Notes on Practice

Diversity Toolkit for Youth Work
Increasing Participation and Inclusion for all Young People

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Abstract
Equality is a named principle in contemporary Irish youth work. In practice, the provision of youth work can be understood as an equality initiative in that it is often targeted at young people who have not experienced equal opportunities. As such, the youth work equality agenda is often understood as an ‘equality of opportunity’ position. This article argues that such a position is not robust enough to be congruent with the articulation of equality in youth work policy, specifically the National Youth Work Development Plan, in which the discussion of equality is more in keeping with an ‘equality of condition’ perspective. Furthermore, youth work that ignores the plurality of young people simply fails to meet their needs. With these concerns in mind, youth work is in need of innovative policy and practice initiatives, such as equality audits, tracking and disaggregation of participants and greater understanding of the needs of young people from diverse identities and living circumstances. This paper describes such an initiative in the form of a Diversity Toolkit and names further steps that are required in the Irish youth work sector.

Introduction
The development of a Diversity Tool came about in response to a shared commitment within the youth work sector to increase participation and inclusion for all young people in youth groups/services in keeping with the vision of equality and inclusion in the National Youth Work Development Plan (NYWDP) (Department of Education and Science, 2003). As its starting point the Diversity Toolkit recognises the almost complete absence of data showing the levels of equality and inclusion that are being practiced in the youth work sector (Mauro-Bracken, 2009). Indeed, it has been recognised in studies of the youth sector that equality and inclusion initiatives are few in number with notable but isolated exceptions (McCrea, 2003; Mauro-Bracken, 2009). Within the Irish youth sector, practitioners with expertise in working with young people with diverse identities and living circumstances have strongly and consistently argued that this gap exists and needs to be addressed by providing for training, policies and a critical awareness of diversity within the sector and within youth services. It was for this reason that a number of such practitioners came together as a group to develop the Diversity Toolkit under the lead of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI).
An Argument for the Diversity Toolkit Based On the Needs and Circumstances of Young People

So often those of us who promote diversity jump straight into ‘why not diversity’ mode, offering advice and support, promoting legislation and insisting that diversity be part of all funding criteria, policy development, legislation and so on. Too often we ignore the process in between – the fact that we wouldn’t be talking about diversity so much if there wasn’t a large degree of resistance to it or difficulty around it. So let’s step back a bit and try to picture what diversity means, and why it is articulated so clearly in the National Youth Work Development Plan.

First we need to agree that youth work is about meeting the needs of young people. The NYWDP is clear about this when it says: ‘Throughout its history, the success or otherwise of youth work has depended most centrally on the extent to which it has remained in touch with the changing needs and circumstances of young people’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 2). If this is the case, youth work must cater to the diverse circumstances and identities of young people. Let’s take a moment to think about what those circumstances and identities are in contemporary Ireland.

Imagine you are at a football match, Ireland is playing, the crowd in green is 60,000 strong and is really eager for a win. Let us also imagine that the crowd is fully representative of the population of Ireland. In one brief, quiet moment you look around you. 10 per cent, or 6,000 people in the crowd, are foreign nationals – you know this because their skin colour, languages or accents are different to yours (CSO, 2007). 1.2 per cent of all the 12–18 year olds are members of the Traveller Community (CSO, 2007). At least 7 per cent are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. Some are obviously so, holding hands, maybe kissing (Belong To, 2009). 10.2 per cent of the 15 – 24 year olds have a chronic physical or mental health problem, illness or disability – again sometimes obvious, sometimes not (Gannon and Nolan, 2005; cited in Lalor et al, 2007). One in five of this crowd will have a mental illness during their lives, you have no idea how many in the stadium are currently on medication, feeling suicidal or getting over a serious bout of depression. There are 6600 early school leavers (CSO, 2008a) wearing green and at least 90 of the fans are young unmarried parents and their children are with them (CSO 2008b). To cap it all 50 per cent are a different gender to you (CSO, 2007). Are you feeling a little uncomfortable in this scenario? Could this scenario ever be a reality?

In such a seemingly diverse country you might wonder who the majority really is. The dominant voice and the dominant representation if people who are Irish, settled, from a Catholic background, white, literate, able bodied, heterosexual and not suffering from a mental health issue. To belong to a minority group often means having different – and lower – expectations from others due to our life’s circumstances. This is not what our equality legislation supports, nor, as we will see, the vision of the youth work sector, especially the NYWDP (2003). But what is it like in reality? What does the football stadium actually look like? What does it feel like?

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Let us transpose this model into the youth work sector. What do youth groups look like? What do they feel like? And for whom do they feel that way, the majority or minority? We live in a world where it is much more likely to consist of the majority grouping than a statistical representation given in the breakdown above. Why? Well it’s easier for a start. And being easier for some means that it is so much harder for the minority to attend and be fully included.
This hardness is institutionalised. We have made it hard – over centuries of thinking and practice. In fact it is so institutionalised we often don’t see that it should be any different. Except that we remember vividly within our own lifetimes when women were not treated equally, a situation that has changed beyond recognition today. Was it so hard to make the changes that made gender equality a reality? Hard is often just a frame of mind and because others around us make it so. The diversity tool seeks to support youth workers, to make it as easy as possible to implement change and embed equality and inclusiveness in youth work.

An Argument for the Diversity Toolkit based on the NYWDP and Equality Theory

So far this article has proposed that there is a need for youth work to employ tools such as the Diversity Toolkit because youth work has a responsibility to meet the needs of young people from diverse identities and living circumstances. The next few pages will present an argument that youth work services should employ tools such as those found in the Diversity Toolkit because equality is a key principle in youth work and consequently youth work policy and legislation compel youth workers to act to realise equality in their work.

Firstly, what is it that we mean when we talk about equality? Baker et al (2004) have developed a framework which helps us to understand the key elements of equality as well as the various ways that equality is articulated. The framework identifies three perspectives, or types of equality which can roughly be understood as follows:

**Basic Equality** – essentially the belief that we are all equally entitled to basic rights and security (right to life, right to justice and so on).

**Liberal Egalitarianism** – essentially can be understood as equality of opportunity: we should all have an equal chance to get into school, get a job and that who we were born as should not affect this.

**Equality of Condition** – is a much more robust understanding of equality and includes the ideas that:

- Everybody is of equal value and deserves equal respect and dignity, and in fact we should celebrate diversity;
- Everybody should have equal prospects of wellbeing and having their needs met, and resources should be distributed in such a way as to provide for this;
- Everybody should have equal prospects to develop relationships;
- Everybody should have equal rights including an equal chance to have their say.

If we understand liberal egalitarianism in its simplest form as providing for the equal opportunity to participate (Brighouse, 2002), then we argue that equality in the youth sector is largely oriented towards liberal egalitarianism. Certainly, it is largely the case that equality is understood as equality of opportunity (Smith and Lusthaus, 1995; Lynch and Baker, 2006). In youth work, an instance of the focus on equality of opportunity can be found in the way that youth work is evaluated in relation to equality. We are all familiar with participant analysis forms, these forms provide data which are employed in equality evaluation as they collect data in relation to named groups such as young Travellers, early school leavers, young men and young women. As anyone knows who has completed such forms, they measure attendance rates, not
participation; in other words whether young people showed up, not what they did. They assess whether young people have received an opportunity to participate, not whether they have actually participated in a meaningful and equal way.

More simply, equality is evaluated largely based on the presence or otherwise of young people from named groups. An example of this is a study to evaluate gender equality in the youth sector. The previous National Development Plan included the commitment to ‘women and men’s equitable involvement and contribution to youth service activity’, which was identified as a ‘a core EU and Irish government policy priority, due to the gender mainstreaming strategy adopted under the NDP and in EU Structural Funds’ (NDP, 2002: 6). To ensure that progress on this commitment was made, an assessment of gender equality in the youth sector was undertaken in 2002. Tellingly, the analysis in this study of gender equality in the youth sector consisted almost entirely of a statistical analysis of the respective attendance rates of young men and women and specifically noted that it did not address uptake of activities.

So, in youth work, we have participant analysis forms and we have some monitoring of the overall attendance rates. However, as previously discussed, we don’t have sector-wide initiatives to ensure that we give everyone equal prospects to participate in a manner which ensures equal respect and dignity. Nevertheless, such initiatives are clearly called for in the actions and in the principles for the National Youth Work Development Plan. In fact, this article argues that policy and legislation governing youth work articulates a position that is in keeping with equality of condition and suggests that we should be doing much more as youth workers.

There are several pieces of policy and legislation relating to youth work and equality. They include the Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004, which are a key part of Ireland’s equality legislation and the National Action Plan against Racism (NPAR) (DOJELR, 2005) a strategic plan to combat racism employing an intercultural approach. Not yet policy but currently under consideration by the Youth Affairs Unit within the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), is the Report and Recommendations for an Intercultural Strategy for the Youth Work Sector, which was prepared by NYCI building on the commitment in the NYWDP to ‘equality and inclusiveness’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 13).

There is also of course the Youth Work Act 2001, which evinces a concern for access to youth work of young people from a number of named groups. The Act obligates providers to deliver youth work services with particular regard to young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and on equal basis with regard to gender. It emphasises the needs of young Irish speakers and those living in the Gaeltacht. It urges Vocational Education Committees to ensure that people working with young Travellers are represented on Voluntary Youth Councils (which should also have a gender balance).

However, the key piece of policy is the National Youth Work Development Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2003) which should serve as the touchstone for the development of any equality response in the Youth Sector. Under the heading ‘Equality and Inclusiveness’ the NYWDP states:

These proposals for a National Youth Work Development Plan…[aim] to uphold in spirit as well as in letter the provisions of the Equal Status Act, whereby no adult or young person may experience discrimination on the
basis of gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race, nationality or ethnicity, including membership of the Traveller community (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 15).

This statement makes clear the breadth of equality concerns as they are understood in the NYWDP. In keeping with the legislation, a broad range of grounds for equality are identified. Any theoretical construct which informs practice and which aims to comprehensively address this range of grounds must itself be comprehensive.

Constructs such as anti-racism, or interculturalism, which focus primarily on ethnicity or race, are not in themselves comprehensive enough to address all of the grounds of equality identified in the Equal Status Act, and echoed in the NYWDP. Such approaches, which are already widely employed in youth work (Alluffi – Pentini and Lorenz, 1996), must be seen as only a partial response to the broad terms of the equality legislation and youth work policy. Other approaches which have already provided for a broader range of grounds must also be employed, or, alternatively, an encompassing approach must be identified.

While the NYWDP clearly indicates a broad and comprehensive equality position this policy does not identify any particular equality perspective, such as equality of condition or liberal egalitarianism. There are, however, a number of statements relating to equality in youth work which, when taken together, describe a coherent position in relation to equality. This position, as will be seen, most closely resembles that of equality of condition as identified by Lynch and Baker (2005). This resemblance is most evident in the overarching goal of the NYWDP in relation to equality in youth work. The NYWDP state that its proposals ‘are based on a commitment to a vision of youth work which values diversity, aims to eradicate injustice and inequality and strives for openness and inclusiveness in all its dealings with young people and adults’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 15). This aim is a normative aim; it describes not what is, but what ought to be. This statement clearly recognises the existence of inequalities and suggests a reformist or activist agenda that resonates with the equality agenda proposed by equality of condition, which is to ‘eradicate inequality’ (Baker, 2006: 34). The NYWDP also unambiguously supports the proposition that diversity needs to be valued in order to achieve equality of condition, which is a belief of egalitarians who hold an equality of condition perspective (Baker et al, 2004).

Likewise, egalitarians who are focused on equality of condition are concerned that in educational institutions the rights of learners are provided for and that participatory structures and processes are in place that are accessible to all (Lynch and Baker, 2005). The NYWDP firmly places rights and participation at the heart of youth work by emphasizing that the ‘active and critical participation of young people is in keeping with the view that young people have rights as citizens’ (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 14).

Taken together these statements describe an equality position that is much more rigorous than equal opportunity; the NYWDP articulates a position that is much more consistent with an equality of condition perspective. Such a perspective requires robust efforts to promote equality. Such aims are not unrealistic, and there are practical steps that can be taken to realise this vision. The Diversity Toolkit attempts to outline such steps so that a wider range of young people have their needs met in youth work; so that everyone feels that their identity is accepted and celebrated; so that everybody can have equal prospects to develop relationships in youth work; so that all young people are respected and have an equal chance to learn and develop within youth work.
A Description of the Diversity Toolkit

As outlined above, meeting the needs of young people who have diverse needs and living circumstances is the essence of youth work. In response to this imperative youth workers will assert that they meet the individual young people ‘where they are at’. However, this notion of ‘at-ness’ is frequently interpreted as the young person’s journey through life and it presupposes that the young person is already physically in contact with the youth service. So if a young person with specific needs seeks to join a youth group we would expect that they would be welcomed. However, the question remains as to whether – once there – their needs would be adequately met, the service is prepared in advance and the youth workers feel confident in meeting the young person’s needs. But the more important consideration is whether the young person knows about the service and feels that they can even join the group in the first place. Evidence suggests that young people with diverse needs are not accessing youth services (Mauro-Bracken 2009) but clear and broad ranging data is not available to verify or contradict this. This can only become evident when youth services themselves question how they are meeting the needs of young people with specific needs. This means youth services questioning whether they engage with young members of the Traveller Community, and young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, and early school leavers, and young people with a disability, and young LGBT people, and young parents, and young people with mental health issues and geographically isolated young people and young people who have been involved in the juvenile justice system – in numbers that are representative of the diversity in their own wider community. When questioned specifically about this, youth workers often say that their group is a special interest group or that they don’t have the skills to work with young people that identify with these issues.

We would say that their youth work skills do equip them to work with these young people and what they need is some extra support and awareness raising. We also stress that young people have multiple identities and living conditions and youth work should address as broad a range of needs as possible to reflect the reality for the young person – at least by consideration. In other words, are youth groups discriminating by unconscious omission? Are some youth groups leaving inclusion of young people with diverse needs to specialist groups? We would argue that such responses are not only prevalent throughout the country but they also defy the whole ethos of inclusion that the NYWDP demands. It was this need that led to the development of the Diversity Toolkit as a means by which to gently challenge our frames of mind, our working practices, our policies and procedures across a broad range of needs.

What then does the Diversity Toolkit look like? In practice, the Diversity Toolkit was inspired by the idea of Equality Audits and derives a number of key elements from experiences in implementing these. In format and presentation the Toolkit draws upon an equality tool for youth work that was produced in Australia.¹ The tool, entitled Opening the Doors (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2006) is described as a ‘Do It Yourself’ Access and Equity manual for working with young people.
Opening the Doors has three features:

- Practical advice which includes a description of the needs and issues facing particular groups;
- Checklists for thinking about how your service is performing on access and equity issues;
- Contacts for further resources.

The NYCI Diversity Toolkit adopts the checklists and the practical advice of Opening the Doors, but also includes several features inspired by equality audits. Equality audits, also known as ‘equity audits’ and ‘representivity audits’, have long been used to monitor and enforce civil rights in the United States, Scotland, Great Britain, and Australia (Skria et al, 2004). Audits have been used in education, but also in other areas such as enforcing workplace equality. Here in Ireland Morrison and Lumby (2007) have piloted an equality audit in education and Pavee Point (2006) has piloted ethnicity tracking tools necessary for effective auditing systems.

These audits vary widely in form and process, but share the same premise. That is, within institutions, we are all aware of individual instances of inequality, but we rarely have opportunities to systematically examine educational provision to ensure that it is equitable (Skria et al, 2004). The Diversity Toolkit is like an equality audit in that its key aim and function is to provide an opportunity to systematically and holistically examine the practice and policy of youth work organisations to identify inequalities, gaps in provision and policy deficits.

The literature of equality audits is replete with frameworks for understanding and examining educational services. These include Norte (1999), Skria et al (2004) and Opfer (2006). In the end, the Diversity Toolkit adopted a framework employed by BeLonG To (the youth service for LGBT young people) which focuses on the youth service’s public image, programme planning, participation of young people, professional development of staff and their policies and procedures. Encompassing these five criteria is the question of practice which looks beyond the practical application of youth work to the values and attitudes that pervade the youth service. It is important to point out that the elements within this framework are common to the equality audits named above.

Just as with the Opening the Doors toolkit, the Diversity Toolkit is conceived of as a do-it-yourself activity – this is for two reasons. One is that centrally mandated audits are often seen as box-ticking exercises (Morrison, 2007). The second is that self-assessment is a valuable developmental process. Participants of audits have found that the process of doing an audit provides an opportunity to learn a great deal about their obligations under the equal status legislation and also about best practice. Creating space for honestly reflecting on practice is a valuable developmental experience. This is one reason why self assessment is built into the new framework for quality standards in youth work (OMCYA, 2009).

It is clear also from the experience of those examining the effectiveness of equality audits that it is vitally important to ensure that disaggregated data tracking takes place (Morrison and Osler, 2002; Young, 2001). This is simply because we cannot tell how well an educational institution is involving a particular group, for instance young people with disabilities, if there are no records of how many young people with disabilities participate in that service. For this reason the Diversity Toolkit includes a data collection tool.
In its entirety the Diversity Toolkit is designed to be user friendly and practical, with an emphasis on raising awareness and providing clear and practical tips to directly meet specific needs of young people. It presents the diversity issues together (as a whole document) and in their specificity (in specialised chapters), thus recognising the multi-faceted identities of young people together with the specific needs they may have. For example, a young person may be an early school leaver, a young woman and also be a member of the Traveller community. Alternatively a young gay person may have a mental health issue and be geographically isolated or someone with a physical disability may be a young parent and come from a minority ethnic background.

The Diversity Toolkit chapters include:

1. Introduction – Equality, Access, Inclusion & Master Questionnaire
2. Working with Young People with a Physical or Sensory Disability
3. Working with Young People from Minority Ethnic Background
4. Working with Young Travellers
5. Working with Young LGBT people
6. Working with Young People with Mental Health Issues
7. Working with Early School Leavers
8. Working with Young Women
9. Working with Young Parents
10. Working with Rural and Geographically Isolated Young People

As a web-based tool it has the capacity for additions and edits to be made and further chapters are envisioned. These include:

- Working with Young People involved in Juvenile Justice System
- Working with Young People with a Learning Disability
- Working with Young Carers
- Working with Young Men

Conclusion

The aim of the Diversity Toolkit is to realise the vision of the *National Youth Work Development Plan* and embed equality and inclusiveness in all youth work. It is designed to help youth workers to adopt an inclusion and equality approach and it stresses that skills development is important in meeting the needs of all young people. The Diversity Toolkit is a resource that offers information, advice and guidance. However, it needs to fit into a wider framework and work in cohesion with a number of other sector wide initiatives that are also necessary.

Principal amongst these initiatives is the ongoing need for specialist training programmes to incorporate the principles and practice contained within the Diversity Toolkit – i.e. the need for disaggregation of data, evaluation and monitoring, planning and practice, together with policy development. To this end the Diversity Toolkit development team will work toward developing a standardised training module to be disseminated as widely as possible throughout the sector. In doing so it will be guided by the learning from the very successful Health Quality Mark initiative, a model that promotes and develops best practice in health promoting youth work and that NYCI has been operating for many years (see Hodgins and Swinburne, 2008).
Another sector wide initiative already underway is the development and implementation of the Quality Standards Framework (QSF) within the youth work sector (OMCYA, 2009). In essence quality standard processes demand a link between policy and practice, a whole organisation approach and sector wide support. Currently at the end of its pilot phase the QSF has the potential and vision to be utilised by all youth services in Ireland to assess their achievements across the core principles of youth work. The QSF identifies one such principle as being that all youth work practice must be committed to ensuring and promoting equality and inclusiveness in all its dealings with young people and adults. The Diversity Toolkit will work to uphold this core principle, offering effective tools toward achieving the verifiable indicators sought by the QSF.

Another pillar of youth work is the principle of participation which is the natural progression beyond inclusion. It is, in reality, inclusion’s verifiable indicator – real inclusion and real equality demands full participation. Initiatives to promote youth participation have been taken on several fronts ranging from local and national structures such as Comhairle na Óg and Dáil na nÓg to leadership programmes for young people within individual youth organisations. Participation must also be mirrored at staff and volunteer level. The Diversity Toolkit promotes participation – meaning the full involvement – of youth work teams. Working in a team environment, working together toward a common goal, supporting one another, recognising and facing the ongoing challenges, taking a whole organisational approach and having strong leadership is the only way to achieve the vision of a truly equal society on which the Diversity Toolkit is based.

Notes
1 The Opening the Doors Tool was produced by an initiative of the Youth Action and Policy Association and the Access Project Reference Group for the Nepean Better Futures Strategy

References


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