al. 2005) was to have a lasting impact on the development of youth policy in Malta.

These developments, at least in part, reflected changes in Malta's political landscape. Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004 was to have significant consequences for youth work. Membership of the European Union provided youth work with new sources of funding, through Youth in Action, as well as a new and expanded policy horizon, through the Youth Working Party and the Council of Youth Ministers. The momentum generated at both national and European level culminated in the establishment in 2010 of the national youth agency, Aġenzija Żgħażaġh, which opened a new chapter in the history of youth work in Malta.

Youth work and social work in the new century

In the 21st century, it would appear that in Malta both social work and youth work have reached the "promised land" after the struggles and uncertainties of previous decades. Sustained state support, clearly defined training and career paths and status and recognition as professions have redefined and reinvigorated both. These changes in the context of social work might be described as both evolutionary and constructive; in the case of youth work they are little less than transformational.

The Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS), which was established in 1998, took over the role of social welfare service provider for the state, with responsibility for social welfare services and staff, including social workers. The aim in establishing the FSWS was to provide "quality and timely service and help develop individuals to become responsible, integrated and productive members of society who value life as a resource for self actualisation". It was also to act as a catalyst "for change and development in the social welfare sector in Malta, consistent with the real and emerging needs of children, families and the community in order to avoid social exclusion" (Foundation for Social Welfare Services 2012).

The FSWS operates under the Ministry for Family and Social Solidarity, which oversees a number of socially related national policies and strategies covering children, parenting, poverty reduction and social inclusion, and the rights of people with disabilities.

The FSWS also incorporates two other entities: the national agency for children, families and the community, Aġenzija Appoġġ, which aims to safeguard and promote their well-being through the development and provision of psychosocial welfare services; and Aġenzija Sedqa, which aims to increase public awareness of the harm caused by addictive behaviours and to support those who have developed an addiction to modify their lifestyle.

The establishment of the Aġenzija Żgħażaġh in 2010 had three transformational consequences for youth work in Malta.

First, in its first five years of operation the agency put in place administrative structures and operational procedures for the promotion and implementation of youth work practice and youth-related services and is now the main employer of professionally qualified youth workers in Malta. It has also developed and implemented a wide range of programmes, projects and initiatives in youth empowerment and created new spaces at local community level for young people, including youth activity centres, youth cafés and youth hubs. The agency has placed a strong focus on engaging with and consulting young people on their views, concerns and aspirations and in promoting their democratic participation and intercultural and social awareness.

Second, the Youth Work Profession Act of 2014 gave formal professional recognition and status to youth workers, regulated the profession and determined the qualifications and conditions under which youth workers could acquire such recognition. The act provided for a Youth Work Profession Board to regulate the practice of youth work and eligibility to practise. The act also formally recognised the existence of academically qualified and professionally organised youth workers in Malta and provided for a code of ethics for youth workers.

Third, the agency was instrumental in drafting and overseeing the national youth policy *Towards 2020 – A shared vision for the future of young people*, which it will also manage and implement over the five-year period 2015-20. This was the first national youth policy to be based on widespread consultation and the first to have a particular instrument, Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, to implement policy with the financial and political support of the state.

The achievement of sustained state support, clear training and career paths and professional recognition, status and parity also coincided with a blurring of the boundaries in terms of professional purpose and practice. Both the concept and practice of youth work and social work have undergone change over time, often driven by external demands and pressures. The definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers in 2014 reflects these changes, and is not incompatible with youth work:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (International Federation of Social Workers 2014)

These changes have been reflected in Malta, where the traditional concept and practice of social work has undergone change and development. Youth work in Europe, it could be argued, has also become more contextualised, issues-driven and focused on solving problems – things formerly associated with social work. The European Union's youth agenda in recent times is replete with references to unemployment, radicalisation, intercultural dialogue, social inclusion and upskilling, and youth policy in Malta has reflected these changes.

The social work and youth work profession acts and Malta's national youth policy *Towards 2020* can be seen as examples not only of change and development

– professional parity in terms of sustained state support, clear training and career paths and recognition and the increasing blurring of boundaries in terms of professional purpose and practice – but also of the enduring historical legacies and experiences of social work and youth work in Malta.

The Social Work Profession Act of 2004 effectively served as a model for the Youth Work Profession Act of 2014. The acts gave formal professional recognition and status to social workers and youth workers, regulated the professions and determined the qualifications and conditions under which social workers and youth workers could acquire such recognition. The acts provided for professional boards to regulate the practice, and eligibility to practise, and for codes of ethics. Effectively, the acts ensured professional parity between the two professions.

However, it is in the definitions of “social work” and “youth work” in the respective Acts that the distinct historical legacies are most apparent. The Social Work Profession Act of 2004 was amended in 2016 to include the definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers in 2014. As for the definition of youth work, under the provisions of the Youth Work Profession Act of 2014:

“youth work” in Malta is a non-formal learning activity aimed at the personal, social and political development of young people. Youth workers engage with young people within their communities, including the voluntary sector and support them in realising their potential and address life’s challenges critically and creatively to bring about social change. Youth work takes into account all strands of diversity and focuses on all young people between thirteen (13) to thirty (30). (Laws of Malta 2014)

While both definitions are positive and assertive and share common values, sentiments and aspirations, there are also revealing differences. Social work is practice-based, an academic discipline, underpinned by theories. Central to its concerns are issues such as social justice and human rights. It engages with people and structures. Youth work is a non-formal learning activity aimed at holistic development and realising potential. It addresses challenges critically and creatively, is both communal and voluntary and workers engage with all young people from diverse backgrounds.

Towards 2020, the national youth policy, is at least in part an avowal of the ethos and values of youth work in Malta over the past century. Its vision is of young people who are:

respected, valued and listened to ... supported and encouraged in building fulfilling personal and social relationships and in developing their innate abilities and talents for the benefit of themselves, their communities and society. (Ministry for Education and Employment 2015).

The policy espouses values of respect for “the individuality, worth and dignity of all young people” and “the right to have their voices heard” and in the recognition of the “beliefs, culture and shared experiences of Malta”. It also commits to sustained support for “all young people in developing their ... capacities, skills, talents, strengths and abilities” and in “promoting their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being” in solidarity with their families and communities (ibid.).

The policy's description of youth work fleshes out the definition found in the Youth Work Profession Act:

a planned learning programme, project or activity aimed at the personal, social and political development of young people based on their voluntary participation and on mutually respectful and supportive relationships between young people and adults and built on a strong working relationship between the individual young person and youth workers. (ibid.)

The description is not only a policy imperative, it is also one full of historical resonance.

Towards 2020, however, is also, in part, a reflection of the role and possibilities of youth work in contemporary Malta and Europe. Its aims and structure resemble those of the renewed framework for European co-operation in the youth field (2010-18) and comprise two interrelated policy aims:

- ▶ to effectively support and encourage the young individual in fulfilling her/his potential and aspirations while addressing their needs and concerns; and
- ▶ to effectively support young people as active and responsible citizens who fully participate in and contribute to the social, economic and cultural life of the nation and Europe. (ibid)

This is to be achieved through two strategies: one focused on youth work and services for young people and the second focused on cross-sectoral support for young people. Each strategy has accompanying action plans.

The strategy focused on cross-sectoral supports for young people seeks to encourage and facilitate co-operative endeavour, mutual support and burden sharing not only across departments of state and public bodies but also with the private and voluntary sectors and with fellow professionals and practitioners. Two action plans under this strategy are of particular relevance for co-operative efforts between youth workers and social workers. The Action Plan for Health and Well-being proposes action in addressing issues such as healthy lifestyles, sexual health and responsible relationships, mental health and emotional well-being, substance abuse and addictive behaviour, bullying and disability. The Action Plan on Social Inclusion proposes action in addressing issues facing young migrants, families at risk of poverty, LGBTIQ young people and young people leaving care and detention.

The purpose is not for youth work to emulate social work, or for youth workers to act as social workers, but rather to explore the boundaries and possibilities of youth work in diverse settings and how it interfaces with other professions, such as social work, in building mutually supportive relationships and jointly formulating original and inventive ways of encouraging and helping young people.

Where will professional parity lead to? Professional rivalries and staking out and defence of professional territory? Will social workers be inclined to see youth work as merely an aspect of social work, but lacking its methodological rigour and academic weight? Will youth workers incline to the view that social work is replete with arcane methodologies based on dubious theories? Or will youth workers and social workers learn to work together on the basis of parity of esteem and a spirit of mutual support and endeavour to the benefit of young people with whom they work?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to trace the development of youth work and social work in Malta over the past century. Both were shaped and strongly influenced by the Catholic Church and the British presence: youth work more by the Church and social work more by the state. Youth work remained a voluntary activity on the part of individuals and groups for most of the period under consideration: the state, both British and Maltese, played no role. While social work was of greater interest to the state, support for it was limited, uneven and fitful. Youth work lagged behind social work in terms of recognition and development. Sociology and social work only came to be taught at university level in the 1970s: youth work almost 20 years later. Social work achieved professional recognition in 2004: youth work 10 years later. For most of the period under consideration both struggled in their different ways. When sustained state support, clear training and career paths and professional parity were finally achieved, they remained distinct activities despite the blurring of their professional purpose and practices.

The reason for this continuing distinction between the nature and role of social work and those of youth work in Malta may have less to do with theories about what social work and youth work actually are, the particular methods employed, practices engaged in or people supported and more to do with the historical legacy and experience of both over time. It is this historical legacy that has shaped how youth workers and social workers see themselves and each other and how others have come to see them.

The past made us; what the future holds is another matter.

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