

Targeted Youth Work in Contemporary Ireland

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Abstract

Debates about the implications of a targeted approach to youth work have been conducted over the last few decades. While it is often argued that targeting is a means of reaching and engaging marginalised young people, critics suggest that recent initiatives represent a form of surveillance and undermine the fundamental principles of youth work. In this article we explore the implications of targeting from the perspective of those working in the youth work sector in Ireland, based on interviews with youth workers and policy makers. A number of key themes emerged from these interviews, including issues around whether targeted projects are complementary or compensatory, whether they empower or control young people, and whether they are genuinely based on voluntary participation and promote social integration. While participants were mindful of the possible drawbacks of certain interventions, there was a general consensus that targeting (in some form) is necessary to reach the most disadvantaged young people in Irish society.

Keywords

youth work; targeting; targeted projects

Introduction

The youth work sector in Ireland is made up of a diverse range of voluntary organisations. While some (like the YMCA, Scouting Ireland and the Irish Girl Guides) are over 100 years old and part of international movements, others are more recent in origin and based nationally (e.g. Foróige); regionally (the diocesan youth services) or locally. Youth work continues to be located predominantly in the voluntary sector, but the state does nonetheless exert an important, if indirect, influence through its funding of the sector (and more recently through the National Quality Standards Framework). Over the last few decades increased state support has been provided for youth work, particularly initiatives 'targeted' at young people who are deemed to be disadvantaged or 'at risk' of involvement in crime or drug abuse. Consecutive Irish governments and policy makers have presented youth work as a means of addressing social issues such as early school leaving, juvenile crime, underage drinking, substance misuse and so on. The *National Drugs Strategy (interim) 2009–2016*, for example, emphasises the importance of youth work services in preventing drug abuse, particularly targeted interventions such as those provided through the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, 2009). Similarly the *Report on the Youth Justice Review* notes that various initiatives – including Neighbourhood Youth Projects and Special Projects to Assist Disadvantaged

Youth – can be used to ‘address strong risk factors which can contribute to potential youth offending’ (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2006: 20). While additional state funding has been welcomed by the youth work sector, there are concerns that a two-tier service is developing in which the ‘mainstream’ is under-funded while targeted projects take on a compensatory role, making up for the shortcomings of statutory services, including justice, education and health.

Debates about the nature of youth work and the implications of a targeted approach have been conducted over the last few decades (see Jeffs and Banks, 1999; Smith, 2003; Bradford, 2005; Jeffs and Smith, 2008; Davies and Merton, 2009; Ord, 2009). Jeffs and Smith (2002) consider the historical development of the sector, concluding that the core values which characterise youth work in the UK are being gradually undermined. They argue that the principle of voluntary participation has been replaced by more coercive forms of participation; the focus on the life of the association and group has shifted towards a focus on the individual; the informal relationship between young people and youth work has been increasingly formalised into a bureaucratic relationship; and, finally, a concern with learning has been replaced with case management (Jeffs and Smith, 2002; Jeffs and Smith, 2008). Similarly Kiely (2009), in a wide ranging critique of Irish youth work, argues that targeted interventions undermine the ethos and objectives which the sector has traditionally claimed for itself. Rather than promoting equality and inclusiveness, specialised projects may reinforce the targeted group’s sense of difference and separateness. Moreover, the principle of voluntary participation is compromised by projects which are characterised by ‘more coercive kinds of participation and a greater orientation towards the surveillance and control of young people’ (Kiely, 2009: 23). In addition, targeted initiatives are often based on inter-agency co-operation with statutory bodies (police, schools, health authorities) and there is a danger that youth work agencies will be used to compensate for the inadequacies in vital state supports for young people with difficulties. McMahon (2009) provides an equally scathing assessment of the sector. She argues that the state – through funding, legislation and other policy measures – has effectively ‘taken control of the management of Irish youth work’ (McMahon, 2009: 123).

In her research into targeted initiatives in the Kerry Diocesan Youth Service (KDYS), Barrett (2003) found both strengths and weaknesses in the current system. On the one hand there is evidence to suggest that young people can be labelled and stigmatised and thus further segregated by such an approach. In addition, entire geographic areas can be excluded from resourcing because they do not comply with a narrow definition of ‘disadvantage’. One of the strongest arguments *in favour* of targeting, expressed by most of those interviewed in the research, was that it directs scarce resources towards those areas deemed to be in greatest need. This point was expressed aptly by one member of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee when he asked: ‘If equity is a principle underlying social policy, how else could you give out resources which are limited?’ (cited in Barrett, 2003: 3).

In this article we explore the implications of targeting, from the perspective of those working in the sector. During 2009 and 2010 twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of personnel, including:

- youth workers employed on targeted projects (10);
- volunteers and youth work coordinators who provide support to volunteer-run youth clubs (4);

- senior managers and directors of youth work organisations (4);
- senior representatives from Youth Work Ireland and the National Youth Council of Ireland (2).

Participants were selected to represent the different types of youth work organisations (for example, regional and national) and targeted projects (for example, Garda Youth Diversion, Special Projects for Youth) which were identified in a national survey conducted during 2009 (Powell et al., 2010). A number of issues were addressed in the interviews, including: the nature and purpose of youth work; the impact of targeting and other policy developments; and the emergence of new models of youth work. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data was coded. The transcripts were subjected to ‘inductive analysis’ which ‘begins with specific observations and builds towards general patterns’ (Patton, 2002: 56). The findings are presented in the form of ‘thick description’ by reproducing detailed quotes from participants.

A number of key themes emerged from these interviews, including the question of whether targeted projects are complementary or compensatory, whether they empower or control young people, and whether they are genuinely based on voluntary participation and promote integration. Our findings will be contextualised by first outlining briefly some of the main targeted interventions currently in operation.

The research reported here forms part of a larger study on the history and contemporary scope of youth work in Ireland, which was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS). Data from our national survey of 662 youth work organisations will also be referenced (see Powell et al., 2010 for details), though the main focus of this article will be on the qualitative data derived from the semi-structured interviews.

The definition of mainstream youth work used in our research is closely adapted from what Davies and Merton (2009: 9) describe as ‘open access’ youth work in which admittance is not dependent on the young person ‘having a prior label attached’; does not lay down eligibility criteria; and is not only voluntary but allows ‘considerable freedom of choice within the relevant facilities’. Targeted provision, on the other hand, comprises programmes and/or facilities for specific young people – particularly those identified as ‘at risk’ and/or with ‘special needs’ – and which are meant to offer dedicated and often intensive support (Davies and Merton, 2009: 8). On the basis of these definitions we classified youth clubs and uniformed groups as ‘mainstream’ while various other initiatives which identified a particular group (for example Special Projects to Assist Disadvantaged Youth) were classified as targeted provision.

Targeted Interventions

The voluntary sector’s targeting of certain groups of young people, deemed to be ‘at risk’, is not a recent phenomenon. Uniformed groups formed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, set out to reform boys (typically perceived to be working class) who drank and smoked, hung around street corners and avoided playing games (Springhall, 1977). What is relatively new, however, is the role which consecutive Irish governments have assigned to youth work as a means of addressing social issues such as early school leaving, juvenile crime, underage drinking, substance misuse and so on. From the 1960s onwards policy reports identified a role for youth work in tackling

social disadvantage and preventing delinquency (see for example the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Illness, 1966; Task Force on Child Care Services, 1975 and 1980; Department of Education, 1980). The influential Costello Report emphasised the need for more youth work resources in deprived areas and recommended that statutory support for voluntary providers should no longer be discretionary (National Youth Policy Committee, 1984). With the creation of the National Lottery in 1987, more funds became available to allocate to voluntary youth organisations (Devlin, 2008: 46) and the Lottery remains a significant source of income for both mainstream and targeted youth work (OMCYA: 2011a).

One of the main targeted schemes currently in operation is the Special Projects to Assist Disadvantaged Youth (SPY). Under this scheme, grants are made available to organisations and groups 'for specific projects which seek to address the needs of young people who are disadvantaged due to a combination of factors' including, unemployment, social isolation, drug abuse, homelessness and inadequate take-up of educational opportunities (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2006: 64). In 2005 special projects received €12.5 million (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2006: 64), increasing to €21 million in 2008 (NYCI, 2009). However further expansion of the scheme has been curtailed due to the current financial crisis and widespread cutbacks in public spending (OMCYA, 2011a).

The Garda Youth Diversion Projects represent another major strand of targeted work. According to the National Youth Justice Strategy 2008–2010 Garda Youth Diversion Projects are 'community-based initiatives intended to help divert young people away from crime and towards positive and socially responsible behaviour' (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2008: 43). The target group includes young offenders as well as those who have 'come to the attention of the Garda' and are deemed to be 'at risk of entering the justice system at a future date' (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2003: 34). By 2009 there were a hundred projects, with a total financial commitment for that year in excess of €13 million (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2009: 7). The projects are funded by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (since 2006, the Irish Youth Justice Service) and administered through the Community Relations Section of An Garda Síochána. The projects themselves are implemented to a large extent by voluntary youth organisations, thereby creating an interesting interface between the youth justice system and the youth work sector.

Youth work interventions have also formed part of strategies designed to prevent alcohol and drug abuse. The Young People's Facilities and Services Fund (YPFSF) has been the main funding mechanism for providing activities for young people under the current National Drugs Strategy (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, 2009: 32–33). Established in 1998, the YPFSF sets out to:

assist in the development of preventative strategies/initiatives in a targeted manner through the development of youth facilities, (including sport and recreation facilities) and services in disadvantaged areas where a significant drug problem exists or has the potential to develop (OMCYA, 2011b).

To date approximately €150 million has been allocated under the YPFSF to support in the region of 500 facility and services projects (OMCYA, 2011b). The majority of the funding has been allocated to the 14 areas in which a Local Drugs Task Force has been established

and to four other designated urban centres – Limerick, Waterford, Carlow and Galway. YPFSF-funded projects have been set up and run by various youth work organisations, including Foróige and the regional youth services within Youth Work Ireland.

While the targeted initiatives described so far focus on young people, Neighbourhood Youth Projects (NYPs) also work with parents and other family members on the grounds that ‘a young person’s problems do not occur in isolation [and] they cannot be solved in isolation’ (Dolan and Kane, 2005: 19). Young people can be referred to NYPs for a variety of reasons, usually relating to ‘personal, family or social problems’ (Dolan, 2006: 5). Mentoring programmes, such as ‘Big Brother Big Sister’ (BBBS), represent a new and more individualised form of targeting. The essence of the BBBS scheme is that a young person who is considered ‘at risk’ or who is already experiencing adversity in their lives, is matched with an adult mentor with whom he/she meets on a regular basis (Brady and Dolan, 2007; Brady et al., 2005). The advantage of the scheme, according to one youth worker involved in its introduction, is that it attracts a younger ‘at risk’ age group (often as young as 10 or 11) and is therefore seen as more ‘effective’ in terms of early prevention. Clearly the one-to-one mentoring relationship represents a radical departure from the communal traditions of youth work; and further stretches the boundaries of what might be described as youth work, and undertaken by youth work organisations.

While each of the initiatives described above is distinct, they also have a number of common features. They all claim to have a preventative function and are targeted at young people who are deemed to be ‘at risk’, a population who appear to have a broadly similar profile regardless of the particular intervention (early school leaver, living in a disadvantaged area and so on). The fact that targeted projects form a distinct group can be better appreciated by comparing their membership profile with that of mainstream clubs, cafés and uniformed groups. A survey conducted as part of the current research found that nearly three quarters of targeted projects work with groups in which most or all young people are from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to only 12 per cent of mainstream youth work groups (Powell et al., 2010: 46). Similarly 48 per cent of targeted youth work interventions report that all or the majority of young people they are working with experience behavioural difficulties, compared to only 3 per cent within mainstream youth work groups. Equally stark differences are observable in relation to alcohol and substance abuse. This raises the issue of whether a focus on ‘multiple deprivations’ leads to a ghettoisation of disadvantaged young people in certain kinds of interventions or whether it actually contributes to social inclusion. Moreover while targeted youth work has brought a welcome injection of funding into the sector, working with various different funding partners (such as the Health Service Executive, Departments of Justice and Education) raises questions as to whether youth work is taking on a ‘compensatory’ function. These were some of the issues explored in our interviews with youth workers and policy makers, outlined below.

Complementary or compensatory?

According to the Youth Work Act 2001, youth work is ‘a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development

of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is *complementary* to their formal, academic or vocational education' (our emphasis). One of the concerns expressed in the research was that rather than being complementary to education, youth work is taking on a compensatory role and attempting to make up for the shortcomings of a range of statutory services, including health, justice and education. The image of the youth work relationship (between adults and young people) as being unique and special has made the sector increasingly attractive to agencies and professionals who may have a less benign public image, including gardaí, teachers, health professionals and social workers. As Kiely (2009: 15) has argued, youth work has come to be seen as 'a means of managing and socialising young people who move outside the radar of other agencies'. This view was shared by some of those interviewed, one of whom was particularly concerned at the way in which youth work was being 'used' by other sectors:

If you look at some of the areas where the youth sector has created partnerships with other sectors – like education or the HSE – it's where the work demands the development of a trusting relationship with an adult, someone who can connect with young people etc. and they use youth work for that ... They view youth workers as well-meaning amateurs, but also as having some skills that they might not have. (Chief Executive Officer)

The respondent went on to point out that by working with different partners the youth work sector may be adapting to their agendas and objectives and losing sight of its own:

One of my concerns has been because youth work is linked to many other areas of work – like justice, like health promotion, education, whatever – that we can be seen as compensating for the inadequacies of other systems or supporting them in tasks that they find difficult because our method is something that creates greater access to young people and influence with young people. But I think what we should be about is complementing rather than compensating for these systems through delivering our own distinctive programme for work. Which is that non formal education, education for citizenship, supporting young people in the transition from childhood to adulthood in a way that will ensure that they have the confidence, knowledge skills and experiences that will help them to fare well in their future lives ... We need to have youth work positioned positively. [Our role] is not to compensate or pick up on the work that other institutions fail to do.

The above comments are very much in line with the National Youth Work Development Plan which asserts that 'young people are not a "problem" to be solved' nor is youth work 'a remedial service for those whose needs are not being met otherwise' (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 14). However our research suggests that these views are not universally shared within the sector. A senior representative from one youth work organisation had no qualms about seeing youth work in a compensatory role. Indeed some of his comments about targeted projects seem to suggest that they have an almost remedial purpose, helping to 'normalise' young people:

There is a very specific role for youth work around compensatory, that works with young people who have deficiencies or need additional help or

support. And good youth work interventions can help almost normalise them or help to bring them on. So we would see that there is both generic and targeted youth work. And both sit side by side and complement each other, and one can't operate without the other.

Elsewhere in the interview the respondent again ascribes a normative role to youth work, suggesting that mainstream clubs are something to which project members can aspire or 'normalise' to: 'Youth work is about normalisation ... you can only normalise if you have something to normalise to, if you have a mainstream, and therefore you need to have a mainstream that is robust and well funded'. While none of the other interviewees or policy documents expressed themselves in such terms, the idea that young people need to conform to certain norms of behaviour was often implicit. Youth workers on targeted projects spoke of their efforts to encourage certain types of behaviour (for example, remaining in or returning to school) and discouraging others (law breaking). Thus one youth worker, who runs a SPY project for teenage boys, explained that one of her objectives was to 'get them to look at what's right and what's wrong, what's the right thing to do and what's the wrong thing to do'. Similarly, policy documents make clear what is expected in terms of diverting young people from crime, preventing or addressing drug and alcohol use, encouraging school attendance and so on. The SPY projects, as we have seen, emphasise the need for participants to be equipped with 'the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for their *appropriate integration* in society' (OMCYA, 2011a, emphasis added); while the Garda Youth Diversion Projects encourage 'positive and socially responsible behaviour' (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2008: 43). While not disputing that these might be worthwhile endeavours, some respondents expressed concern that they are beyond the remit of youth work and are increasingly casting the sector in a compensatory role. There was also frustration that youth work is seen as 'a panacea to all ills of young people and the system', though another youth worker acknowledged that this was at least in part because the sector had marketed itself as such in order to compete for state funding.

Including or ghettoising young people?

Volunteers and project workers reported that mainstream youth work brings together people who might otherwise have little contact with each other. This was a factor not only in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic background but also gender: many primary and secondary schools in Ireland are still single-sex and so youth clubs and youth cafés provide an opportunity for all young people to mix socially. However, there were concerns that targeted interventions were undermining this inclusive aspect of youth work by segregating particular young people (often young men from the most disadvantaged backgrounds) in specialist projects. Indeed the work of these projects appears to be based on a paradox: as one youth worker suggested, while claiming to integrate marginalised young people into mainstream society they run the risk of 'ghettoising' them. Moreover as the number of targeted interventions increases in response to government imperatives and funding, there were concerns that the youth work sector *as a whole* may be stigmatised. One youth club volunteer noted, for example, that the regional youth service had expanded its targeted projects to such an extent that now even their youth clubs (which are open to all young people) are seen

by the local community as catering only for 'the disadvantaged' or those with 'problems'. Some young people, she pointed out, would not want to join because of the growing association between youth work and social disadvantage.

In defence of targeted projects, youth workers pointed out that some of the young people with whom they work would never have attended a mainstream youth club, still less a uniformed group, and that the only way of reaching them was through a targeted intervention. In some cases youth workers go out to where young people are (streets, parks, shopping centres) to reach the most marginalised groups:

A lot of the best youth work we are doing at the moment is street youth work, where we recognise that for a whole lot of reasons a lot of young people are not able to work in groups. They are not going to be coming into a centre. And even if they would be coming into a centre, their behaviour might be so challenging for the youth worker that they end up not working with them anyways. So we will have developed and used a street work model and that is particularly used with the most marginalised young people. (Youth Work Service Manager)

While targeting might be the only way of getting some young people to participate in youth work, it may also provide them with a safe space to 'simply be themselves'. By way of example one youth worker recalled his experience with a group which included a significant number of young people with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). At one of their meetings a boy mentioned that he was taking medication for ADHD, and this prompted the others to talk openly about their own medication. 'At that moment', the youth worker recalled, 'you could feel the group bonding, each youngster realising that they weren't alone, they hadn't really known that there were others in exactly the same situation as themselves'. Another point made by respondents was that targeted youth work is often the first stage in a young person's involvement with youth work. This may lead them to engage in more mainstream provision, which is in line with youth work's integrative role:

It could work whereby we go out into a housing estate and we might set up a group and part of our plan there might be to integrate that group with the community. So we might work out in a housing estate with a group for six months. And then we might decide we'll stop that group for the summer and if everybody would come to the youth café for the summer. So we have everybody integrating together here [in the youth café] rather than ghettoising people in their little groups in their little housing estates. So it can work really well that way to integrate people into the community. But you start with them in their own place where they are comfortable. You work with them there for maybe six months and then you encourage them to come down to the youth centre to the youth café where they hang out with everybody. (Youth Worker, SPY project)

The interviews (as well as literature produced by different youth organisation) suggest that there is a considerable interchange of membership between different clubs and projects run by one organisation. A young person enrolled in a SPY project, for example, could also be attending another facility (youth café, Youthreach training

centre and so on) offered by the same organisation. Nonetheless youth workers were keenly aware that certain projects risk stigmatising young people and confirming them in their status as 'outsiders'. In some instances strategies were devised to counteract this possibility, for example by broadening the membership base of targeted projects, though this is not always popular with funding agencies. One regional director recalled, for example, having 'heated discussions' with funders when he proposed 'a more inclusive' membership policy.

Promoting equality?

One of the most powerful arguments in favour of targeted youth work is that it represents a form of positive discrimination which is seen to benefit some of the most disadvantaged groups (Barrett, 2003). The counter argument, of course, is that by pooling resources into a relatively small number of projects the vast majority of young people (particularly those living in rural areas) are not, to quote one volunteer, 'getting their fair share'. A perceived lack of resources for some areas or groups of young people can also give rise to resentment in the community. One youth worker noted that members of the public will complain if young people are 'hanging-around and maybe getting into trouble', but when the youth service provides facilities for them (for example through a targeted project) they are accused of 'rewarding bad behaviour'. He noted wryly that parents will ask 'how many windows does my son have to break before he gets to go on a day-trip?'. In these circumstances youth workers can find themselves between the proverbial 'rock and a hard place'. This of course relates back to the issue of youth work being seen (and perhaps also representing itself) as the panacea for various social problems.

Empowering or controlling young people?

Membership of a youth organisation can be an empowering experience as young people have the opportunity to make decisions, take on new responsibilities and have their views represented; experiences which are often denied them in other areas of their lives, particularly within formal education. In their case-study research, Devlin and Gunning (2009) found that youth workers saw their role as one of facilitating the active engagement and participation of young people, promoting their empowerment and the development of self and others. The young people involved in these groups also reported that the chance to be involved in decision-making was very highly valued, with one participant noting that 'you feel powerful when you can do that' (quoted in Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 41). Indeed Jeffs and Smith (2002) have argued that most people only encounter 'genuine democracy' in autonomous organisations, clubs, and associations, where profit is not the prime objective, strong leadership is mistrusted and dialogue is nurtured. However one of the critiques of recent youth work interventions is that they are increasingly taking on the role of surveillance and control. If youth work is used in this way, its claim to empower young people may be compromised, as Frances and Wiles point out: 'such work threatens youth workers' relationships with young people and indicates to young people, and other agencies, that youth work has a social control function which would undermine its advocacy and empowerment role' (cited in Barrett, 2003: 35).

Undeniably, the Garda Youth Diversion Projects follow a 'social control' agenda as an explicit rationale exists to divert young people from causing disruption to public order, as outlined earlier. Indications of this more focused agenda are also provided by our survey data: over 70 per cent of targeted projects reported that 'behavioural change' was an important or very important aspect of their work, compared with 38 per cent for mainstream youth work (Powell et al., 2010: 57). However, the vast majority of targeted projects (80 per cent) also reported that *empowering* marginalised young people was a major aspect of their work. The means by which youth workers reconcile the need to both change behaviour (which suggests a social control agenda) and empower young people was explored further through our interviews.

Youth workers agreed that there was certainly an element of surveillance and control in targeted initiatives. As one participant pointed out in relation to the Garda Youth Diversion Projects:

Diversion is certainly about changing behaviour. Mainstream ones are more relaxed. No need to talk to young people about what they did on the weekend – did they drink or did they take drugs – in the mainstream projects. Diversion is hoping more to get them away from certain behaviours. (Youth Worker, Garda Diversion Project)

However from the same youth worker's point of view targeted projects were also empowering because, for example, they could help to free young people from a dependence on drink or drugs and foster a sense of self-esteem and control over their lives. One youth worker elaborated on this theme:

It is partly about trying to change behaviour, especially in the Garda Diversion Projects. But it is also about empowering young people with problems in their lives, to make them strong enough to say no to drugs, or to build up their self-esteem so that they don't have to find an escape in drink or destructive behaviour. And to encourage them to keep on at school, because it is often when they drop out of school that the real problems begin.

These comments are in line with Kiely's assertion that Irish youth work is largely concerned with 'enabling young people to manage their lives as best they can in the society of which they are part', for example through life-skills programmes or crime prevention programmes (Kiely, 2009: 22). A more radical approach to empowering young people would be to engage them in consciousness-raising so that they develop an understanding of their 'oppressive life situations' and are prompted 'to collectively want to act on society in a way intended to bring about structural or institutional change' (*ibid.* 23). Similarly Hurley and Treacy (1993: 41) have made the case for 'critical social education' which emphasises 'consciousness raising strategies that view the dominant value system as an inherent part of young people's problems'.

In our research on youth work practice we found little evidence of the type of consciousness-raising social education described by Kiely (2009) or Hurley and Treacy (1993), either in mainstream or targeted initiatives. Instead social education tended to be seen as an extension of personal development: as one respondent noted 'they were on the same continuum'. In this instance the respondent described social education in

terms of developing certain skills and abilities (for example communication skills, relationship-building), with no reference to the type of societal change envisaged by Hurley and Treacy. Another youth worker, who was familiar with Hurley and Treacy's critical social education model, rejected it as inappropriate to the immediate needs of the young people with whom he worked:

What we have done very little of nationally, is looking at structures, society's structures and how these actually impact on young people. I don't think we've done much of that type of critical social education and maybe that goes back to targeting. And maybe if we look at the particular young people we are targeting or engaging, they are not ready for that. Who cares about structures and all of that, when it's really the person, their own particular issues, you know, that they are much more interested in. There are some projects or organisations – like Amnesty International – that are involved in the political sphere, but that's rare.

This is not to suggest that the youth work sector does not engage in awareness-raising or address difficult issues. The YMCA, for example, was involved in anti-sectarian programmes in the North of Ireland and anti-racist programmes in the South. However the programmes provided by some organisations tend to be in areas which are relatively uncontroversial, for example environmentalism and citizenship education. While not disputing that these are important issues, they are of a different type to those described in Hurley and Treacy's model of critical social education.

Research carried out by Devlin and Gunning (2009) also indicates a certain ambivalence about the role of youth work in awareness-raising and the promotion of social change. In focus groups and questionnaire responses, participants expressed strong views in support of promoting equality and inclusiveness through youth work. 'To encourage young people to challenge social injustice and inequalities' was one of the ten possible aims of youth work presented in a list of options in the questionnaire and it ranked strongly overall (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 49). However, in the *open-ended* question about the purpose of youth work, none of the participants spontaneously couched their answer in equality terms. The 'dominant discourse' of youth workers, when they are asked spontaneously to identify the purpose of their work, is personal development within a community context (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 15). Moreover, while the views of the workers in the focus groups were strongly in favour of equality and inclusiveness and of recognising and valuing diversity, they also acknowledged in most cases that practice in this area is not yet as fully or highly developed as it could or should be. Specific practical difficulties were cited in relation to trying to develop initiatives in some areas including intercultural work and work that is inclusive of young lesbians and gay men. 'In all cases the sense is that workers are committed to developing practice in these (and other) fields and are in some cases already actively doing so but that they themselves see room for progress' (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 49).

In the same research young people themselves were asked what they saw as the main purpose of their youth project/group. About a third of respondents emphasised what might be termed the 'diversionary' aspect of youth work: to keep young people off the street and out of trouble. Interestingly, practitioners also regarded this as an

important objective of youth work (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 48). More positively, the authors note, it was also evident that young people do not see youth work as being *only* about keeping young people off the streets and that they attach considerable importance to the opportunities which it provides (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 46).

Voluntary participation

Targeted interventions – particularly those with a crime prevention remit – have been criticised for undermining the principle of voluntary participation, which is often regarded as one of the key elements of youth work (Jeffs and Smith, 2008: 283; Kiely, 2009: 23). The nature of voluntary participation in targeted projects was explored in our research, particularly in relation to the Garda Youth Diversion Projects. It is clear that, officially, the Diversion projects are based on the principle of voluntary participation: ‘Young people who participate in the project do so voluntarily. A young person cannot be directed by the courts to participate in the project nor should participation be a condition of supervision’ (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2003: 38). This practice is confirmed in our research by the finding that some young people chose to opt out or not join projects, even if referred to them by the Juvenile Liaison Officer (Powell et al., forthcoming). However, to assume that this automatically implies genuinely voluntary participation in all cases would deny the subtle power inequalities which are at play between authority figures and young people. One Garda Youth Diversion Project Coordinator admitted, for example, that some young people had to be ‘convinced’ to voluntarily participate in the projects:

It’s very strict in the Garda Youth Diversion Projects – that it is voluntary. However, that is not the case in practice. Because the Juvenile Liaison Officer refers them, it’s up to me to follow up. If they [the young person] say no the first time I leave it for a while. I try another thing. Let them come to the youth café. I pull them into the building that way. (Garda Youth Diversion Project Coordinator)

The extent to which the young people themselves felt that their participation was voluntary is an issue which was beyond the scope of the current project but which warrants further research.

Conclusion

The origins of contemporary youth work in Ireland can be traced back to the late 19th century and while much has changed in the intervening period many of the basic principles and ideals have remained the same (O’hAodain, 2010). Concepts and trends that were established then continue to inform the development of the sector, including the predominance of voluntary organisations as the main service providers, the principle of voluntary participation by young people, and limited state involvement. At the same time the sector has evolved to reflect the changing needs and lifestyles of young people in Ireland. New forms of youth work have emerged (e.g. youth cafés, mentoring programmes) which co-exist with established models (youth clubs, uniformed groups). Continuity and change is also evident in relation to targeting. While youth organisations have always claimed to reach certain groups of young

people, targeting has assumed far greater importance over the last few decades, largely in response to government priorities and funding. This injection of capital was welcomed by youth work organisations and was seen to represent a form of positive discrimination which would benefit some of the most underprivileged young people in Irish society. Critics, on the other hand, have suggested that targeted projects represent a form of social control and fail to address the structural problems which impact on young people's lives. Moreover the drift towards a two-tier youth service raises the question of whether certain young people are being ghettoised in targeted projects and thereby further marginalised. There are, therefore, a number of contradictions at the heart of contemporary youth work: while claiming to empower and integrate young people it could equally be seen to control and segregate them from their 'mainstream' peers.

Our research suggests that youth workers and policy makers share many of these concerns, and sometimes struggle with conflicting roles and expectations. While there was a general consensus that targeted youth work, *in some form*, was necessary in order to reach the most disadvantaged young people, youth workers were adamant that this should not come at the expense of mainstream youth work. The challenge, as they see it, is to strike a balance between targeted and mainstream provision so that both are valued; and to ensure that targeted interventions are based on youth work values and traditions, including voluntary participation and the empowerment of young people. However, as the sector grows increasingly dependent on targeted funding, it may become ever more difficult to achieve these objectives.

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