Youth Work in Northern Ireland: 
An Exploration of Emerging Themes and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a recent research project which explored the perceptions of youth workers in Northern Ireland of the nature and purpose of their work and their attitudes towards a number of important current issues, including the role of youth work in combating social exclusion, the measurability of youth work outcomes, the relationships between trained professional workers and volunteers, the place of youth work in schools and the tensions associated with practising youth work in a ‘post-conflict’ society. The paper reveals that while youth workers attach immense importance to relationship-building and attending to process, they appear to have difficulty identifying more concrete or measurable outcomes from their work with young people. The youth workers see their practice as being increasingly shaped by external factors such as the funding environment, policies for formal education, social exclusion measures and the persistence of sectarian social divisions. The authors suggest that youth workers have an opportunity to secure greater recognition for the value of their work by articulating its benefits more clearly, but they caution that funders and policy-makers should be realistic in their expectations given the scale of disadvantage and disaffection experienced by many young people.

Keywords

Youth work; social exclusion; Northern Ireland; youth work in a divided society; youth work issues.

Introduction: Youth Work Purpose and Principles

The transition from primary to secondary school, from education and training to the labour market and from the family home to independent living requires certain key skills. For some this process may be hampered by factors such as unemployment, a lack of social or educational skills, or lack of adequate housing. In such cases, young people may find it difficult to follow a narrow prescribed curriculum, not least due to factors such as minimal parental support, poor earlier schooling or absenteeism. This group of young people need an education that can start where they are, identify their specific needs and proceed accordingly (Morgan et al., 2000). Failure to provide opportunities for these young people to ‘increase capacities’ can lead to social exclusion (McCartney, 1999).
Structures such as school, established to educate and support young people, are often perceived as part of a system that has labelled these same young people as failures (Harland, 2001). For this reason, schools may not necessarily be best placed to meet the needs of this group. The Department of Education for Northern Ireland (1997) recognises that effective youth work enables young people to develop a range of personal and social skills and understanding. The Youth Service in Northern Ireland aims to ensure opportunities for children and young people to acquire knowledge, skills and experience to enable them to achieve their full potential as valued individuals (Department of Education, 2000).

Of crucial importance is the quality of the youth worker’s relationship with young people and the consequent influence on their learning and development. Learning can take place in planned and focused programmes, or it may be spontaneous through informal encounters with individuals or with groups offering programmes that attempt to meet the multitude of developmental needs of young people. Youth programmes aim to be flexible and relevant and ensure progression through what is being learnt. In many cases, the opportunities and experiences brought about by youth work are complementary to what young people encounter in school (Department of Education, 1997).

Whilst the nature of youth work appears self-evident to many, it remains a contested field of activity in the sense that there are different and competing views as to its fundamental purpose (Murphy, 1999). However, according to Smith (2002) it is possible to identify some key dimensions that have been present to differing degrees since the early 1900s. These key dimensions include the following.

**Age-Related Focus** As its name makes clear, youth work caters for specific age groups. The group targeted can vary from one context to another and over time. In Northern Ireland, at present, the age range for the Youth Service is 4–25 (Department of Education, 2003).

**Voluntary Participation and Positive Relationships** Youth work’s ethos and process strongly emphasise a voluntary relationship between the worker and the young person. As Jeffs (2001) has commented, the voluntary principle has distinguished youth work from most other services provided for this age group. The participant retains the right to freely enter into relationships with youth workers and to end those relationships when they want. This voluntary principle has implications for the way in which practitioners work as it encourages them to think and work in more dialogical ways through developing innovative programmes that attract young people whilst appreciating they have the choice to leave a programme at any given time (Smith, 2002). As noted by Bamber (2002) if engagement and participation of young people cannot be assured, neither can the ultimate outcomes of the work.

**Commitment to Association** Association has been an essential feature of youth work since its inception. The Albemarle Report (Ministry of Education, 1960) highlighted its importance as one of the principal aims of the Youth Service along with training and challenge. According to Doyle and Smith (1999) association refers to joining together in friendship or for a given purpose. However, as Smith (2002) argues, the idea of association has become less prominent as individualised and specialised understandings of youth work have become more prominent.
Friendliness, Informality and Integrity  
Smith agrees with Henriques (1933) that the success of youth work depends upon the personality, ingenuity, approachability and friendliness of the youth worker and their ability to engage informally with young people in a wide range of settings. Therefore effective youth work is a combination of an informal approach and the character of the youth worker.

Concern with the Welfare and Education of Young People  
Historically youth work did not develop simply to ‘keep people off the streets’, or to ‘provide amusement’. Training courses and programmes, discussions and opportunities to expand and deepen experience have been an essential element of youth work since its beginnings (Jeffs & Smith, 1998/99). Furthermore, as Smith (2002) maintains, there are many examples of youth work providing a range of more specialised services for young people, both educational and welfare-based.

The official understanding of youth work in Northern Ireland today, as expressed in the Department of Education’s ‘Model for Effective Practice’ (2003) is broadly in line with the view outlined above, but adds as a ‘core value’ a commitment to equity, diversity and interdependence (known by the acronym EDI). Equity is ‘essentially about fairness…about ensuring that we do not directly or indirectly exclude people’; diversity ‘is about seeing difference as something that can enrich us…It is crucial that the youth worker is a positive model in terms of attitudes and responses to difference’; and interdependence is about ‘building robust relationships and developing our understanding of how the actions of individuals and groups affect each other’ (Department of Education, 2003: 10). Building on this commitment to EDI, the ‘Model for Effective Practice’ sets out three core principles which underpin the personal and social development of young people and which should be reflected in all youth work. These are: a commitment to young people’s participation; a testing of values and beliefs; and the promotion of acceptance and understanding of others (Department of Education, 2003: 13).

Through their active participation, good youth work practice gives young people the opportunity to shape and develop their own experiences and to make decisions on issues relevant to them. Little occurs in youth work processes, group activities, programme design or meetings without the involvement and co-operation of young people. Young people are given opportunity to veto or approve processes or activities, to speak, to lead and generally to be involved in their own learning in a thinking and creative way. This proactive and interactive approach, much more a feature of non-formal youth work than formal education and vocational training, enables youth workers to ensure equality of opportunity and to offer encouragement, support, stimulation and facilitation for the development of young people’s potential. At its best, participation ensures that young people are at the heart of designing, managing and evaluating youth work policy and practice and have opportunities to make a meaningful contribution within their communities and within public and political decision-making processes (Youth Service Liaison Forum, 2005).

Acceptance and understanding of others is particularly important in the context of ‘a legacy of violence and communal strife, alongside other issues that affect modern society’ (Department of Education, 2003:16). It is increasingly recognised that youth workers possess a unique blend of skills, knowledge and experience that is particularly effective in building meaningful relationships with young people (Harland, 2001). One of the most powerful influences in encouraging young people to engage in potentially
contentious work is the trust they have with the youth worker. It is important that youth workers are aware of their potential to communicate to young people the values of compassion, understanding and acceptance of others. Youth workers have huge potential to serve as alternative role models and by their example can encourage these values both in the young people they are immediately involved with and other young people in the community. By doing so, youth workers can help young people achieve a broader understanding and tolerance of issues such as sexuality, disability, culture and tradition (Department of Education, 1997: 10).

Youth work should allow young people to explore and question the origins of their values and beliefs and to gain a deeper awareness of the opinions and beliefs of others. Youth workers can help young people gain understanding through discussing moral and spiritual issues, values relating to ‘right and wrong’, honesty, truth, integrity, rights and responsibilities, respect for other people and their property (Department of Education, 1997). It is important to enable young people to recognise bias, examine alternative viewpoints and look for reliable sources of evidence. Again, this principle has a particular resonance in Northern Ireland, where ‘views are often entrenched and where community divisions have affected all aspects of life’, even to the extent that other types of conflict, prejudice and discrimination are in danger of being obscured or ignored (Department of Education, 2003: 15).

Current Challenges

The values and principles outlined above, which emphasise such dimensions of youth work as relationships, participation and education, and which rest on an inherently positive view of young people, are not necessarily compatible with the broader social, political and policy environment in which youth workers operate, and this inevitably creates tensions and challenges.

One very significant factor is the pervasive perception of youth as a ‘threat’ which has led to a number of policy initiatives during the last ten years related to control and management (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). Some of these have involved increased surveillance. For example, there has been an increased use of closed circuit television in shopping centres and entertainment areas specifically aimed at identifying problematic groups of young people. Not only has the perception of young people as a threat created a new way of dealing with youth issues; it could be argued that youth work itself has been shaped and influenced by these policy changes and practices. Youth workers have found themselves undertaking work in areas where young people congregate and appear to engage in behaviours that are perceived as deviant. For example, in response to concerns expressed by shop-owners and police, youth workers have been appointed to Belfast city centre as detached workers to engage with young people on the streets. There is increasing recognition within society of the potential of youth work to address the perceived negative behaviour of young people. However, those who look to youth workers may have little understanding of the traditions or principles which have historically informed and shaped youth work practice. What they require is a ‘solution’ to a ‘problem’ – for example hooliganism, petty crime, teenage pregnancy, anti-social behaviour – and they are willing to try youth work as an alternative to CCTV or to employing a private security firm. If youth work is used in this way, its educational principles are likely to be compromised.
These principles are also under threat from an increasingly ‘managerial’ policy approach. While the government has in recent years (DfES, 2002) officially recognised the benefit of youth work, Ord (2004: 57) has argued that ‘at the same time it is denying the main tool utilised for that benefit – the youth work process’. Smith (2003: 79) has warned that ‘organising youth work around concepts like outcome, targets, curriculum and issue’ means there is a danger of losing relationship as a defining feature of youth work practice through a reduction in the amount of time youth workers spend with young people.

A further challenge to purpose and principle arises from the provision of youth work in institutional contexts such as school or other ‘contested spaces’. While demands placed on youth workers are likely to increase in future years as more professions see the potential that youth work approaches offer, the voluntary principle may be perceived by those professions as problematic (Jeffs & Smith, 1998/99). At the same time, youth workers question whether they can do their job effectively where attendance is compulsory. As Hand (1995) points out, school-based youth work has sometimes developed ‘negotiated programmes’ or the agreement of a ‘contract’ at the start of the project which blurs the voluntary issue. Much of the current school-based youth work is funded to target specific ‘problem youth’ such as ‘truants’, young people ‘at risk’, the ‘disaffected’ and those referred by teachers, parents or social workers (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). In such cases it is at least questionable that participation is voluntary. For youth workers this poses an ethical dilemma; whether to protect and control young people or respect their rights to self-determination (Banks 1999).

Finally, there are challenges posed by the emphasis on combating social exclusion through youth work. Given that youth work has historically been engaged with both education and welfare provision, it is not surprising that it is at the forefront of efforts aimed at tackling social exclusion among children and young people: those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with special educational needs, children in care, Traveller children, teenage parents, and those caught in a cycle of poor school attendance, low educational achievement and poorly paid employment (Youth Council for Northern Ireland, 2001). In the light of this, Young (1999) believes it is important for youth workers to keep focused on the fact that they do not work with young people solely because they are ‘in trouble’ or ‘cause trouble’. Indeed, youth work programmes that focus on particular issues such as harm-minimisation or alternatives to school, may be criticised for addressing the symptoms rather than the root causes of the problem (Morgan et al., 2000). In this context it is both unrealistic and unfair to construct youth work as a panacea for social exclusion or other contemporary social problems.

Research Method and Sample
The rest of this paper documents some findings from an exploratory research project (Harland, Morgan and Muldoon, 2005) designed to investigate the perceptions of youth workers in Northern Ireland of the nature of youth work and of key issues in contemporary youth work practice, including how it applies to and addresses social exclusion. Four focus groups were conducted (total 42 participants) with youth workers who were experienced and currently practicing in the field of community youth work, including students enrolled on the Postgraduate Diploma in Community Youth Work at the University of Ulster. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted and
the respondents included both professionally-qualified and non professionally-qualified ‘indigenous’ workers. The participants represented a diverse range of agencies from the statutory and voluntary sectors, came from a mix of urban and rural backgrounds and were roughly gender balanced (19 males, 23 females).

The focus groups concentrated on a number of key issues: how workers defined youth work; how youth work’s outcomes could be measured; how they understood the essential skills needed for delivering youth work; how learning is delivered in different youth work contexts and to what extent (and how) youth work addresses social exclusion. The groups were facilitated by an experienced researcher and a second researcher was present to take notes in line with best practice. All focus groups were taped and subsequently transcribed. Participants were sent a written summary of the preliminary analysis of the focus group findings and invited to validate the researcher’s record and interpretations, as well as to make additional comments.

Youth Workers’ Perceptions and Experiences

The Nature of Youth Work

In general it was found that no one definition of youth work prevailed in the focus groups and in fact many participants had difficulty coming up with a clear statement of its nature. Responses included: ‘helping young people develop’; ‘personal development’; ‘helping socially disadvantaged young people’; ‘providing opportunities for young people’; ‘empowering young people’; ‘it’s about citizenship education’; ‘encompassing everything from education to personal and social development to employment’; ‘it’s about self-esteem’.

In fact there seemed to be more consensus on what youth work was not. The following received broad agreement: ‘youth work has a different approach to formal education, it is applied differently’; ‘youth work is not about doing things for a young person, but doing things with a young person’; ‘it’s not like formal education or carried out for a set period of time’; ‘you can’t work with young people alone, you’ve got to work with communities’; ‘youth work is not about controlling young people’. Many participants, therefore, defined youth work with reference to the formal education system which they saw as failing a considerable proportion of young people. Youth work could play a valuable role in supporting young people who were struggling at school. For these respondents, youth work is concerned with ‘young people who have had bad experiences in the educational system’; ‘those whom the school system has failed’; ‘young people who leave school with no qualifications and live in areas of high social deprivation with little chance of getting a job’. For young people like this, the voluntary and non-obligatory aspect of youth work was perceived as crucial to the youth work process. Imposing attendance requirements were deemed counterproductive as it removed the locus of control from the young people.

An important aspect of youth work is that it is not obligatory and young people have a choice. You can never say this is what we are going to do for the first six weeks because after three weeks a young person may choose not to be there. So your goals must suit the needs of young people and be appropriate to what they want.
There was strong agreement that youth work should be ‘process’ rather than ‘product’ orientated and be rooted firmly in the nature of relationship between the youth worker and the young person. Perhaps because of this emphasis on process, many participants had difficulty articulating how youth workers set their goals when undertaking youth work. Repeatedly respondents stated that they primarily focused on building relationships with young people rather than specific or measurable outcomes. As one stated:

*Youth work is definitely a process; there is no specific beginning or end. How can you say at the start what the end result will be? If a young person is empowered then he or she will decide the outcomes.*

The process within youth work was generally seen to be contingent on the quality of relationship between a young person and a youth worker. Although most youth work was primarily carried out within groups, the work also had an important individual focus. Participants believed that time spent with young people and building trust were crucial factors in this relationship. For example:

*In our literacy programmes, the first thing you have to do is develop a relationship with that young person. It is very embarrassing for a young person to say ‘I don’t know my alphabet,’ or ‘I can’t read a dictionary’. So a rapport is crucial so that you can work together. The needs of every young person are different so you need a different relationship with every young person you work with.*

Whilst the respondents seemed to be agreed that meaningful relationships were crucial to the youth work process, many struggled to articulate the purpose of youth work beyond the relationship phase. Workers found it difficult to offer an overall model of youth work that incorporated patterns of progression, specific content that would facilitate progression and an evaluation process that would help identify, even quantify, hard evidence that empowerment and autonomy have taken root in the young person. Indeed, the majority of workers did not appear to think it was important to try and determine what the next phase would be: ‘young people define for themselves what they want from the relationship’. Statements such as this reveal the extent to which youth workers were struggling to define their interventions with young people in terms of products and ‘outcomes’. For these youth workers products and outcomes were always secondary to the youth work process and its unique emphasis on relationships. One respondent expressed concern that youth work was ‘moving dangerously away from informal to formal education’.

A further important guiding principle for many of these youth workers was positive role modeling. In communities that experienced high levels of social deprivation, anti-social behaviour and paramilitary influence, the young people they worked with were most likely to be exposed to negative role models, and many did not have access to interested positive alternatives, which is where youth work comes in.

*In the communities where I work young people rarely look to adults or parents for support. They have little access to positive role models and feel left to their own devices. Through our relationship with young people we can become positive role models to them.*
Many participants pointed to the importance of flexibility and creativity; a willingness and ability to find and use alternative solutions to problems that young people might encounter. Once again the process was deemed more important than the identification of specific measurable aims and objective.

*All the young people I work with are different and at different stages of development so you have to work with each person differently. Our programmes try to reflect this difference. This is important, particularly when someone is fragile.*

It was recognised that to many people youth work might appear to take place within a very loose framework. Despite this, participants were not concerned that they could not always articulate what occurs beyond the relationship phase of youth work. Indeed, they believed it was this flexibility that made informal youth work approaches unique and distinct from formal education. For some, the absence of a rigid curriculum was linked to the issue of labelling young people.

*This is where non-formal education differs from formal education. We are not trying to get a specific number of people through an exam. We don’t call them failures if they don’t achieve a specific grade. This is a pessimistic orientation whereas youth workers have an optimistic outlook even when young people don’t reach certain standards. We don’t label people as they do in school. Some may think this is simply naïve but for me this is the core of youth work.*

**Social Exclusion**

Most participants perceived themselves as working in some capacity with young people who were socially disadvantaged or excluded. For many this was fundamental to why youth work was so important in Northern Ireland.

*Youth work has been going on all through ‘the troubles’. There are many excellent examples of youth work going on behind the scenes and picking up the pieces of young people’s lives and supporting them to understand issues that no one talks about such as violence, sexual and mental health.*

The majority of participants worked in inner city and rural areas with young people aged 12–25. Their work was with the young unemployed, young homeless, ethnic minorities, young people underachieving at school, young people involved in crime, joy/death riders, teenage mothers and young fathers, young people abusing drugs and alcohol, young people with behavioural problems, young people with mental and sexual health problems, young people identified as marginalised within communities characterised by paramilitary influence, sectarianism, violence and marital breakdown. Typically the work took place in contested spaces such as interface areas, city centres, on the streets, schools, parks and in communities with little or no youth provision. Notably, it was in discussing these issues that respondents appeared most passionate and energised.

Some workers felt that this focus on social exclusion has been determined by the changing social and political context in Northern Ireland over thirty-five years of sectarian violence and political unrest. Initially, and to some extent more recently, Youth Service provision was primarily centre-based and located in the heart of communities. This trend has radically changed recently with many professionally
trained youth workers perceiving themselves as doing more ‘specialist’ project and outreach work using a variety of bases, leaving youth centres to be run by indigenous part-time youth workers. While some saw this as a necessary shift, others believed that youth centres were a valuable resource and their demise was detrimental to local communities. There was a general consensus however that the nature of funding sources and funding requirements have played a key role in the direction that youth work has taken over the past decade. For some participants this was not necessarily in the best interest of young people:

*In order to get funding now you have to demonstrate ways in which you are working with ‘disadvantaged young people’. This has meant that the focus of youth work has switched from a focus on all young people to a focus on disadvantaged young people. The danger therefore is that youth work becomes issue focused rather than young person focused.*

There were participants who still perceived themselves as providing ‘traditional’ youth work in youth centres. Typically however, these participants were local people who are not professionally qualified and are either working voluntarily or part-time several afternoons or evenings per week. In contrast, the majority of professionally trained youth workers did not work in ‘traditional’ youth centres. One participant spoke of how youth work has changed over the past number of years:

*In the past youth workers typically worked alone in a youth centre with part-time staff. Today there is much more emphasis on partnerships and working in the community with marginalised young people. It is good that the skills of youth workers are more appreciated by agencies such as Probation, Health Boards and even in schools. The danger is however, that youth workers are expected to be experts in these areas. It’s good that things are changing but I’m not sure that youth workers can be all things to all people.*

**Assessing the Impact of Youth Work**
The majority of participants believed that the effectiveness of youth work ‘could not and should not be measured’. Others believed that its effectiveness was often self-evident. For instance:

*I think working with young people in groups you can see development and growth even if it is just they are getting on better with each or showing more confidence…. You can measure it, but it is very, very hard to put it down on paper.*

Another participant commented:

*Youth work has been criticised because we can’t measure outcomes. But how can you measure personal development or the impact that the work has had upon a young person. Sometimes it’s only years later that a young person realises the benefit they have had from being involved in youth work programmes.*

Two key markers of achievement frequently mentioned were levels of participation (both in terms of frequency and duration) and the extent of relationship with young people. For example, one participant stated: ‘We measure the number coming through
the door. We know how many young people attend and their involvement in the club’. Another commented that ‘as a detached youth worker we can measure how many young people we come into contact with’. These indicators should not be underestimated, particularly in socially disadvantaged areas, as they are evidence of young people entering into positive relationships with adults on a non-obligatory basis. For the most disadvantaged and excluded young people, this is a very positive ‘measurement’.

A large proportion of participants cited ‘increased community involvement’ as a key indicator of success. Workers spoke of young people getting involved in issues within their community that were important to them. Several participants mentioned ‘citizenship education’ as a relatively new way of measuring success. For some the fact that a young person now had the ‘confidence to lift the phone’ or ‘speak in front of a group’ was an indicator of success. Others spoke of young people from different communities and traditions engaging in youth exchanges, participating in cross-community and international programmes and embracing active citizenship as positive outcomes.

An interesting perspective on the subject of youth work’s impact was provided by a youth worker who did not participate in the focus groups but who was interviewed separately in another strand of this research project. He placed the issue of measurement in the context of his own work dealing with very disadvantaged young people and extreme inter-community tension.

For example at our last residential some of the lads came back saying I have never tasted water from the mountain spring. Instead of telling them it is ‘boggin’, you stop the van and get them to get two big bottles of water and drink it. Maybe it’s because they haven’t done that before … a wee special moment. Whether you see simple things like this as community relations doesn’t really matter. It mightn’t be the big picture, but when you have to give indicators and measure things surely this is still important. How do you measure a change in someone’s attitude? How do you measure someone who has been through an extremely bad experience and has moved a little bit compared to someone who has not been through much? If you take an area like [this one] then it may be ten times harder to get some young person on a cross-community project than it would be somewhere else. Yet how do you measure that?

**Key Challenges**

Many focus group respondents felt that they were responding to crises within their communities rather than being involved in supporting young people. For example, they were under pressure to address anti-social behaviour amongst young people in response to community concerns. There was a fear that youth work would overly focus on ‘sorting young people out’ rather than offering them supportive, creative and exciting learning opportunities.

There were serious concerns voiced regarding the nature of resource allocation and in particular funding arrangements for youth work. One respondent explicitly stated that youth work funding ‘makes youth work problem-oriented’. The need for youth workers to be involved in securing funding for the continuance of projects was also a major concern. For many, the demands on time and energy to complete
cumbersome funding applications took them away from what they perceived as ‘the real business of working with young people’. Participants were also concerned that the ‘competitive nature of funding’ has had a negative effect on youth work. As one participant stated:

Youth work has become competitive and that undermines traditional youth work values. The nature of funding now determines what we do with young people rather than the issues that young people feel are important.

A number of participants believed that this problem was exacerbated by the top-down orientation of government policy.

We keep waiting on the next government policy or priority to tell us what needs to be done with young people. Often it is youth workers who are at the coal-face and know what the needs of young people are. But we are told what to do with young people by policy makers and funders.

Both the status of youth work and the role of the youth worker were also of concern to respondents, particularly those who had received professional training in youth work. Some felt uncomfortable with the fact that ‘anyone working with young people can call themselves a youth worker’. While acknowledging the fact that volunteers and non-qualified youth workers provide an important service to young people, some qualified workers believed that only those with professional training should be formally recognised as youth workers. They believed that initial professional training is essential in order for youth workers to understand the ‘skills, knowledge and experience needed to work with young people’. These participants expressed concern that youth workers were often perceived as ‘less professional than school teachers, social workers and other professionals’. In contrast, non-qualified participants believed that it was more important for youth workers to be ‘passionate about the work’ and prepared to be ‘available to young people at all times’. These indigenous youth workers felt they had more knowledge of the young people they work with and were more accessible. While the non-qualified workers were very articulate in discussing the issues confronting young people in their communities, they had more difficulty engaging in discussion about the nature and purpose of youth work.

Some participants with many years’ experience drew attention to the ways in which the nature of youth work in Northern Ireland has changed. They identified ‘the troubles’ and difficult socio-economic circumstances as having an adverse affect on communities and young people.

Being a youth worker is different now than it was twenty years ago. The essence of youth work is no longer simply to get young people off the streets and into youth clubs. Youth workers are expected to engage young people who have particular difficulties and provide a service that attempts to meet all their needs.

Another youth worker highlighted the increasing complexity of young people’s lives and therefore of the work itself.

It’s only in recent years that youth workers have recognised the need to address issues such as suicide and mental health and the importance of diet and the environment. Young peoples’ lives are becoming more and more complicated and the transition into adulthood is more prolonged.
A further significant challenge for youth work in the Northern Ireland context was highlighted in the in-depth interview with the youth worker in the area experiencing severe sectarian tension. In this area and others like it young people’s involvement in rioting is commonplace, may even be seen as a manifestation of community solidarity. It also provides excitement, a regular ‘buzz’. It is difficult for traditional youth work to compete with this.

There are huge numbers who don’t even want to attend clubs. Most say the place is boring and shudder in horror at the thought of going to the youth club.

Discussion: Emerging Themes and Challenges

The comment just quoted makes it clear that a major challenge facing youth workers and educationalists is the need for a more innovative way of educating and learning that can tackle issues associated with growing-up in a ‘post-conflict’ society. Youth work in Northern Ireland takes place within the context of a contested and divided society emerging from over thirty five years of conflict and political unrest. Throughout this conflict, youth workers have consistently been at the coal-face of political, community and sectarian violence that has impacted upon the lives of young people. While themes of community relations, political education, citizenship and civic participation emerged throughout the research, there appeared to be a lack of clarity or agreement amongst youth workers about their role in this type of work or how it should be implemented. In certain communities it is perhaps aspirational to expect youth workers to be able to persuade young people that they have a future role in a civic society. Civic participation in the face of such disadvantage requires broader social initiatives than informal education, not just from youth workers, but from all those who work with disaffected young people.

It is certainly a challenge to find sufficient resources in order to develop alternative and more creative ways of supporting young people from communities who directly experience political conflict and violence. This is particularly pertinent as European Peace monies dry up and many projects which evolved as a result of the troubles in Northern Ireland are being abruptly terminated. The impact of short-term funding upon the practice and development of youth work and the effect of this upon young people in Northern Ireland has not been, and perhaps never will be, fully measured. Critically however, challenges to delivering youth work in contested spaces are not solely about resources. There are ethical questions about the motivation of youth workers and the extent to which their subjective political beliefs influence their relationships with young people. These are challenging but important issues that must be addressed by the Youth Service in Northern Ireland, particularly as involving young people and supporting their active participation in shaping the future of Northern Ireland is a high priority for funders and policy makers.

These funders and policy makers increasingly require youth workers to articulate more precisely the value of their work in terms of measurable outcomes. It was apparent that the majority of youth workers in this study struggled to identify outcomes beyond the initial relationship phase of their work. Although youth workers spoke of increased confidence and self-esteem amongst the young people they worked with, they found it difficult to express these in more measurable or quantifiable terms.
While a person-centred approach has always been a fundamental aspect of youth work, in an ever-changing funding and policy context, more concrete outcomes are now expected. This emerging trend has created particular tensions for youth workers who feel pressurised to concentrate on the ‘product’ aspect of their programmes rather than youth work’s historical emphasis on ‘process.’ Indeed, this reorientation appears to be happening without the consent or engagement of those at the forefront of youth work practice. Those interested in monitoring youth work and its effects need to take into consideration the difficulties youth workers are experiencing adjusting to this new paradigm. The fact that some socially excluded young people actually participated in a youth work programme at all was in itself seen as a highly significant ‘product’ by some respondents. On the positive side, however, developing the ability to offer more concrete and tangible evidence of effectiveness and to adhere to agreed standards of practice offers youth work the opportunity to be accorded greater recognition and a higher status and value amongst funders, policy makers and other professionals working with young people.

Youth work in Northern Ireland has a clear ethos and a set of values and principles that underpin its approach. In this sense it is clearly a profession. Importantly however, there may be aspects of youth work that people may be capable of doing whether they are qualified or not. Indeed, this may be a key reason why youth work is so distinctive. In addressing issues of professionalisation it is necessary to acknowledge the myriad of hours that thousands of volunteers commit to young people each year. However, there are few other professions where those who are not professionally qualified are given the same title as trained professionals. There is a need for much more rigour and clarity in the definition of the roles of all those who engage with young people. This is all the more important when youth work is practised in complex environments such as schools and communities in conflict. It is given added urgency now that the decision has been taken by the relevant professional and educational bodies to raise the threshold for entry to youth work as a profession and all programmes of initial undergraduate training – including the only course available in Northern Ireland at the University of Ulster – are to become degree-level programmes.

It is important however to acknowledge that the development of youth work as a profession will depend on more than providing professional training to non-qualified youth workers and increasing the level and duration of such training. France & Wiles (1997:13) have argued in the UK that there must be improvements in project management, monitoring and evaluation. They also suggest that youth work lacks a coherent, self-governing professional organisation and the leadership to develop the new skills and thinking a modern Youth Service requires. The Youth Service Liaison Forum set up in 2003 identified the lack of a co-ordinated strategy as a stumbling block to the development of the Youth Service in Northern Ireland. In response to this the Forum produced a Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work: 2005–2008 (Youth Service Liaison Forum 2005). The setting up of the Forum and the publication of the youth work strategy is a very positive step, particularly as there was a process of consultation with youth workers. It is to be hoped that the strategy, and any new youth work structures which emerge out of the recent Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland (2006) can go some way to addressing the key issues and challenges outlined in this paper.
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References


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