Reclaiming youth work:

ARK Policy Brief

Reclaiming youth work: A return to the founding principles of youth work during the COVID-19 pandemic

Dr. Mark Hammond and Clare Harvey

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic created significant challenges for young people and those who work with them. Throughout this period, we have been reminded of the core principles and values of youth work which are pivotal to engaging and connecting with young people. Youth workers have demonstrated that they are much bigger partners in the lives of young people than perhaps has previously been understood and appreciated.

In November 2020 ARK staff facilitated an online Roundtable event which brought together over 30 leaders from the youth work sector, academics, policy makers, professionals from the justice system and government departmental officials (North and South). The aim of the event was to explore the impact of the pandemic from a youth service perspective and to share insights into the evolving needs of young people and youth work responses. Ultimately the event sought to identify recommendations for North-South youth sector collaboration and for future policy priorities.

The event was organised in conjunction with the Education Authority Youth Service in Northern Ireland, the National Youth Council of Ireland and YouthPact. Facilitated by ARK staff, the discussion was conducted under the anonymity of the Chatham House Rule in order to encourage open debate. Prior to the event a briefing paper prepared by Dr. Mark

Hammond, based on his PhD research was circulated to invitees. It provided an excellent basis for the discussion and is summarised below.

Hammond's (2018) work *'The Point of Encounter: An investigation into the purpose, processes and theory underpinning youth work practice'*[1] identifies five defining characteristics of youth work and presents a new practice model centred around four key youth work processes. The five characteristics are outlined below as foundational theories to understand youth work; elements of these have become more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Five Characteristics

1. Young People

Davies (2005, p.7) suggests that a defining characteristic of youth work is that young people should be *"perceived and received as young people"*. This not only recognises young people as individuals, but also challenges the negative labels that are associated with them. It places value and respect on the young person, esteeming them and advocating for their place in society.

2. Voluntary Participation

Davies (2005) proposes that *voluntary participation* is a defining feature of youth work. The voluntary

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1. Full text of PhD including references for this paper is available at https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/an-investigation-in-to-the-purpose-processes-and-theory-underpinni

principle emphasises the choice exercised by young people - they are freely able to engage or disengage with the youth work process. This distinguishing characteristic enables a more equal relationship where dialogue rather than imposition is the focus and consequently leads to the young person exercising personal judgement and self-efficacy.

3. Association

Jeffs and Smith (2010) see association, relationship and community as the distinguishing features of youth work. Doyle and Smith (1999) further recognise the *"educative power of playing one's part in a group or association"* (cited in Jeffs and Smith 2010, p.3). The campaign group, In Defence of Youth Work (2011, p.7), articulated association as a cornerstone for youth work practice and emphasises the importance of fostering *"supportive relationships"* as central to this.

4. Democracy

Democracy in youth work terms, presents a paradigm shift from the other power relationships that exist between young people and adults. For democracy to flourish, this relationship should be marked by *"mutual respect, a concern for other's needs, and a belief in community"* (Jeffs and Smith 2005, p. 56). *In Defence of Youth Work* (2011, p.7) calls for an insistence upon a *"democratic practice"* where every effort should be made for young people to *"play the fullest part in making decisions about anything affecting them"*.

5. Education and Welfare

Jeffs and Smith (2010) argue the purposeful goals of education and welfare have been defining elements since the foundation of youth work. More recently welfare functions have evolved into more contemporary interventions such as counselling, careers advice and support groups.

Most definitions of youth work emphasise its educational and developmental focus over its welfare function. Mahony (2001) goes further, suggesting that youth work's singular aim is education. He contends that youth work is informal education whereby the environment is central to the learning process. Unlike structure and content-driven formal education, the informality of youth work and the processes involved are the tools that support the learning (Ord, 2016).

Four Emerging Processes

Four key processes emerge from Hammond's analysis: a) relationship building, b) conversation, c) participation and d) learning through experience. He found that youth workers engage in these four processes to produce outcomes for young people.

A) Relationship Building

The importance of building relationships with young people was not seen as a purpose but a basis for the work with the young person. It facilitated the building of skills and trust while at the same time supporting young people to learn. For some, relationship building generated the *"space for change",* in order to bring about transformation. The research suggests that youth workers regard the relationship with the young people as a *'journey'* and favoured the idea of *'accompanying'* young people on their terms rather than working to presupposed agendas or predetermined outcomes.

B) Conversation and Dialogue

The process of conversation and dialogue is inextricably linked with that of relationship building. Whilst conversation leads to relationships with young people, building a relationship is equally a way

of enabling the conversation to move deeper. The intertwined connection between these two processes demonstrates interdependence within this learning experience. This connection between dialogue and building strong relationships enables transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003). The focus for youth work practitioners is to enable young people to think more deeply about themselves and to change or act upon their new thinking.

C) Participation

Of the four processes explored in this study, participation is perhaps the most easily recognised, yet, evidence suggests, the least understood. Youth workers have a wide range of perspectives on participation, with the continuum of expression ranging from 'just taking part', to deeper insights on power relationships and control. Youth workers' vocabulary includes ideas about young people having their say in the issues that affect them; *'having their voices heard'*; *'control'*; *'ownership'* and *'power'*. Whilst the literature stresses the political dimension of participation (Arnstein, 1969; Crick, 2004) and its educational process for increasing the learning experience (Dewey, 2007), the respondents rarely referred to these themes. Instead, few recognised the political dimension in their practice and showed a basic understanding of participation processes in practice.

D) Learning through Experience

Dewey (1997) posits that at the heart of learning is the experience of the learner and that this experience is not in isolation of a context nor from the relationships with others. While not all respondents demonstrated a full understanding of the role of experience in their youth work, they recognised a connection between the experience and learning. With a relationship between the youth worker and the young person, the worker can enter a participative dialogue and assist the young person to make sense of their experience.

An emerging model

The model emerging from Hammond's research is one which places conversation as the central cog driving all the youth work processes (Fig 1).

Contrary to other learning processes, conversation and dialogue emphasise a two-way co-learning relationship and the strive for equality in the educative process. In such a model, young people can articulate their needs and find the freedom to

Fig 1. Conversation as the cog which drives the other three processes.

learn for themselves (Rogers and Freiberg, 1994). It is through this dialogical experience that learners come together to encounter each other in an authentic way.

Consideration of the purpose and processes relating

to the role of youth work gave rise to several questions which participants were asked to think about in advance of the roundtable:

1. (a) How have we seen the processes, values and principles of youth work in practice during the pandemic?

   (b) How might these processes be embedded in future policy responses for full populations of young people or more focused actions for those with more acute needs?

2. (a) What are the opportunities for embedding youth work processes, values and principles in government/public policy and decision-making?

   (b) What are the tensions of this approach within public policy and how might these be mitigated or managed?

3. (a) How can we manage the tensions of funders and policymakers (of having pre-determined or quantitative outcomes) with a practice that is process-driven?

   (b) How can the process be captured in reporting or monitoring mechanisms that support the work?

4. (a) What areas or themes related to young people would warrant greater North-South sharing and learning?

   (b) What policies or structures could support or be developed towards greater North-South Alignment and collaboration?

Roundtable Discussion

Perspectives from young people - North and South

The event began with three brief presentations to inform the roundtable discussion. Dr. Katrina Lloyd,

Queens University Belfast, reported on a survey of 587 children and young people aged 8-17 years from across the UK and ROI (the survey was also part of a global study involving 26,000+ respondents from over 100 countries). The research sought to explore children and young people's perceptions of how their rights had been upheld throughout the pandemic. Topics included education, access to information, access to health, protection, safety and well-being. When asked to select words which best described their feelings during lockdown, the top three were Bored (54%) Lonely (39%) and Optimistic (37%). The vast majority of young respondents felt that both their access to a good education and to support from teachers had been better prior to the pandemic, whilst just over half considered that their chance of achieving the grades they deserved had been better beforehand. Fewer than 10% felt the government was listening to young people when making decisions about how to deal with Covid-19[2].

A perspective from Northern Ireland

The second presentation from Arlene Kee, Education Authority and John Lynch, North West Youth Services, used the experience in Derry/Londonderry to illustrate how youth services had quickly mobilised to adapt to lockdown restrictions and to address the evolving needs of young people.

Lockdown had created a range of challenges at management level, including the need to rapidly re-assess the role of provision and practitioners, the need to counter differing interpretations of government guidelines, and to navigate community and political tensions. Emerging issues and needs of young people included hunger, increases in child

2. The survey report is available to download from https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/CentreforChildrensRights/NewsEvents/WhatdoesthepandemicmeanforchildrenCovidUnder19GlobalSurveyresults.html

sexual exploitation and domestic violence, feelings of isolation, unemployment, increased exposure to paramilitaries, health and hygiene issues and worsening mental health. Bespoke programmes of intervention were required and delivered to meet these needs.

The fact that the youth work sector met the challenges of the pandemic with agility, innovation and commitment has been recognised by government departments beyond education. Key strengths of the service in this context were: the skilled and determined workforce; the support of volunteers; being based within the community; the uniqueness of youth worker/young person relationships; creative management; the strengths-based approach which underpins the youth service vision; and the value of successful partnerships to support youth work delivery.

This example also highlighted the importance of generic/universal provision. The closure of youth centres meant that young people were increasingly exposed to negative influences in the community once the positive supports and safe spaces of the youth service were removed. Some young people not normally deemed 'at risk' began to fall into this category during the lockdown. This experience underscored the value of generic and club-based youth work in terms of its preventive and early intervention roles, and the risks associated with cessation of centre-based provision.

A perspective from the Republic of Ireland

In the final presentation Marie-Claire McAleer, National Youth Council of Ireland, reported on an independent rapid review of how the youth work sector had responded to Covid-19 in the Republic of Ireland. 256 youth work organisations responded to

the survey, with the review launched in September 2020.

14% of respondents had been unable to provide a service during the lockdown, and 59% experienced a significant reduction in the number of young people they had worked with during the period. Reasons for disruption to services included the closure of buildings (in accordance with government directives) and the lack of digital infrastructure to transfer to online provision.

Of those respondents who did attempt to provide a digital service, 68% said young people had shown reluctance to engage digitally, and 67% found it difficult to engage with disadvantaged young people. A quarter of respondents said that their staff lacked proficiency in IT skills. The study also highlighted the issue of digital poverty among young people, as well as poor IT coverage in rural areas.

The study showed that the pandemic exposed existing inequalities, and that some groups of marginalised young people became further isolated during this period, including Looked After Children, LGBTQI young people, young people with disabilities, and those in youth diversionary schemes.

Despite the challenges, numerous examples of good practice demonstrated the creativity and adaptability of youth work staff and volunteers. However, the research findings also indicated that the enormous contributions made by youth workers during this period had come at a personal cost in terms of stress exhaustion, unhealthy work-life balances and staff safeguarding issues. Conclusions from the study included a strong affirmation of the importance of relationships within youth work, the need to pay attention to key transition points, to engage in reflective practice, the need

to improve IT infrastructure and skills within the service, investment in the workforce and to improve accessibility for young people with disabilities[3].

Discussion

The three presentations and the briefing paper provided the basis for a thoughtful and stimulating discussion in which participants reflected on the huge impact of lockdown on young people and youth services and explored how the youth sector and departmental officials could prepare to address the multiple long-term repercussions emerging from this crisis.

Online youth work

One of the most striking developments during this period was a rapid shift to online youth provision, as well as working from home. Discussion revealed that there was not a consistent experience within the service. Some participants reiterated that digital poverty among young people, poor internet coverage in rural areas, and a lack of skills and equipment had significantly hampered efforts to move to online provision. Conversely, others described how IT had been very successfully harnessed and had extended their reach to young people. The uptake of online Youth Information services in ROI was also cited as a credible and very effective form of support to young people. While the shift to online youth work had been a defining feature of the period, there was a strong feeling that this could never be a substitute for face to face youth work. Indeed, some participants observed that digital poverty meant that some of the most disadvantaged young people were excluded from online youth services. In this context

many centre-based and other' youth workers were redeployed to deliver intensive street work and one to one based work. This direct point of contact had proven invaluable to vulnerable young people. Whilst youth services were commended for their agility and versatility in providing alternative provision - be it online or street-based - the point was made that such approaches were unsustainable without investing in staff support, training and safeguarding. Some participants noted the lack of digital skills of many youth workers; highlighting this as an area of neglect in workforce development.

Participation and politicisation

The observation was made that this period had been a politicising experience for many youth workers and young people. In a time when personal agency and power were constricted due to lockdown conditions, many young people had increased concern and involvement in matters of global injustice such as climate justice campaigns, social media lobbying and Black Lives Matter. This could also be applied to the funding of youth work. Undoubtedly, the pandemic had highlighted the value of the work, but it has also shown the need for investment in youth work and in youth workers.

There was some discussion of young people's engagement with policy making. The youth service had continued to provide opportunities for young people to express their views to decision makers, and an example given was young people being asked to advise education officials on how to re-start schools. It was suggested that work currently underway in NI to increase the formal participation of young people across governmental decision-making, could draw from experiences in the ROI. In addition to structural

and dialogue-based ways to engage young people it was agreed that creative methodologies are equally powerful vehicles for youth voice and expression. A policymaker requested that the youth service documents and communicates these creative approaches in order to inform those in policy circles. An interesting point was made with regard to how the views of young people on policy (policing was the example used), gets communicated to frontline workers. This links to a more general point about how the value of their participation needs to be clearly communicated to young people. Whilst welcoming the improvements in participatory opportunities for young people, one participant voiced concern that the views of those who work with young people were increasingly overlooked by funders and policy makers.

Welfare versus education

As evidenced in the presentations, the pandemic had created and magnified need among many disadvantaged young people. Basic issues such as hunger, safety issues (e.g. the increase in child sexual exploitation and domestic violence, the increase in negative influences such as paramilitaries), and the closure of safe spaces for young people meant that mainstream youth provision was put on hold in some areas to make way for acute and crisis-driven supports. A number of participants from governmental and justice sectors recognised the significant role played by youth workers and praised the agility and versatility of the sector to adapt to crisis scenarios. The sector's ability to mobilise around an issue across traditional policy and funding silos was praised by a policymaker who advised that the service is well positioned to 'shout a bit louder' ahead of government funding rounds.

Several participants strongly cautioned against a potential drift from the educational and developmental model to a welfare and reactive model of youth work. Likewise, fears were expressed about the impact of the temporary closure of generic/universal youth centres and volunteer-led provision, and the urgent need to support and re-boot universal provision once lockdown is eased. Real concern was expressed about data from the Republic of Ireland survey which indicated a significant reduction in the numbers of young people engaging with universal provision throughout the pandemic, as well as the potential loss of volunteers.

Solidarity, association and partnerships

Participants were interested to hear the finding from the QUB presentation that many young people had selected 'optimistic' to describe one of their main emotions during the pandemic. A study by the Duke of Edinburgh Trust (https://www.dofe.org/thelatest/youth-mental-health-crisis) had also found signs of positivity, with young people saying they had developed a new skill, felt more empathy to others around the globe and more attached to their own community. One participant observed that the quality of human connections had been magnified throughout the period, and that many of the fundamentals of youth work re-emerged, such as working in small groups and generating a sense of belonging and social solidarity. The experience of being forced apart had served as a reminder of the value of association which underpins youth work.

Another positive aspect emerging from the lockdown had been an upturn in the quality of relationships and collaboration between the voluntary and statutory sectors, and this was seen across the island of Ireland.

One participant asserted that while the sectors have always aspired to work in partnership, Covid-19 had suddenly sharpened the focus and the imperative to work together with a common theme and purpose. The value and benefits of co-design and partnership work had been very evident, and there was a strong feeling that the service should build upon this.

Summary

The Chief Executive of the National Youth Council of Ireland, Mary Cunningham, recapped on the main discussion areas and highlighted several themes for further collaboration. She observed the timeliness of this discussion and the imperative to plan now to meet future challenges. Highlighting that youth work has proven itself a lifeline for many young people throughout this period, she noted that there has been a sense of common purpose within youth services across the island of Ireland. Youth work has been recognised as creative, agile, versatile and committed, and Mary proposed that youth workers and volunteers should be strongly commended for their dedication and contribution. Noting that the experience of the pandemic has brought recognition from those outside the youth sector of the reach of the youth work approach in engaging disaffected and distant young people, Mary proposed there are greater opportunities to build on this role in supporting wider public agendas. There is scope for further collaborative working.

Policy Recommendations

1. Investment in North South collaboration

There is significant potential to build on the already positive North South co-operation between youth services, including implementation bodies (NSETS), practice development and training for qualified and volunteer youth workers. In terms of the latter, the pandemic has revealed urgent and emerging issues for training in both jurisdictions – for example, practitioner skills gap in ICT; youth mental health; the whole area of worker self-care; and reflective practice.

2. Investment in a digital strategy for young people

A recurring theme of the Roundtable discussion was the importance of digital connectivity and online learning. The success of online provision differed widely across youth work provision, and was highly dependent on digital infrastructure, young people's local access, and the skills and equipment of youth workers. This has been an area of tremendous creativity and a strategy and investment is urgently needed to support further innovations, build capacity for online provision and to ensure that bespoke regulatory protections are in place.

3. Immediate planning and investment to pre-empt the negative repercussions for young people

The pandemic has exposed a range of inequalities and has worsened life for those who were already disadvantaged. Young people's transitions have also been particularly challenging, including the disruption to exams and uncertainty about life after school. Covid-19 has widened the educational attainment gap and there are concerns about the numbers of young people who have not re-engaged with education after lockdown. Concerns were also expressed about the likelihood of increased youth unemployment as a result of economic decline. There is therefore an important role for youth work to help young people navigate these difficult transitions. For

policy, youth work offers a method to engage these young people in learning and development activities that can help bridge the transition when school is not involved.

4. A strategic and operational plan to re-build and re-populate youth service provision

Roundtable participants emphasised the benefits of generic/universal youth work, and the imperative that youth provision remains available to all young people. Serious concerns were expressed about the potential reductions in volunteers and young people as a result of the temporary closure of some provision, and planning and resources are needed now to re-build provision.

Authors

Dr Mark Hammond: *Lecturer in the School of Applied Social and Policy Science, Ulster University.*

Clare Harvey: *is a freelance researcher in youth work and young people in Northern Ireland*

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