This report’s topic is worthy of consideration as Northern Ireland moves to a new era of peace and reconciliation. Additionally this new era has witnessed an increase in immigration and an increasing number of new cultures creating a multi-cultural society. While for many the notion of ‘faith-based’ youth work may conjure up concepts associated with the two dominant religions in Northern Ireland, i.e. Catholic and Protestant, any adequate definition of the concept of ‘faith-based’ youth work should take cognisance of this changing society if it is to be inclusive. This report is timely as a first step in attempting to both define and understand the nature of faith-based youth work in Northern Ireland.

Choosing the correct methodology for such a study requires a clear definition of the concept of faith based youth work. The authors state that:

“For the purpose of this research, faith based youth work is youth work … that is motivated by any religious faith and underpinned by the values of a religious faith. (p. 16)”

However, many of the values underpinning the work documented in the report are heavily influenced by ‘generic’ as well as ‘faith-based’ youth work principles, for example personal and social development, promoting rights, protection, participation, peace-building and partnership. Therefore the definition of faith-based work seems to be dominated by traditional youth work values with the concept of ‘faith’ appearing to be an add-on. This suggests that the concept of faith based youth work may not be robust enough for researchers to identify indicators or variables that facilitate measurement. The researchers collected secondary data (i.e. data normally used for other purposes) followed by semi-structured interviews and focus groups using a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, if the concept has not been clearly defined at the outset is it possible to infer, with any degree of certainty, that the data presented represent only faith-based youth work?

When they say that they have used a ‘scoping’ approach, one assumes that the researchers are alluding to a brief investigation that might, at a later date, lead to more in-depth analysis. The difficulties associated with scoping are illustrated in the ‘Scoping Report’ by the Department of Constitutional Affairs (Public Legal Education Strategy (PLES) Task Force (2006). The introduction states:
Within the timescale allowed, it has not been possible to contact everybody with information to share, nor to identify and assess all material which may be relevant. Therefore, gaps remain and some of what follows is impressionistic.

This ‘impressionistic’ sense also characterises parts of the Macaulay report. An example is in the section dealing with training, when it is stated that ‘a significant number of interviewees referred to a “chill factor” for faith based youth work within the degree course at University of Ulster’. Firstly the numbers of interviewees in the sample is minimal; and secondly it is the case that many students are placed, and place themselves, in a variety of placements within church, faith and ethnically orientated youth work agencies while on the aforementioned programme. An impressionistic response to an impressionistic assertion!!

Kumar (2005: 55) says that if you want to find out if a programme is effective, if a service is of quality or if there is discrimination, you need to be careful that such judgements have a rational and sound basis. This warrants the use of a valid and reliable measuring instrument because it is through the process of measurement that knowledge about variables can be acquired. Stressing the importance in research methodology of operationalising a concept, Kumar notes (2005: 56) that:

*Concepts are mental images or perceptions and therefore their meanings vary markedly from individual to individual, whereas variables are measurable, of course with varying degrees of accuracy.*

The research report under consideration does not identify variables that operationalise the concept of faith based youth work nor does it underpin the research with a review of relevant literature. Such a review might have discussed the difference between Catholic and Protestant perceptions of faith based youth work, or addressed the relationship between ‘faith based’ and ‘Christian’ youth work, or asked the question whether faith based and church based youth work are the same thing.

Furthermore, the secondary data presented may be representative of a variety of types of ‘faith based youth work’, such as youth work in church premises; generic youth work with minimal faith based aspects; youth work with strong faith based inputs; youth work with historical links to a church; youth work that is faith based but not church based; youth work that is neither faith based nor church based, and so on. Without a clear conceptual understanding of the term ‘faith based’ the data remains very difficult to interpret. It seems clear, at least from the focus groups, that most of the youth work outcomes mentioned in the report are not exclusively or necessarily ‘faith based’ – for example, citizenship; community spirit; shared values; community involvement; work with other groups; personal and social development. These are all examples of generic youth work practice.

Much more thought is needed on what the indicators of faith-based youth work might be and how these could be turned into variables. One indicator might be attendance at a youth centre that has a faith-based activity (some are mentioned in the report, for example, faith based projects such as Christian Aid, attending mass, involvement with other religious groups, faith development activities and faith-based interventions). This in turn could be developed into a measurable variable such as length of time spent on faith based activities, for example three times a week for thirty minutes. Otherwise, as this report suggests, all those registered in a notional faith-based organisation are involved in faith-based youth work.
Social capital is presented in the report as a theoretical framework within which the potential of faith-based youth work can be ‘positively’ understood. The report suggests that faith-based youth work *bonds* individuals through closer ties with families and other groups. Social capital offers a *bridging* process between people and the wider society, and is good for ‘getting ahead’, *linking* individuals to positions of power and authority. If we accept this analysis then we might add that traditional youth work can also deliver social capital.

In any case we should be cautious about viewing social capital too uncritically, as is advised by John Field (2003) whose study, interestingly, was based on evidence collected in Northern Ireland. Field talks about the ‘perverse effects of social capital’ stating that a reasonably clear distinction can be drawn between productive social networks, which we might define as those that generate favourable outcomes both for members and the community at large, and perverse networks, which we could describe as those that have positive benefits for their members but include negative outcomes for the wider community. Field calls this the ‘dark side’ of social capital and continues:

> … negative social capital, in the form of racism or religious bigotry, has been widely associated with close ties, or bonding social capital. It has also been associated with a tendency towards particularised trust, that is, a propensity to trust those to whom one is related by kinship or personal acquaintance, or who share membership of a known common grouping such as a church or association.

(Field, 2003: 87)

Field is alluding to the fact that some forms of closed membership may lead, either intentionally or unintentionally, to the exclusion of others. The use of social capital is therefore open to challenge in terms of perpetuating ‘negative’ aspects of a culture especially in a divided society. That is not to say that faith-based youth work does not perceive its role as reconciliatory or that society, and indeed the changing cultural milieu of Northern Ireland, has not moved on.

There is one obvious incongruity that is worth exploring in the findings in this report. The facts as presented suggest that:

- Faith based youth work applies to 1405 units;
- There are 98,902 members of faith/church based groups;
- Faith-based work has 16,457 volunteer leaders;
- There are employed 160 full-time youth workers;
- 68 per cent of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland are faith/church based;
- 57.8 per cent of all members of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were participants in faith/church based youth groups in 2005.

Further on in the findings one reads that ‘… *negative responses and low profile are the major barriers to young people accessing faith-based youth work*’. Given that there are so many people involved in faith-based youth work one wonders at the validity of this comment. Is it that young people are involved in faith-based youth work simply by association? Does it mean that if young people are attending a certain group that says it is faith/church based then no other indicators or variables are needed to discern or challenge the taken-for-granted assertion that they are involved in faith-based youth work? Are numbers and attendance, de facto, sufficient indicators of faith-based youth work?
In summary, while the *Faith-Based Youth Work in Northern Ireland* report pays timely attention to an important topic, a clearer definition of the concept itself is needed. The report would have benefited from clarifying the difference between faith-based and church-based youth work, including a Catholic and Protestant perspective and addressing the changing nature and context of Northern Ireland as a multi-cultural society. However, there is no doubt that the report raises a key question for consideration: *is spiritual development* just the work of faith-based youth groups? This itself is a worthy question for further research.

**References**


**Ursula Kilkelly**  
*Youth Justice in Ireland: Tough Lives, Rough Justice*  
Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006. 278pp. €55.00 hb (cloth); €27.50 pb.

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response towards young people in conflict with the law and the pivotal role of the Catholic Church in the operation of this system.

Kilkelly charts events leading up to the Children Act 2001 from 1970, the year of the publication of the Kennedy Report, which recommended a significant overhaul of the Industrial and Reformatory School system. While the author presents important information on the failure to fully implement the Children Act 2001 and the subsequent reforms, the preceding analysis is quite brief and does not outline key elements of the historical context in which the recommendations of the Kennedy Report were made. While this publication does not purport to undertake a historical analysis, a more thorough perspective is important in any attempt to understand the present configuration of youth justice services, particularly in regard to situating the discussion of the rights of children in conflict with the law.

The first section of the book thus deals with a brief setting of the context and in reviewing of some of the research and information available on youth justice in Ireland, Kilkelly identifies information shortfalls and data deficits which hamper a thorough interrogation of this area. Based on a review of the available Garda figures and various studies in this area, Kilkelly attempts to analyse trends in youth crime. While she notes some of the shortfalls in the Garda statistics, most notably the categories into which offences are recorded, she does not acknowledge any of the other inherent and thornier problems in the use of official crime statistics, for example the manner in which policing operates (see for example Bottomley and Pease, 1986; Maguire, 2002). Given the fact that in a later section of this book important questions are raised regarding aspects of discretion in policing and issues concerning the transparency of the Garda-operated Juvenile Diversion Programme, the use of any such statistics in this context require a more thorough ‘health warning’.

The more substantial part of this publication deals with the operation of various aspects of the youth justice system, including chapters on the Juvenile Diversion Programme, the Courts and sentencing practices, the detention of young people and the relationship between young people and the Gardaí. The chapter on ‘Diversion from the Criminal Justice System’ makes some important points with regard to the diversion programme, including its uneven national resourcing, with significant differences in the numbers of Gardaí dedicated to the scheme across the country. In addition, concerns are raised regarding aspects of its operation, relating for example to the transparency in the decision making process of admissions onto the scheme. Kilkelly indicates that there is no check on the powers of the Director of the Diversion Programme, who ultimately decides on a young person’s suitability for diversion and thereby whether they avoid prosecution. These factors she argues are significant in light of ‘… allegations of unequal treatment frequently levelled at diversion schemes’ (p.75). Furthermore, she raises the concern of ‘cherry-picking’, in other words the suggestion that the success rate of the scheme, measured on recidivism levels, may be ‘artificially high’ on the basis of the young people selected for the programme. Given the fact that, as Kilkelly asserts, the system lacks transparency, the concerns named in this chapter cannot be substantiated; but their naming is a useful exercise and opens up further avenues of possible research.

A further significant point made in this context relates to delays in admission onto the scheme, with large backlogs in the cases with decisions pending. The issue of the timeliness of interventions and the length of delays, at all stages of the criminal justice.
process, is a consistent theme throughout the text. However, having raised all of these issues as concerns, the author states in her conclusion to the chapter that: ‘The Diversion Programme, in particular, is one of the most well-managed and coherent parts of the Irish youth justice system and its success rate in preventing re-offending by children and young people is impressive’ (p.94). She then proceeds to summarise the negative aspects previously raised. The contradictions in this analysis are apparent.

The information in the chapter on ‘Young People Before the Courts’ is based largely on two recent studies conducted in the Children Court: McPhillips’ (2005) study on the Dublin Children Court and Kilkelly’s (2005) own ‘rights audit’ of the Children Courts in Limerick, Cork and Waterford. The fact that this information is based on primary research that the author has undertaken in this area aids the analysis and adds a greater depth to this chapter. Some of the points raised concern the ability of young people to understand the proceedings in court and the physical environment in which proceedings are heard.

The chapters in this book dealing with other stages of the criminal justice system are largely based on documentary analysis. In the section on ‘Young People and An Garda Síochána’, the author highlights significant concerns regarding the treatment of young people in Garda custody. The information here is primarily based on newspaper reporting of these cases. In the chapter on ‘Young People in Detention’, the analysis of the operation of the Children Detention Schools is primarily based on Department of Education Inspection Reports and information from the websites of the detention schools. While this is one approach to conducting an analysis of the rights compliance of these facilities, the information presented in this section would have benefited from more in-depth research of an area in which, as the author asserts, ‘little is known’ (p.194). While recognising the constraints of access and research resources, this section would have particularly benefited from interviews with young people who have experienced these interventions.

The information presented on St Patrick’s Institution, where young offenders between the ages of 16 and 18 are detained, is derived from the Reports of the Inspector of Prisons, and presents a stark view of conditions in this institution, containing the observation: ‘St Patrick’s is a disaster, or at least one waiting to happen, as it is only in the future that the true neglect of the young people who spend time there will be realised’ (p.233). Given her overall positive assessment of the compliance of the Children Detention Schools with international standards, the author is concerned that the move of the schools to the Department of Justice (which operates St Patrick’s Institution) may threaten the ethos of these facilities. However, the potential of the newly formed Youth Justice Service to bring greater coherency and strategic direction to the system is viewed by the author as a potentially positive step.

It has been noted elsewhere (O’Sullivan 1998) that much of the research on youth offending in Ireland has tended towards descriptive studies of young people who have been ‘processed’ through the criminal justice system. There has been very little primary research conducted on the actual operation of the system and the ‘pathways’ of young people’s journey through it. While this publication does not present new research, it gathers information on various aspects of the system and as such presents an overview of some of the concerns in this area at a point in time where there are significant changes proposed. It also highlights questions for future research in what has been a neglected area.
This publication aims to explore the meaning and value of youth work, locate it in the contemporary conditions of the UK through documented research, and comment on a range of themes. The first theme focuses on those often unpredictable aspects of practice which do not readily correspond with policy, such as relationship, dialogue, time and space. The second theme considers the ‘narrative of everyday practice’ which takes place between young people and youth workers. A further theme focuses on exclusion, exploring the range of causes and the impact of interpreting the social exclusion agenda. The final theme pays attention to the tensions evident in the mechanisms of accountability for the practitioner. These themes create a focus for the main sections of the report and provide a constant thread of cohesion throughout the publication.

Beginning with an examination of the research context, background and themes Youth Work: Voices of Practice provides an extraordinarily concise and insightful overview of the contemporary youth work environment in the UK, exploring the tensions and
dilemmas faced by youth workers in their efforts to reconcile an understanding of the purpose and process of their work with the demands of a public policy environment seemingly unrefined in its understanding of youth work.

The research method and issues are set out clearly, demonstrating an acute awareness of the youth work environment and its complexities and allowing for the recording of a very real picture of youth work as delivered and experienced in a diverse range of projects across the UK. Research of youth work by youth workers presents inherent challenges, and these are addressed in the research design. Nonetheless, there are doubtless those who will question whether such insight and comprehension of the complex youth work environment, coupled with a perspective so clearly committed to youth work, are compatible with a fully objective view.

Chapters three to ten of this publication create a vivid picture of youth work in practice. Issues such as unpredictability, communication, performance, facilities, programme and accountability are all presented comprehensively, illuminated through direct quotes from research participants and subjected to rigorous analysis. In the case of everyday practice the application of values and the ‘conceptual cohesion in the language of informal education’ moves us towards a clear definition of the youth work process. It is suggested that at worst youth work projects provide a social service but where most effective they can engage with young people who refuse other institutional participation. Youth work can also maximise the benefits of other more structured approaches. Youth work is described as transitional, beginning with informal approaches which are person-centred and relational, moving to planned, structured interventions which can be issue or problem-centred. This approach is seen as being in conflict with policy priorities which are inherently problem-centred and which underestimate the importance of the informal for youth work. However, there is a clear acknowledgement that youth work is not always appropriate for all young people and this is seen as important in the context of partnership working, as is an understanding of the interface between youth work and more dominant institutions such as family, school and police.

The centrality of communication in a process which is essentially relational is significantly reinforced while it is accepted that this can often be ‘masked’ by an apparent preoccupation with activities, programmes and outcomes. Communication is described as a two-way process with ‘listening’ identified as an essential tool for the youth worker in dialogic and present-orientated engagement with young people. The non-linear and rapidly adjusting conversations which take place in the structured and un-structured situation are seen as insensitive to predetermined outcomes and evaluation within specific timeframes. External communication is also addressed both in terms of how youth workers have a tendency to ‘play to the audience’ rather than articulate the realities of their work in an environment where few external agency representatives have any real understanding of the youth work process. Most interestingly, the publication visits the variance in young people’s ability to articulate the benefits of their involvement in youth work and its impact on outcomes and their measurement.

In relation to social exclusion, Youth Work: Voices of Practice is strong on the importance of centering the young person rather than the problem and stresses how important this is to establishing the voluntary commitment of young people. Similarly,
it is proposed that a focus on deficit rather positive identities of young people, with programme goals created externally rather than with the involvement of young people themselves, predisposes the process to failure. The authors are quick to add, however, that this does not signal a weakness in youth work but rather that the dialogue with young people, rooting the work in the reality of their everyday lives and viewing them positively, is an essential prerequisite to effective practice. It is conceded that in some circumstances success can be achieved on the social exclusion agenda but this is in specialised situations and ‘… depends upon the maintainance of the professional informal educational values of youth work within the youth work team’. However, the authors go on to point out that ‘the full potential of generic youth work is being inhibited by the way in which the social exclusion discourse fragments practice into specialisms’.

The report makes it clear that bureaucracy, accountability and evaluation are subject to some confusion in practice. It is clear that increasing accountability to public policy goals rather than those of young people shifts the balance and with youth workers focusing primarily on practice rather than political influencing there is a poor prospect of redressing this bias. An increased focus on the youth participation agenda is identified as an important action in ensuring prevention of any further erosion of the fundamentals of youth work practice as is a much greater investment in the development of qualitative rather than quantitative measures of success. Caution is also advised that focus on the achievement of agency outcomes could create a bias for working with those young people most likely to achieve those outcomes. It is suggested that fundamental to the development of more appropriate bureaucracy, accountability and evaluation is the development of a more articulate voice for youth work practice in the arenas where decisions are made; and the need for discussion on the nature of professionalism within youth work is stressed.

In conclusion the publication makes reference to the lessons learned in the course of the research and its hope to influence both practice and policy in the future. *Youth Work: Voices of Practice* is an exceptionally well tooled articulation of contemporary issues in youth work which have significant relevance to both the UK and Ireland. It presents both a strong analysis of youth work today and an identification of some key actions for the amelioration of the negative consequences of a problem-centred agenda set by policy makers ignorant of the youth work process.