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Youth work in Ireland – A decade on

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Abstract

This article examines the development of youth work policy and practice in Ireland over the past decade. The paper emerged from a research project carried out by the author which sought to establish the main issues and themes which have characterised youth work in Ireland since the passing of the Youth Work Act in 2001. Themes such as the increased professional identity of youth work; greater unity within the sector; the impact of changing economic conditions; and a move towards outcomes led and evidence based work are explored. The paper also examines future challenges facing voluntary youth work organisations in Ireland.

Introduction

This paper is a follow-up to Jenkinson (2000). Youth work in Ireland has undergone many significant changes and developments in recent years and this paper seeks to document the main themes and factors which have influenced these developments. In order to portray a representative and grounded picture of recent issues in youth work, I conducted a piece of research to elicit the views of those who are centrally involved in key youth work organisations in Ireland. This article outlines and discusses the key findings of that research.

The paper begins by outlining the research methodology, sampling and analysis used in this study. Following this the paper outlines the legislative and policy contexts of Irish youth work, in particular the Youth Work Act 2001 and the National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007, which, at the outset of the decade influenced significantly the ensuing journey of youth work in Ireland. The changes which have occurred in the youth work sector in terms of its professionalisation are explored, followed by a discussion about how the sector has become much more united over the decade. The paper proceeds to examine the effects of the fluctuating economic conditions on the nature and development of youth work highlighting the significant pressure being experienced by organisations at this time. In an administrative context, the voluntary youth work sector has experienced transition by being moved from the remit of the Department of Education to the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). Until June 2011, there was cross departmental responsibility for this office; the Departments concerned were Health, Education and Justice. The OMCYA subsequently became the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The impact of this move from Education is discussed. The nature of how Irish youth work is approached has been strongly impacted by an increasing focus on outcomes and evidence based approaches. The factors and challenges associated with this shift in focus are explored. The paper continues by highlighting how child protection has been a

strong theme over the decade. The paper concludes by drawing together the main challenges facing the sector over the next number of years.

Methodology

The research carried out in this study was qualitative in nature where ‘the stress is on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants’ (Bryman 2004, p. 266). The study sought to explore the participants’ own understandings of how the landscape of youth work in Ireland had developed over the past decade, and the principle factors which have influenced this development. The data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews which were conducted by telephone (4) and in person (2). Six people were interviewed.

Sampling

The author used purposive sampling as a method of identifying potential respondents. This approach is commonly used in qualitative studies and entails researchers purposely choosing subjects who, in their opinion, are relevant to the project (Sarantakos 2005, p. 164). Respondents were invited to participate by virtue of their key roles in four Irish youth work organisations (National Youth Council of Ireland, YMCA, Youth Work Ireland, and Foróige) over the past decade, and were therefore seen as well placed to provide insightful commentary on the development of youth work in Ireland over this period. The research was carried out during the spring of 2011.

Interviews

Open ended questions were used, as, according to Bryman (2004), this allows participants to answer in their own terms and does not suggest a certain kind of answer to the respondent; therefore issues of most salience to the respondents will emerge. The participants were asked the following questions:

1. In broad terms, how has the landscape of youth work in Ireland changed over the past decade?
2. The last decade began with the Youth Work Amendment Act in 2001 – what aspects of its implementation have had the most significant impact in Irish youth work?
3. What other factors have influenced the development of youth work in Ireland over the past decade?
4. What impact has the recession had on youth work organisations?
5. What impact has the revelations of abuse in the Catholic church had on youth work?
6. In ‘Youth work in Ireland – the struggle for identity’, I spoke about the gradual emergence of a more critical focus of youth work in Ireland at a policy level ... but in general youth work was still fairly conservative – do you think this has changed over the past 10 years?
7. What are the most significant challenges youth work in Ireland faces over the next five years?

These questions were compiled with the aim of eliciting what were the most significant developments in Irish youth work since 2000, and what factors influenced these developments. Question two specifically addresses the Youth Work Act 2001 as it is the

most significant piece of legislation affecting youth work in Ireland. Questions four and five aimed to establish the impact on youth work of key social issues in Ireland during this decade. Question six picks up a theme which was prominent in my original article, and aims to track how this has developed. Finally question seven aimed to identify key issues and challenges which are likely to face the sector in the near to medium term future.

Analysis

On the basis of the data generated through the questionnaire, the author engaged in a process of thematic analysis of the material. Thematic analysis, according to Gomm (2004), is commonly used to analyse data gained from qualitative research methods and involves reading and re-reading participants' responses in order to identify the primary themes and issues arising. This paper provides a discussion of the major themes occurring in the research and provides an overview of the principal issues impacting on the development of youth work in Ireland over the past decade.

The legislative and policy contexts of Irish youth work

Youth Work Act 1997

The late 1990s in Ireland saw a 'false start' in relation to enacting youth work legislation. The 1997 Youth Work Act was passed at the last minute by the outgoing Fine Gael led 'rainbow coalition'. However, before its departure, the outgoing government commenced two elements of the Act. Firstly, the appointment of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) as the prescribed national organisation representing the voluntary youth work sector; and secondly, the appointment of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC), which would advise the Minister on the provision, coordination and development of youth work services and policies. The appointment of NYWAC was essential to giving life to the intent of the Act and served to keep the dream of a legislative base for youth work alive. The incoming Minister had to accept the legitimacy of NYWAC which was key in lobbying for a new Youth Work Act. This was necessary as it soon became apparent that the 1997 Act was virtually inoperable due to decisions made by the incoming Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats government regarding setting up the necessary structures to implement the Act. In order for the Act to have been operational Local Education Boards needed to be set up, but the incoming government decided against setting these up. The frustration felt at that time by Irish youth work organisations, is articulated by the Chief Executive of the National Youth Federation, Tony Murphy when he said "Currently no legislative base for the (youth work) sector is in operation ... there is a less than comprehensive service being offered nationwide ... Shifting political sands is no excuse for failing to make worthwhile progress" (1997, p. 2).

Youth Work Act 2001

The beginning of the 2000s saw the Youth Work Act 2001 being passed and parts of it implemented. This legislation was long awaited and was the culmination of a very long journey with initial calls for youth work to be put on a statutory footing beginning in 1984 in the Costello Report. Finally the youth work sector had legislation which committed the government to taking responsibility for its development and coordination, albeit subject to caveats such as "as far as is practicable" (Section 8(1)), and "within the financial resources available" (Sections 8(c) and 9(a)).

The remit of this Act was to define the development, structure, implementation, and funding of youth work in Ireland. It reaffirmed the establishment of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee, and the appointment of the National Youth Council of Ireland as the National Representative Youth Work Organisation, both set up under the 1997 Act. The other main provisions of this legislation which have been implemented, and which have had an impact on the development of youth work over the past decade are:

- The appointment by the Minister of an Assessor of Youth Work who would monitor the operation of youth work programmes on a national basis.
- The Act defined youth work as ‘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 and training; and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.’ (Youth Work Act 2001, Part 1, Section 3).

The Act also made provision for Local Youth Work Committees within each VEC area, and the establishment of Voluntary Youth Councils who would represent youth work agencies and make representations to the Youth Work Committees; however these have not developed.

Interestingly, there was a mixed response among participants in this research regarding whether the Act should be implemented fully. Most commented on how little of it had been implemented; some felt that its full enactment would provide a positive framework for future youth work development, others felt it was redundant and should be put aside and a fresh view taken of where we go from here.

National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007

In the early part of the last decade, the NYWAC carried out a consultation process carried out within the sector in order to set out priorities for the development of youth work in Ireland. This resulted in the publication of the National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007 which outlined four broad goals in relation to how youth work would develop over the next number of years:

- To facilitate young people and adults to participate more fully in, and gain optimum benefit from, youth work programmes and services.
- To enhance the contribution of youth work to social inclusion, social cohesion and citizenship in a rapidly changing national and global context.
- To put in place an expanded and enhanced infrastructure for development, support, and coordination at a national and local level.
- To put in place mechanisms for enhancing professionalism and ensuring quality standards in youth work (Department of Education and Science 2003).

This plan had the full endorsement of the statutory and voluntary youth work sectors and was key in moving the sector towards a united approach. The endorsement of the

Plan is articulated by James Doorley, a former president of the National Youth Council of Ireland;

‘I believe the plan provides the youth sector with the opportunity to articulate the positive contribution that youth work and non-formal education can make to the lives of young people, if properly supported and resourced, with the consequent benefits for society as a whole. For the first time also the youth sector is in a position to articulate a shared vision and blueprint for the development and strengthening of youth services in Ireland’ (Doorely, 2003 p. 3).

The provisions of both the Youth Work Act and the National Youth Work Development Plan formed the basis for many of the key developments in Irish Youth Work during the following decade. These issues, as they arose in the research, are discussed in the following section, beginning with the evolving professional identity of youth workers, which (as we have seen) was one of the main aims of the National Youth Work Development Plan.

Increased professional identity of youth work

In ‘Youth Work in Ireland – a Struggle for Identity’ I identified that youth work was at the initial stages of developing an identity of its own and was striving to be seen as profession in its own right rather than ‘an offshoot of social work, probation work, or even sport and recreational activities’ (Jenkinson, 2000, p. 107). In contrast, a strong theme arising in this research is that youth work has become increasingly professionalised over the last decade and has a much greater sense of established identity. This finding is echoed by Powell et al. (2010), who also noted an increased professionalism and professionalisation on the part of youth work organisations. To what can we attribute these changes? Participants in our research highlighted a number of factors. Firstly, a higher percentage of those working within the sector have a professional qualification in youth work. A decision by the youth work sector to move towards requiring full-time youth workers to hold professional qualifications was set out in the National Youth Work Development Plan. Increasingly, holding a professional qualification became a desired and often an essential requirement of youth work employment. This contributed to the development of numerous accredited third level courses in youth and community work in NUI Maynooth, University College Cork, Dundalk IT, and University of Ulster. The Youth Work Development Plan proposed the establishment of a validation body for youth work training and 2006 saw the launch of the North South Education and Training Standards for Youth Work (NSETS). This body was established by the NYWAC in the Republic of Ireland and the Youth Work Training Board in Northern Ireland. It is this body that gives professional endorsement to all academic courses in youth work in the island of Ireland. This shift towards increased professionalisation of the youth work sector is paralleled by similar developments in the social care sector (Devlin, 2009; Share 2009).

Another factor, particularly in the first part of the decade, has been the rise in investment and uptake of in-service training by youth work organisations. This has resulted in the up-skilling of staff in terms of best practice, and the development of a culture whereby the identification of training needs and responding to these have become more normalised within the sector. This has contributed to youth workers and

youth work organisations having a greater sense of confidence in relation to the significance of their input into the lives of young people and their communities.

Thirdly, a majority of participants identified that having a definition of youth work enshrined in legislation has been a very significant and positive development for youth work in Ireland. Wide support for this legislative definition is echoed by Devlin who points out that the definition ‘explicitly and unmistakably enshrines a few key points – or principles – that would command widespread agreement among people involved in youth work in Ireland today’ (2010, p. 94) In particular, the Youth Work Act 2001 defines youth work in terms of it being an educational endeavour, which supports the personal and social development of young people, in which they engage on a voluntary basis. It also specifically identifies the voluntary sector as being the main provider of youth work services. According to the participants in this study, having an agreed definition lends strength and credibility to the vision and work of the sector, and provides a clear and focused understanding of the purposes of the work. Indeed, one participant remarked that having legislation which includes a definition of youth work is the source of envy on the part of some of our neighbouring nations.

These combined factors have resulted in a youth work sector which is more sure of itself, and clearer about the value and significance of what it has to contribute in terms of effective interventions in the lives of young people. This research also pointed to a greater involvement and valuing of youth work agencies at a community level in terms of delivery of local services, in that youth work is increasingly being seen as a legitimate partner around the table in terms of interdisciplinary and community based work. However, participants in the research also highlighted the challenge of addressing how youth work is viewed at a broader governmental level. Youth work, it was felt, is still on the margins of state priorities and funding opportunities.

A more united sector

There was unanimous agreement among participants that the past ten years has seen the development of a much greater unity among youth work organisations. This is in sharp contrast to the beginning of the decade when I cited Bernard Allen, Minister of State for Youth Affairs, who said: ‘I am strongly of the view that a lack of unity has had a negative impact on the development of, and the funding of, the Irish Youth Service’ (Jenkinson 2000, p. 117). One of the reasons for this is the establishment of the NYWAC (National Youth Work Advisory Committee). This Committee operates at government departmental level and advises the Minister on the implementation of youth work policies, and the provision of youth work programmes and services. There are 32 members of this committee and sixteen of these are representatives of the voluntary youth work sector. This has facilitated round table discussions between all the major stakeholders on the development of youth work and has also had the effect of ensuring an equal partnership between the statutory and voluntary sector in the development of Irish youth work. In particular, NYWAC had a very concrete programme of work that was agreed by all parties as the priorities for the youth work sector. The development of a Youth Work Development Plan and the subsequent implementation of key areas of work identified in that plan, such as a review of child protection, funding review, equality, interculturalism and the development of the Quality Standards Framework were all important areas of work undertaken by the sector through NYWAC. This level

of collaboration between key parties was heretofore unseen in Irish youth work and the process has contributed significantly to a greater unity and cooperation between youth work agencies.

Another factor which has contributed to greater unity within the sector has been the official appointment, under the Youth Work Act, of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) as the representative body for voluntary youth work organisations. Much of the political wrangling of the previous decade was put aside and the youth work sector as a whole became united in its affiliation to the NYCI. This has engendered a greater level of cooperation and trust within the sector and has enabled the sector to operate out of a situation of collective strength.

A decade of economic climate change

The economic context of the past decade has had a pervading influence on all aspects of Irish society, including the development of youth work. According to Hine & Wood (2009), the wider economic and social context within which work with young people takes place has a significant impact on the policy and practice of youth work. All of the research participants referred to the past decade having been one of two extremes, spanning the Celtic Tiger years in the first two thirds and the recession during the latter third. The boom years saw the expansion of youth work service provision, with additional government funding streams coming on-line such as the Drugs Task Force and Department of Justice sources. The Young People's Facilities and Services Fund came on stream in 1998 and has made a very significant investment in youth facilities and youth work provision. Its focus is targeting young people at risk of drug use and/or crime involvement. Philanthropic organisations, such as Atlantic Philanthropies Ireland and The One Foundation also developed as significant sources of funding for the sector. Funding was increasingly provided for specific interventions for particular populations... One of the ensuing effects of this is that youth work became much more targeted as a result. A significant number of Youth Justice and Garda Diversion Projects were established throughout the decade, many of which were run by, or in partnership, with youth work agencies. The establishment of regional and local drugs task forces across the country in this decade has resulted in many youth projects specifically aimed at preventing and addressing drug use among young people. Whilst in some respects this level of resources and specific intervention was welcomed by participants, concern was also expressed regarding the effect this has had on the provision of universal youth work initiatives aimed at the general youth population. They expressed the view that this aspect of youth work has suffered in terms of funding allocation, which is undermining the commitment of youth work agencies to the youth population in general. Concerns about this move towards targeted work are expressed by Kiely (2009), who claims that this shift represents an eroding of a foundational tenet of youth work, which is universalism. Participants in Powell et al.'s (2010) research also referred to the tension between targeted and general youth work and highlighted a desire to combine and maintain a balance in these two elements of youth work provision.

How funding is targeted also reflects the view of young people taken by funders. Looking back, the increases in government funding in Ireland have focussed mainly on young people at risk of drug use and criminal involvement. According to Sercombe, 'Mostly, governments see young people as a risk factor that needs to be managed ... if

youth work could guarantee an orderly, predictable progression through adolescence ... we would see youth work budgets increase dramatically' (2010, p. 76). Ord (2012) also highlights the difficulties of targeting specific groups of young people as this not only pathologizes young people, but represents them as dysfunctional. This view of young people and its consequential implementation in youth work provision presents quite a challenge for youth workers and youth organisations as the values that inform this view of young people are diametrically opposed to the aims of youth work which seeks to promote the empowerment of young people, and challenge labelling and negative stereotyping.

The economic boom brought with it some other changes which impacted on both the lives of young people, and youth work's response to these changes. There was a greater diversity in the nationalities and cultures of young people engaging in youth services; there was an increase in young people who had part-time employment, and therefore had greater economic power; and the rise in new technology and in particular social networking brought its own flavour and challenges to those working with young people. In addition to these observations, participants noted that the boom resulted in a decline in volunteers within youth organisations.

The last number of years has seen a sharp economic decline in Ireland. Youth work organisations have felt the impact of this severely as government funding has contracted by almost twenty percent (NYCI, 2011). This has resulted in organisations reducing overheads, the range of activities offered, staff training, expenses and staff hours. It has also restricted programme development and the ability to develop new responses to identified needs. More time must be devoted to fundraising, thus diverting staff time away from front line interventions. Youth agencies have worked hard at maintaining services albeit at a slimmed-down level, but all research participants expressed a strong view that youth organisations had reached a limit and could not absorb any further cuts without a serious and detrimental impact on programme provision.

Paradoxically the recession has resulted in a sharp increase in the demand for youth services due to young people having more spare time, high youth unemployment, and lack of resources within families to pay for alternative activities. Participants also spoke of high levels of insecurity and low morale among young people as they are increasingly unsure about what the future holds for them. Therefore, not only has the demand for youth services increased quantitatively, the needs of the young people they work with have become greater qualitatively also. In a discussion of the effects of recession within a UK context, Jeffs and Smith (2010) express a concern that a decline in funding for youth work would result in directing what funding there is towards targeted work, due to a perception and fear around the effects of recession on young people and their communities, particularly the threat of social disruption. There is a danger that this particular dynamic could unfold in an Irish context, further undermining the provision of generalist youth work services to young people, none of whom are immune from the serious economic decline being experienced in Ireland.

Participants also reported that the decrease in available resources for youth work agencies, coupled with the increased demand for services have had an impact on the morale of staff working within the sector. Whilst there is an effort to keep spirits up and

do their best with less for the young people they work with, many staff are feeling disheartened as they, and their agencies, face an uncertain future.

A journey through government departments

Within the past decade, the Youth Affairs section of the Government was moved from the Department of Education to the Office for the Minister (of State) for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). There was a mixture of responses from the research participants to the move from Education to the OMCYA, but all agreed that it has had a significant impact on how the voluntary youth sector is viewed and operationalised at a policy level. Some felt that given the definition of youth work in the 2001 Act, which clearly identifies youth work as part of an educational process, the Youth Affairs section sits more congruently within Education. However, a majority view within the research is that the move to the OMCYA has been positive, and has meant that there is more potential for integrated, joined up thinking in relation to children and young people's services. Those who held this view also expressed a concern that the educational element of youth work is very important and should be maintained as a key focus in future youth policy development, however it was seen as an asset if this can develop in the context of a broader strategy within children and young people's services. This potential for greater coordination and integration of services for children and young people is acknowledged by Treacy (2009, p. 188) who welcomes the opportunities for 'cross-agency planning and joined up responses to young people's needs'. However, he also urges caution regarding the possible further undermining of youth work's claim to be a distinct practice governed by a particular set of values; the worry being that youth work will be seen as just another service to be delivered to young people. Devlin strikes a stronger note of caution however and points to experiences in England and Wales where such integration has resulted in the educational focus of youth work being 'severely undermined' and calls for a strong resolve on the part of youth work organisations, practitioners, young people and policy makers to consolidate and build on the advances in youth work policy and strengthened identity in recent years (Devlin, 2010, p. 103).

The general election in 2011 resulted in a full ministry being allocated to Children and Youth Affairs; however, this occurred after this piece of research was carried out. Informally though, I have gleaned that this is a welcome development within the sector, potentially facilitating a greater amount of attention and focus on the integrated development on the youth work sector.

Move towards outcomes led and evidenced based work

One of the strongest themes arising in the research is the shift which has occurred within the sector towards outcomes led and evidenced based work. To a greater extent, youth work organisations are being required to demonstrate the efficacy of their interventions and there is a much greater focus on value for money. The sector is increasingly being challenged both in terms of how it presents itself and evidencing that it is useful. Participants identified two main factors which have contributed to this change. Firstly, the introduction by the OMCYA of the National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (NQSF) which was launched in July 2010. The NQSF was developed with the active contribution of the voluntary and statutory youth work sector and provides a framework of standards by which youth work organisations assess,

evaluate and articulate their practice with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the work according to best practice, based on the needs of young people. This initiative is being led by the Assessor of Youth Work and implemented on the ground by local VEC Youth Officers who provide guidance to local youth organisations. At a broad level, those interviewed welcomed the opportunity for youth work to be more focused around being able to demonstrate and account for the value of the work, with the aim of improving outcomes for young people. However, a desire was also expressed that it was important that this be a genuine and collaborative exercise, which is owned by youth organisations rather than a bureaucratic task with the potential to become a stick used to beat them with. Rose (2010), commenting on the UK experience, cautions against the development of an unhelpful dynamic whereby youth agencies are ‘punished’ when they don’t meet required targets within required timeframes. An important factor in the process developing as a constructive one is constructing a shared understanding between agencies and policy makers of the values which underpin youth work and its development (see Jeffs and Smith, 2010, chapter 1, for a discussion of core values of youth work). In our research, concern was also expressed about the ‘measurability’ of key aspects of youth work such as the relationship between workers and young people, which is a determining factor in its success (Blacker, 2010; Sapin, 2009; Ingram & Harris 2005, Treacy 2009). Blacker articulates this:

‘Meaningful, productive relationships provide the essential ingredient of all successful youth work encounters. Yet herein lies a profound difficulty. They are the vital ingredient, yet are impossible to measure in terms of effectiveness and outcomes’ (2010, p. 30).

There is a tension between the importance of being clear about what youth work is achieving in the lives of young people and the feasibility of effectively measuring some of these things. Rose (2010) further highlights that youth work places a high importance on the development of ‘soft skills’ in young people such as the ability to communicate, teamwork, and the development of self esteem. However he points out that these are very difficult to monitor and evaluate in terms of outcomes. This is not to say that youth work should avoid monitoring or evaluating its effectiveness; however, methods used to do this need to reflect the purpose, principles and values of youth work (Rose, 2010, p. 159). Williamson (2005) makes a valuable contribution to this debate when he points out that there are no quick fixes in youth work; effective, lasting interventions take time and he states that ‘politicians and funders also have to learn the art of patience’ (2005, p. 73).

Another factor which has influenced this move towards outcomes focused practice is the emergence of philanthropic funding sources in recent years. Organisations such as Atlantic Philanthropies and One Foundation have progressively become significant funders of Irish youth work initiatives, a move which has been accompanied by an emphasis on evidencing what works, and approaches which are substantiated by research and ‘verifiable’ models of intervention. There is also an emphasis on sharing this learning in the interests of advancing best practice within organisations. Participants acknowledged that funding from these sources has been significant in enabling innovation within the sector.

Focus on child protection

Given that the landscape of the past decade in Ireland has been marred by deeply shocking revelations around clerical and institutional child abuse, participants were asked whether this had impacted on the youth work sector. There was consensus that there has been very little direct impact, but that there has been, since the mid 1990s, a strong emphasis on developing child protection policies within organisations and also providing training in this area for staff and volunteers. This, accompanied by the development of Garda Vetting for all staff and volunteers, has meant a strong awareness of good practice and the need to protect young people. In the early part of the decade this resulted in a high level of caution on the part of youth workers around appropriate conduct and relationships with young people. This dynamic is also noted by Treacy (2009) who claims that child protection concerns have effected how youth workers engage with young people. There was also a sense among participants that this has started to settle in recent years with a more balanced approach being taken by agencies and workers. It was pointed out during the research that principles of good youth work practice, such as having respect and listening to young people, having strong relationships with young people, and the importance of young people's voices being heard, all contribute to the protection and safeguarding of children and young people.

Critical dimension of youth work?

In 'Youth work in Ireland – a struggle for identity' (2000), I wrote about the gradual emergence of a more critical focus of youth work in Ireland at a policy level. A critical approach to youth work emphasises the structural causes of inequality, discrimination, and disadvantage in society. It aims to challenge these inequalities and promote social justice and equal opportunities for all.

In 1977 The Bruton Report identified youth work as being an educational process that should help young people to appreciate society and contribute to it. The publication of the Costello Report in 1984 reflects a development in thinking and advocated a vision of youth work which emphasised the social and political contexts of young people's lives and strongly espoused the notions of 'participation' and 'empowerment', with a particular focus on the needs of disadvantaged young people. By 2000, this more critical focus had only really been translated into practice in projects whose focus lent itself to a critical approach, for example, work with Travellers, development education, work with young women. In general, however, youth work was fairly conservative. In this current piece of research I asked participants whether this relative conservatism within Irish youth work had changed over the past ten years. In general the consensus was that it had not changed significantly and that Irish youth work is still quite conservative in nature. However, participants spoke about observable shifts. For example, one person felt that the critical element had lessened due to lack of interest or commitment among funders who seemed to favour approaches focused on evidence based outcomes. Other participants pointed to work with a strong critical dimension which had developed in their own agencies, such as global youth work, and citizen programmes. The increase in support for Gay and Lesbian youth projects and the publication of the Guidelines for Addressing Homophobic Bullying were also cited as developments in critical youth work. This concurs with Kiely's observation that while youth work has much potential to be radical and transformative in its practice, experience in Ireland suggests this has been realized in a very limited way (Kiely 2009).

Indeed, since 1984 youth work policy and discourse has lost this critical edge and reverted back to defining youth work without reference to its social or political education function. McMahon refers to the Costello report as but a 'brief hiatus ... when a more dynamic socio-political perspective of young people took hold' (2009, p. 212). Thus developments in youth work policy over the past decade are reflected in the predominantly conservative nature of contemporary youth work practice in Ireland today.

Challenges for the future

When asked 'what are the most significant challenges youth work in Ireland faces over the next five years?' the majority response was 'survival!'. The serious erosion of funding, consequent struggle to maintain morale among workers, and increasingly acute needs of greater amounts of young people are sources of grave concern to the voluntary youth work sector in Ireland. This research unfolds a picture of a youth service at its limits, deeply committed to the needs of young people, but potentially facing the prospect of funding contracting to a level where the task of meeting those needs becomes impossible.

In light of the move towards outcomes led and evidence based work, another challenge identified by participants is the need for youth work to demonstrate the efficacy of the youth work approach, being clear about the difference the work being done makes. Rather than this being a funding-led agenda, youth work needs to be confident about its distinct contribution to young people's lives and their communities. It is important to be able to stand over the work carried out, with a view to improving practice. Related to this is the need for a stronger research base which would facilitate the development of evidence based practice. Participants identified the need to not only evaluate internally the work carried out, but engage in opportunities for research to be carried out externally also. In conjunction with this, Irish youth work needs to draw from internationally based research in order to optimise learning gained from other places. Participants also spoke about the constraint of being required to maintain quality, demonstrate their effectiveness but with diminished resources.

Looking ahead, participants referred to the challenge of developing universal youth work provision as well as developing targeted services. A commitment to the general youth population was expressed and a desire to maintain an availability of youth work services at a time in Ireland that is very challenging, particularly for young people. Concern was also expressed about the needs of older young people as most youth work tends to be carried out with the under fifteens.

Finally, uncertainty looms on the horizon of Irish Youth Work's future in light of the intention of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to produce a children's and young people's policy framework which would place youth work in the broader context of other children and young people's services (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). This plan has been initiated by the Department outside the structure of NYWAC which is a cause for some concern. This is an important development and will ultimately determine the future position of youth work. Will youth work maintain its established identity and statutory footing or could this development result in it being subsumed within a broader medley of services and

potentially the loss of its legislative base? The latter would be a highly retrograde development for Irish young people and seriously erode the significant developments achieved by the sector over the past decade.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this research, which was carried out with key people in four main youth organisations in Ireland, depict the emergence of a stronger, confident, and more united youth work sector which is bolstered by its statutory status. The representative body for youth work in Ireland identified the early 2000s as ‘heralding a climate of optimism, confidence and self belief among youth organisations’ (NYCI 2003, cited in McMahon 2009, p. 111). However, this is juxtaposed with a sense of crisis resulting from stringent cutbacks and sparse resources, a crisis which is compounded by the additional and increasing needs of young people and their communities. My sense from carrying out this research is that the youth work sector is braced for the challenges which lie ahead, both in terms of the difficult economic climate, and the changing landscape of being required to demonstrate efficacy. The degree to which the next decade is experienced as positive and productive by youth work agencies, young people, and their communities will be, in my view, largely influenced by the degree to which this journey is undertaken in a context of partnership and collaboration on the part of policy makers, funders, the voluntary youth work sector, and government. Go n’éirí an bóthar libh.

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