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Researching effective programmes and ways of engaging young people in a youth work setting

Marie Holton

Youth work in contemporary Ireland is undergoing many changes. The introduction of the National Quality Standards Framework (2010) has seen a shift from process orientated work to outcomes based models. There are several ongoing debates in the current economic climate which sees the need to satisfy the funding agencies, whilst upholding the core values and principles of youth work. Youth work seems to be divided between ‘mainstream’ which is open access to all young people, (this type of youth work is generally found in the voluntary sector), and ‘targeted’ youth work, (which is funded by government initiatives) to tackle disadvantage and social exclusion of young people deemed to be ‘at risk’ or ‘disadvantaged’. Due to a relative lack of literature exploring the viewpoints of young people on their continued engagement with youth work services, the research reported here explores the reasons given by ten young people for their continued engagement in a targeted youth work service. Findings from a focus group discussion agrees with other literature which suggests that multiple factors must co-exist to continue to engage young people. Key factors are the availability of a welcoming environment, the types of programmes on offer and relationships with both peers and the youth workers.

Introduction and Literature Review

The National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (2010) is being implemented throughout the youth work sector in an attempt to provide evidence to demonstrate the benefits and value of youth work to both young people and society. Evidence of effectiveness, through programmes that have measurable outcomes as a result of a specific intervention is also related to the provision of funding, as noted by Bamber, Power and Rowley (2012). However while funding requirements demand the provision of evidence in the form of tangible outcomes the challenge to youth workers is to engage the young people to participate in the programmes. This was part of the motivation behind this research, leading to the decision that the best way to understand what young people wanted and how to engage them was to ask the young people themselves. Seeking out young people’s views on what they see as effective programmes of

value to them provides young workers with a deeper insight and understanding of their needs and how to respond appropriately to meet these needs.

According to Seebach (2008, p.43) “youth participation is a core element of Irish youth work theory and policy”. He argues that this originated in the Costello Report (1984), which identified youth participation “as the first of its core values” (*ibid*). Seebach cites the framework for youth participation in Ireland proposed by Hurley and Treacy (1993), which looks at the relevance of youth participation from a “sociological perspective” and emphasises “youth participation as a key dimension, noting that “other frameworks do not” (Seebach, 2008, p.43).

Central to young people’s reasons for engagement and participation with youth work services is a place to come to socialise with their friends and engage in activities that interest them (Devlin & Gunning, 2009; Martin, 2010). While young people are more drawn to and engage in unstructured programmes Martin (2010) argues that structured programmes are of a greater benefit and provide more learning to the young people. Structured programmes generally have tangible outcomes whereas unstructured programmes are more process oriented. Bamber et al. (2012, p.45) note the need to capture the gains for young people from engagement with programmes in agreement with the National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (2010). Therefore the challenge for youth services is to create structured programmes that will encourage young people’s voluntary participation (Martin, 2010). Devlin and Gunning (2009) also note that continued engagement allows young people to participate in a greater variety of different programmes.

Young people themselves recognise that involvement in activities in youth work services keeps them off the street and out of trouble (Devlin & Gunning, 2009), suggesting a need to target some young people. Powell, Geoghan, Scanlon and Swirak (2010) agree for the need for targeted young work to ensure that most vulnerable and marginalised young people are encouraged to participate. Meaningful participation within community initiatives contributes to the development of coping skills to deal with the negative life circumstances encountered by marginalised young people, particularly when a strengths-based approach is used (Seebach, 2008).

Key to young people participating in youth services is the relationship formed with youth workers (Devlin & Gunning, 2009; Martin, 2010; Bamber et al., 2012). Indeed the relationship between the youth worker and the young person may be the only ongoing positive interaction the

young person has with an adult outside the family. Henry, Morgan and Hammond (2010, p.26) propose that the youth worker is the “most valuable resource in youth work” and youth workers need excellent communication and listening skills, self-awareness as well as confidence and competence in interacting with young people. Successful interactions and interventions with young people require workers to be genuine and transparent.

As Martin (2010) points out there has been very little direct consultation with young people in research on youth work. Indeed a national study of youth work provision (Scanlon, Powell, Geoghegan & Swirak, 2011) did not directly consult young people. Therefore while research in Ireland has listened to the voices of youth workers, managers and policy makers this research is focused on the views of the young people themselves. Its aim was to capture the viewpoints of young people aged 17 years + about their continued involvements with and opinions of effective programmes in a youth work service. This will enable greater understanding of what the young people need and want, the reasons behind their continued engagement and what they see as beneficial in a youth work service.

Design

Participants

A group of ten young people taking part in a Cross Border Exchange Programme with an urban youth project in Dublin city were invited to take part in a focus group to discuss effective programmes and ways of engaging young people in a youth work setting. This group was selected on the basis that all of these young people have been involved in the youth project for several years. The participants all come under the label of targeted youth work as the youth project they attend receives both Special Project for Youth Funding (SPY), and Young People’s Facilities and Services Funding (YPFSSF). These funds are provided to tackle social exclusion in socio economically deprived geographical areas. That is not to suggest that this particular group of young people are deprived rather, it recognises that risk factors are higher for these young people, and therefore supports and services have been put in place to compliment and build on the young people’s and the communities strengths, in an attempt to create equality of opportunity to all.

Four of the ten participants are female and six male. They ranged in age from 17 to 19 years at the time of data collection, with three being 17 years of age. Four participants had been engaged with the youth service for between ten and 12 years, four between six and nine years and the remaining two for approximately five years. All participants attended a large 'drop in' group for the previous three to four years.

Data collection

The rationale for choosing a focus group as the data collection method was that it was deemed a less threatening environment to the young people, as their friends were present. In addition there was an expectation that discussion among the young people in the group setting could provide a deeper insight into the research topic. The young people selected for this focus group all knew each other and were used to working together in a structured group as they had a shared experience of being members of the Cross Border Exchange Group.

The discussion sought young people's views on what they considered to be effective programmes that had value for them. It also explored reasons why young people continue to engage in youth work settings. A flip chart was used as a visual aid to document points raised by the young people as well as demonstrate the value of documenting their views. The discussion was audio and video-taped with the permission of participants. The video recording was done to assist with transcribing the data and was deleted once transcription was completed.

Ethical procedures

A letter was sent to the young people explaining the research topic and seeking their consent to take part. In addition a letter was sent to the parents of the young people under 18 years of age seeking their consent for their child to participate. The letter requested permission for the focus group discussion to be audio and video recorded and provided assurance that all recordings would be destroyed once the data had been transcribed. The young people were advised of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason. However due to the nature of the data collected in a group discussion it was suggested that anyone who had any doubts should not participate. Participants were assured of confidentiality and that any quotes used would be anonymised.

Data analysis

Data analysis was guided by the procedure of thematic analysis. Once transcribed the data was read several times, coded and then codes combined to generate themes.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented under four areas: reasons for engagement; what is considered to be an effective programme; relationships with youth workers and reasons for continued engagement. These will be discussed and compared to findings from literature reviewed. The findings from this focus group do not claim to be indicative of all young people's perspectives, just this focus group; however they have strong similarities to the findings presented by both Devlin and Gunning (2009) and Martin (2010).

Reasons for engagement

A key starting point for engaging young people in youth working setting is the provision of a warm and welcoming place/space where the young people can come and meet up with their friends. Devlin and Gunning (2009) mention that young people value having an enjoyable place to meet and socialise with and friends. This was also identified as a major factor for initial youth engagement by the participants:

You get to be with all your friends and have a laugh instead of sitting in the cold. (Daniel)

This is really the only time we ever see each other. (Clare)

Yeah, it's the only time we're all together. (Carol)

No matter how long you've been out of the youth club knowing you're always welcome back. (Sarah)

Martin (2010, p 41) also identifies having a place meet up with friends and youth workers while participating in activities of interest to them is an important reason why young people attend and engage with youth services. This concurs with comments listed below from the participants:

I get involved 'cause you have different activities and all, so like football and different activities. (Conor)

I get involved because it's like something to do, instead of going around the streets an' all. (Daniel)

Something different for us to do. (Sarah)

Effective programmes

Remembering the different types of activities in which they had engaged over the years prompted the focus group to compile a list of all the programmes and activities in which they had participated and which they considered to be of value or effective. Given that all of this group have been members of the youth project between 5-12 years the list was quite extensive. This supports Devlin and Gunning's (2009) finding, that the length of time young people were involved in youth work equated to increased exposure to new opportunities and activities, and Bamber et al. (2012, p 43) argument that youth work gives young people the opportunity to engage in new experiences and challenging programmes. Comments from the young people when referring to the specific programmes were:

Oh learning new skills, cooking an all, I actually got better at cooking as well to be honest. (Daniel)

We just get to do stuff that we didn't do before, different experiences like. (Carol)

The Can U Hac it. (Anthony)

Yeah you felt like you're after achieving something. (Sarah)

During the discussion on effective programmes, young people referred to the Teenage Health Programme, which was a sexual health programme aimed to provide practical information on puberty, contraception, sexually transmitted infections as well as increasing young people's abilities to improve communication and negotiation skills in relation to their sexual health. At the end of the structured workshops young people were given the opportunity to care for computerised baby dolls for two days in a simulated parenting experience.

What's the one where we got the babies, remember that. (Clare)

That was brilliant. (Niamh)

Another programme considered to be valuable and effective by participants was the Can U Hac It, which was a peer drug education programme focusing on the three main drugs of choice of young people today, hash, alcohol and cocaine. The programme while it provided practical information on the physical effects of drugs, had a more sociological perspective which looked at how an individual's drug use affects them, their family and their community.

When referring to the Cross Border Exchange Programme, which aims to raise their awareness on tolerance, respect for difference, while at the same time it is giving the group an insight into the reality of living in a divided society based on religious beliefs. The focus group members were participating in this programme at the time of data collection.

That's the best one Therese for engagement, at the moment. (Oliver)

Learning about Bloody Sunday, and the, the Bogside and all was real interesting. (Oliver)

Relationship between youth worker and young person

When asked whether they considered the relationship between youth worker and young person important, all of the young people felt it was essential that they had a good relationship with the youth worker. In the words of the young people, the qualities or traits they specified were necessary for a youth worker are:

They have to be sound, like you have to be able to get on with them. (Daniel)

Understand where we're coming from like. (Carol)

Friendly. (Sean)

Good sense of humour. (Scott)

While Henry et al. (2010, p 29) might verbalise the skills and traits required of a youth worker more eloquently, saying "they must be a highly skilled communicator and be a confident, competent, and self aware individual" who is transparent and genuine in their dealings with young people, the above quotes from the focus group participants echo the same sentiments, reinforcing that the young people, have an acute awareness of the attributes required of a youth

worker, and the need to build meaningful, appropriate and constructive relationship with adults outside of their immediate family. Henry et al. (2010) highlight that central to effective work with young people, is the need to build relationships with young people, and it is based on this premise that they consider the youth worker the key resource in youth work.

It is based on this trusting relationship that young people feel they can talk to the youth workers if they have a problem, or need support or help:

Just having someone to talk to, someone there to listen to you. (Carol)

Someone that's gonna be there for you, other than like your Ma and Da like. (Carol)

Knowing that the youth workers are there to help you with anything if you need it. (Niamh)

For these young people, knowing that there is a responsible adult who they can talk to about anything is an invaluable support mechanism for them. Participants also acknowledged that youth workers could challenge their behaviour, when it was dangerous or inappropriate, suggesting trust in the youth worker's judgement:

Like you have your freedom with them unless you do something wrong unless they have to stop you from. (Niamh)

Bamber et al. (2012, p.43) maintain that youth work is based on "building relationships" with the young people while also "engaging them in purposeful activities tailored to their needs and interests".

The group recognised that through their participation in a wide variety of programmes and activities, they had acquired new knowledge. This was reinforced by comments from young people about their learning experiences in the youth project:

You learn more in your youth club than you do in school, I think. (Oliver)

Other group members agreed with this statement citing the reasons for this as being: "cause it's fun" (Daniel), claiming "these are things we couldn't do outside the youth club" (Niamh), "different things that you wouldn't do every day" (Sarah) "like the baby things an' all" (Niamh).

Reasons for staying involved

The group discussed reasons for staying involved or leaving, and stated interesting activities and new learning as reasons for continued involvement. When asked to expand they mentioned trips away. Courses that offered a Certificate on completion were appealing to those age 18 years and older, as they maintain, it is good to have something to put their CV. Martin (2010) also found that young people in the 18-19 year old age group were more inclined to stay engaged if the opportunity to learn new skills was offered.

Some of the member's attendance at the youth project became more sporadic in the year prior to joining the Cross Border Group. This was because the 'Drop In' club was no longer interesting or meeting their needs. In their view it had become a bit boring, as they just kept doing the same thing. Martin (2010) supports the idea that while unstructured activities such as 'Drop In' groups are an important way of initially engaging with the young people, as they provide fun and interesting activities in a place where the young people can gather and meet with their friends. However, Martin (2010), Devlin and Gunning (2008) findings combined with that of the focus group, suggest that to ensure retention of the older teenagers, specifically those 17 years and older, challenging programmes based on their interests and needs are required. The challenges of such programmes could also assist the young people to be active citizens as young people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although limited by the fact that all participants were drawn from one youth service, the findings of this research suggest ways in which the older teenager/youth adult can be retained in a youth service through maintaining positive relationships with youth workers as well as having the opportunity to participate in structured programmes that are seen to be a source of learning and interest to them. Programmes that are seen to be valuable to the older young people such as the Cross Border Exchange in which these participants were involved also take account of the young people's voice in society as citizen rather than potential citizens (Seebach, 2008).

From a youth work practitioner's perspective conducting this research has been valuable for me as it provided an opportunity to reflect on practice away from everyday practice. This has made me question my past practice through the realisation that when young people are on the

brink of adulthood they not only have the capacity to but also the interest to engage in programmes that will challenge them. Such challenging programmes have the potential to create opportunities for the young people's socio-emotional development as they enter into adulthood.

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