

# THINKING SERIOUSLY ABOUT YOUTH WORK

And how to prepare  
people to do it



Youth Knowledge #20

## Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



EUROPEAN UNION

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people to do it

## **Editors**

Hanjo Schild  
Nuala Connolly  
Francine Labadie  
Jan Vanhee  
Howard Williamson

Youth Knowledge # 20

Council of Europe and European Commission

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Cedex or publishing@coe.int).

Cover design: Documents and  
Publications Production Department  
(SPDP), Council of Europe  
Photos: Shutterstock.com  
Layout: Valblor, Illkirch

Council of Europe Publishing  
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex  
<http://book.coe.int>

ISBN 978-92-871-8416-0  
© Council of Europe and European  
Commission, October 2017  
Printed at the Council of Europe

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## Introduction

# Youth work – An incomprehensible subject? Introductory reflections on youth work

*Hanjo Schild, Jan Vanhee and Howard Williamson*

### Introduction

It is never too late to think seriously about youth work in Europe.<sup>1</sup> The two European Youth Work Conventions in Belgium (Ghent 2010, Brussels 2015)<sup>2</sup> introduced specific dynamics in this sector: while the first event focused on the diversity of youth work, the second explored existing common ground. Both Declarations (see Appendix 1 and 2) mirror the reflections from these two conventions. In the present publication, which addresses the varied topics discussed, we want to deepen discussions on youth work in Europe and its relationship to other policy fields.

In Europe today, particularly at local and regional level, there are thousands of youth work initiatives that are meaningful to children and young people, and which are as relevant to their lives as formal education. Hundreds of thousands of youth workers are estimated to be committed to this work and thousands of youth work initiatives and projects exist. But we still do not know exactly how many youth workers do this work, and across how many youth work initiatives. We know exactly the number of schools of various types and how many teachers educate young people. We also know a lot about the professional profiles of teachers and how they are educated and trained. But in the youth field we still lack a common definition and understanding of what youth work is and what a youth worker is. A Spanish youth researcher once answered the question “What about youth work in Spain?” thus: “there is no youth work in our country since young people aren’t allowed to work under the age of 18”. But there is of course work with and for young people in Spain – out-of-school, in their leisure time, on a voluntary basis, and drawing on participatory principles – provided by volunteers or paid professionals.

1. The debates on youth work in Europe are manifold; a critical reflection on (the future of) youth work and youth policy in Europe took place in the Think Tank: Friends of European Youth Policy; these reflections are well-documented and summarised in Schild et al. (2014), see in particular the contribution of H. Williamson, “A matter of concern? The future of the youth agenda in Europe” (137 ff.), available at <https://go.coe.int/cLEr4>, accessed 2 March 2017.
2. Available at <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/eywc-website>, accessed 2 March 2017.

In many countries, however, we do not easily find “youth workers”. We find people who are termed socio-cultural instructors, intercultural mediators, educators or *animateurs*, social workers, community workers, youth leaders, educators and trainers, cultural workers, volunteers and activists in youth organisations or youth movements. All of them meet at the junction of “youth work” in one way or another, but does this allow “youth work” to build an identity of its own? A teacher is a teacher, everywhere, and everybody knows what a teacher does (in a good or a bad way). But a youth worker?

Looking at youth work in the 50 countries that have signed the Council of Europe’s European Cultural Convention, or even just in the (28)<sup>3</sup> member states of the European Union (EU), one has to admit there’s more than one story. We have to be aware of the different realities and underlying theories, concepts and strategies when we think seriously about youth work in Europe. We find well-established youth work structures, mixed systems of youth work carried out by volunteers and paid youth workers, and youth work carried out exclusively by volunteers, often under poor conditions. There is a diversity of well-developed vocational education and training and higher education schemes for youth workers, along with accredited systems of recognising youth work by national authorities and high-quality curricula for youth workers.

We also know that in a few countries youth work hardly exists, and that sometimes where it does it is monitored and controlled, and sometimes suppressed, by governments. Youth work, as it is largely understood at European level, is based on values and is about the promotion of human rights, diversity, social cohesion, peace and democracy; in this respect it can easily become a thorn in the side of authoritarian systems.

Besides the fact that youth work is value-based, what youth workers have and indeed should have in common is the fact that they all work directly with and for young people in non-formal educational settings and with a defined intention. But is that all? This commonality, though helpful in outlining a shared area of activity, does not necessarily lead to a clearer picture of the diversity of youth work. It is crucial to take youth work seriously, therefore further exploration of youth work is necessary. This knowledge book tries to find some answers to the question of what youth work is while not neglecting the variety and differences in methods, disciplines, approaches and even the philosophies and ideologies underpinning it.

By analysing the theories and concepts of youth work and providing insights from perspectives that vary by geographical location and the professional background of authors, we hope to further contribute to what we started doing in the 1st European Youth Work Convention, and to a greater degree in the 2nd European Youth Work Convention: finding common ground. Thus we want to assure the quality of youth work in general and the quality of (staff) training in particular, including in the formal education systems (often in higher education) responsible for the education and training of youth workers. The competences of youth workers are crucial in this regard.

Youth work needs continuous innovation and further development; but what we have also learned in the past years from our series of seminars on the history of

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3. When this book went to press, the United Kingdom was still a member of the European Union.

youth work<sup>4</sup> is that we need to look back from time to time and learn from history. We do not need to reinvent the youth work wheel, but we need a critical look into what works and what does not and what the problems, challenges, obstacles and solutions are and have been. As noted at one of these seminars, held in Malta in September 2016:

workshops do not aim at purifying an essential youth work concept irrespective of historical and cultural context ... Tracing back the roots of youth work and identifying different evolutions within and between countries must help us to feed a fundamental discussion on youth work's multifaceted and multi-layered identity and to cope in a constructive way with recurrent youth work dilemmas. (European Commission/Council of Europe 2016)

Across Europe, youth work displays huge differences with regard to opportunities, support, structures, recognition, and the realities in which it takes place. It may be part of the public sector, run by the state, or the social economy (or the third sector), including a wide range of community, voluntary and not-for-profit activities, and in most cases it is part of both. However, how youth work performs reflects the social, cultural, political and economic context, and the value systems, in which it takes place.

With regard to these contexts, as far back as 2001 an IARD study on the state of young people and youth policy in Europe suggested as a hypothesis the following typology with regard to youth work:

- ▶ universalistic/paternalistic: youth work as civic infrastructure addressing young people as citizens (e.g. through universal access to youth work, participatory structures);
- ▶ liberal/community based: youth work in a universalistic way, providing infrastructure such as youth clubs (i.e. with a strong community orientation);
- ▶ conservative/corporatist: youth work in a corporatist structure, providing socialisation towards the standard biography, delegated to voluntary actors;
- ▶ Mediterranean/sub-institutionalised: youth work facing a deficit or vacuum of regulation, often only the responsibility of local authorities, leading to regional differences.

From today's perspective a fifth type might be added covering the post-socialist countries in central and eastern Europe, while the transitional changes in the past 25 years led to a substantial adaptation of not only "Western-style" economic regimes but also welfare regimes.

Why do we highlight this dimension? As Axel Pohl concluded in his key input at the workshop in Malta, connecting social and youth work issues to societal contexts helps to understand and interpret similarities and differences (Pohl 2016).

As we have emphasised, it is not our objective to distil these perspectives into a single, essential youth work concept, but we need to overcome the differences in terms of opportunities by strengthening co-operation in the youth field with the aim of making sure that we "provide opportunities for all young people to shape

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4. Available at <http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/history-of-youth-work>, accessed 2 March 2017.

their own futures”<sup>5</sup> Many questions remain as to how this could be best done. The economic crisis has turned into a crisis of democracy and in the follow-up a loss of democratic principles and increased authoritarianism prevail. We need to insist that young people are a resource for democracy and human rights and not victims or followers of authoritarian solutions, nor should they be reduced to taxpayers and sustainers of a demographic balance. This leads to the question of how one counteracts the tendency to instrumentalise youth work for predominantly other interests, be it economics or politics.

One way out is a strategy to communicate the strengths, impact and capacities of youth work to those outside the youth sector, namely those who are not familiar with youth work. The other solution is to continue sharing practices and insights with others in the youth field in a more systematic way. Yet another possibility is to sensitise young people to democratic and social values and to empower them to become critical citizens.

Reflections on youth work and its role and contribution for young people and for society at large must go on as the effort to provide high-quality youth work that meets the needs and expectations of young people has to be continued. This comes at a time – as many experts underline – in which young people are facing increasing challenges, in terms of transitions to adulthood, precariousness, uncertainty and insecurity. At a moment where youth work is needed more than ever to support and empower young people to realise their potential, many member states are limiting or diminishing their provision of youth work support, faced with increasing demand and competition for the limited resources and the proclaimed need to implement austerity measures.

In this respect the expected recommendation on youth work of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers (see Appendix 3) leads us in the right direction: it proposes to establish and proactively develop youth work within local, regional and national youth policy, and hereby emphasises the need to pay special attention to legislation, strategies, frameworks and co-ordination and to clarify and define a set of core competences for practising youth work, leading to a coherent competency-based framework as a basis for the education and training of youth workers.

However, the need for a medium-term strategy for the further development of European youth work demands urgent action and a strong vision, in order to improve co-ordination and widen the knowledge base; to support exchange of practice and to provide peer learning opportunities; to strengthen links between practice, policy and research; to encourage knowledge production in terms of studies and research; to map existing education and training for youth workers; to support review and evaluation; and last but not least, to provide assistance to those delivering youth work and “making” youth policy, in particular at national level. Needless to say, all actions taken should – for obvious reasons – include young people and their voices.

Having said that, the youth sector and its stakeholders and various actors in Europe are invited to think about the concrete steps that need to be taken next, such as:

- ▶ the creation of a European agency for the development of youth work;

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5. Peter Lauritzen (2006) has identified this as the main objective of youth work.

- ▶ the establishment of a European (summer) academy for youth policy and youth work;
- ▶ the design of an advanced European training strategy for education and training of youth workers and youth leaders, including the production of a joint university degree MA on European youth studies;
- ▶ the celebration of an annual European day of youth work;
- ▶ the drafting of a European charter on youth work.

Further reflections on these and other ideas are made in the final section of this book (“Conclusions and outlook”).

*Thinking seriously about youth work – And how to prepare people to do it* invites all actors in the “magic triangle” of policy, practice and research in the youth field, and those beyond the youth sector interested in youth issues, to think further about youth work and become – or remain – a member of the network of friends of youth work.

This includes of course also the institutional side, which plays a crucial role in supporting young people (and youth work) in Europe, be it (at European level) in the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and the Parliamentary Assembly, or be it in the EU, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee; all are invited to have a deeper look into the issue of youth work in Europe and to see how they can take initiatives to support it.

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Section I

# Theories and concepts in selected European regions and countries

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## Chapter 1

# Winning space, building bridges – What youth work is all about

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Howard Williamson

### Introduction

**W**hen I was a practising youth worker (a volunteer for 15 years, a paid part-time practitioner for a further 20 years), I often felt that I was, and was perceived to be, something of a “Jack of all trades and master of none”. I certainly had to turn my hand to many different activities and challenges. Did I make it up as I went along? Was there no guiding philosophy, however ill-thought through, that supported my work? Was that work simply ad hoc eclecticism or part of some implicit plan, if only to react supportively to the wishes of young people?

Certainly in my very early days as a “youth worker” (though I did not call or see myself as that), though I had no basis for arguing it through, I wanted to give voice to my less articulate friends. I represented their interests and aspirations in my local community. It was not an official position or role, just something both thrust upon me by others and perhaps also taken on by myself. But it did propel me into a leadership and advocacy role, albeit a rather modest one. Later, when I was more recognisably a youth worker rather than a peer representative, though still “just” a volunteer, I found myself “helping out”, assisting on trips and camps, organising activities and, occasionally, providing support and advice to individual young people who appeared to be somewhat “on the edge” or who came to me for what was clearly more than a casual conversation. Later still, as a nationally qualified “professional” youth worker (though the question of professionalism v. professionalisation remains a thorny one), I found myself managing a diverse programme of evening and weekend (and sometimes daytime) activities for a diverse range of young people, differentiated by status (at school, in work, unemployed), gender, ethnicity and age. My youth work colleagues did what I had done before – chatted, mixed and played with young people – while my role had more gravitas: providing support for those with challenges and difficulties in their family, school or working lives, and liaising for many different reasons with, *inter alia* local business, police, health services and schools around what would now be referred to as the local “youth policy” agenda. I also led a huge number of residential – away from home – experiences, represented young people in courts and tribunals, developed community and photography projects, promoted intergenerational understanding through shared activities, and supported modest forms of youth entrepreneurship, from skateboarding fashion to music compilation tapes (now completely obsolete as an idea!).

So what defined me as a “youth worker”? Without recourse to the theory and the thinking that I now know, I would have said: the nature of my relationship with young people; my listening skills and responsiveness; my observation and proactiveness in terms of both activity and engagement with others (who were having adverse effects on the lives of “my” young people); my determination to win and give space to young people as a whole and to specific sub-groups of the young people I worked with (for example, those with minority tastes seeking to use communal music systems, girls and younger kids wanting to use the pool table); and my commitment to personal advocacy, advice and support. Furthermore, I understood from an early point that young people made use of youth work for many different reasons: simply to be with their mates, to broaden their experiences, as a sanctuary from the pressures of family and school life, and other things.

None of this is very far from the core “tensions” (though they are very positive and valuable tensions) that characterise youth work: its diversity, which permits important flexibilities in practice but which can appear to others as an absence of focus and clear purpose; its provision of space for young people to come together and be young; and simultaneously, its capacity to create opportunities, experiences and interactions that represent stepping stones, or bridges, as young people move along the path towards adulthood, citizenship and greater personal responsibility. I am sure that if you asked the thousands of young people I have worked with what their experience of youth work had done for them, their answer would be some combination of the above. And, though written in more precise and concise language, these are the elements of the 2nd European Youth Work Declaration – the common ground on which, from the evidence mustered so far in the series on the history of youth work in Europe (Verschelden et al. 2009; Coussée et al. 2010; Coussée, Williamson and Verschelden 2012; Taru, Coussée and Williamson 2014; Siurala et al. 2016), all forms of youth work are constructed.

What I did not understand, however, was the extent to which my particular forms of youth work practice deviated from or conformed to youth work practice elsewhere in the United Kingdom, let alone other parts of Europe. Our own personal, practical reference points are, of course, important, but for us to make better, stronger sense of youth work as a practice distinct from, say, social work or formal education, we have to connect them to debates and ideas about youth work at national and international levels. That is the intended contribution of Section I of this book: to “position” youth work as a distinctive practice and as a discrete component of wider policy directed towards and responsive to young people.

### **A reflection on this section**

The recollections of my own autobiographical youth work practice resonate strongly with the arguments and observations made in this section of the book. My practice, perhaps I should now falsely claim, was a concrete exercise in “grounded theory”! In fact, I discovered the theory long after I initiated the practice, and continue to do so, testing both old and new ideas against my past activity – the process of praxis. Indeed, at the heart of youth work practice lies the idea of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1983), constantly weighing options within the inherent tensions and

contradictions of youth work, testing them out and learning from them, before applying them, adapted and modified according to different circumstances and conditions, once again.

The tensions and contradictions alluded to throughout the contributions below are endemic, and arguably unavoidable and irresolvable.

## Some of the tensions at play and at work

### **Political**

- ▶ legislatively embedded in youth policy v. on the political periphery;
- ▶ structurally separated/isolated v. having expectations of connection (e.g. with schooling, social work, justice);
- ▶ continuity/stability v. change/transformation/reform;
- ▶ universal v. targeted;
- ▶ individualised v. collective;
- ▶ educative v. therapeutic;
- ▶ centralisation (top-down) v. pluralisation (bottom up).

### **Ideological/theoretical**

- ▶ professionalisation v. volunteering;
- ▶ personal development v. societal renewal;
- ▶ tradition (e.g. values, philosophy, practice) v. innovation;
- ▶ means to an end v. medium of expression;
- ▶ developmental v. compensatory;
- ▶ relational v. structural;
- ▶ distinction v. connection;
- ▶ an open road v. a pre-planned route.

### **Practical**

- ▶ narrow focus (concentrated fusillade) v. diversity/flexibility (scattergun approach);
- ▶ order and structure v. chaos and spontaneity;
- ▶ process v. outcomes;
- ▶ single issue v. multi-dimensional;
- ▶ proactive v. reactive;
- ▶ individual advice and support v. group work and peer learning;
- ▶ more formalised, curriculum driven v. less formalised, young person-centred;
- ▶ linked to wider youth policy agendas (e.g. labour market insertion, health promotion) v. separated from them;

- ▶ strengthening youth work in other sectoral practice v. other sectoral practice diluting youth work;
- ▶ innovative and contemporary v. traditional and “tried and tested”;
- ▶ raising the game v. selling out.

A key question is, does “youth work” stop on and something else start any of these continua?

Where youth work becomes more professionalised, through, for example, taking on new challenges in bridging the gaps between the circumstances of young people and their destinations in learning and working (as in the case of the Youth.inc developments in Malta), where does this leave more “traditional” youth work delivered substantially by volunteers? They may be no less “professional”, but the recognition and certainly the accreditation of their youth work may not be at the same level.

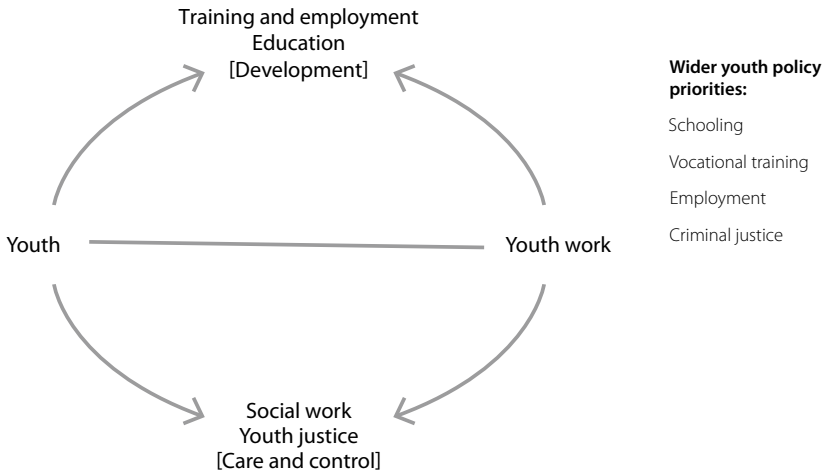
In the following pages, throughout Section I, attention will be given to what might be called the “youth work journey” in particular countries. The nature of that attention will be different, in part because of the decisions of the authors and in part because of the specificities of the country or region under discussion. Consideration is given to the politics around youth work and whether or not it is provided recognition through legislation, definitions and resource allocation. Other contributors address the role of youth work in both policy development and practice, both conceptually and empirically, and both in relation to what might be called its “internal” provision (the shape, breadth and depth of youth work practice, from, for example, open club-based work to issue-based projects) and its external relations with other domains of youth policy, such as formal education, health promotion or criminal justice. The evolution of that role, or roles, demands consideration of further matters around training, professionalisation, standards and quality assurance. And that, in turn, raises questions as to whether the processes enshrined in youth work are enough, or whether the outcomes and impacts on young people are of equal or greater significance. And if so, how can these be demonstrated? These issues are given greater weight in some contributions than others. And, of course, one hopes that a virtuous cycle is established. As the place and partnership of youth work in relation to both young people’s lives and societal concerns about young people is strengthened, so greater recognition flows – in theory. In reality, so these accounts inform us, the place of youth work within youth policy and in terms of wider political recognition ebbs and flows. Positive development and evolution can be cut short by a change in political regime or political priorities. Even from these 12 contributions, written at a particular historical moment, we can see where youth work is currently on a positive trajectory, where it is on a downward path, and where it has only just taken root in the topsoil of social and political understanding.

Even those of us who have spent a lifetime in and around “youth work” continue to struggle to make ourselves understood when explaining what youth work is and how it needs to be distinguished from its nearest relatives: education more generally, and social work. Though often cast as a quintessentially non-formal educational practice, youth work’s history can also be strongly attached to traditions of social work.<sup>6</sup>

6. The social work legacy for youth work is the subject of the forthcoming Volume 6 of the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership’s *The history of youth work in Europe* series.

Contemporaneously, there are questions about how, if at all, youth work should be connected to other youth policy initiatives in, for example, schooling, vocational training, employment or criminal justice (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The origins and destinations of youth work**



It is no surprise, therefore, that the accounts that follow discuss both the emancipatory/developmental/learning dimensions of youth work and those that are more concerned with regulation, correction and control. The advice, counselling and guidance aspects of youth work fall right across this continuum. Nor is it a surprise that while youth work is sometimes firmly dissociated from both formal education and social work, it is also often expected to be connected to wider youth policy concerns such as school inclusion or youth crime prevention. No wonder there are tensions and pressures as the “opportunity-focused” mantras around youth work (and “youth policy”) are sucked into the “problem-oriented” priorities of so much public policy directed towards young people, even if this collaboration, paradoxically, can help to produce, cement and sustain the resource base for youth work to develop (Siurala et al. 2016). It should already be evident that the dilemmas outlined above – the pushes and pulls, the forces from above and from below, the influences that always threaten to corrode the “purity” of the youth work vision – are going to remain with youth work, and those involved in youth work are going to have to find ways of dealing with them – philosophically, theoretically, politically, and on the ground. Youth work is something of a mongrel, a hybrid, or as Filip Coussée and I once suggested (Coussée and Williamson 2011), a hydra that has to be looking in many different directions in order to reconcile many different demands, assumptions and expectations. We suggested at the time that an over-emphasis on measurement, outcomes, indicators and so forth, at the expense of time, space, relationships and processes, would lead to the “dehydration” of youth work. Filip had made the point that “you don’t grow grass by pulling it”, and I noted that youth workers were gardeners, not mechanics:

youth work was about cultivating the talents and interests of young people, not fixing the problems that they caused.

To return to the notion of youth work being a mongrel, cross-bred from developmental and progressive education and preventative and restorative social work (and, arguably, diversionary and reintegrative youth justice), it is perhaps worth noting that at the 1st European Youth Work Convention, I considered the assertion made by one participant that youth work was like a stray dog, looking for a home (and somebody to feed it!). I pointed out that there were many types of dogs: defenders and protectors, retrievers, companions, guides and more. Youth workers performed all of these functions, not just one, even if the preferred role for youth work in some countries was now firmly linked to the agenda of re-engaging young people aged 16 to 24 not in education, employment or training (NEETs), and a “retriever” role (go and find them and return them to formal education, training or employment!). Youth work has to preserve its capacity to do much more than that, if it is to respond positively and purposefully to the different needs, wants and issues facing a diversity of young people. But in defending that position, it struggles once again to position and promote itself with clarity and conviction. Once more, youth work can appear vague, unfocused and ad hoc, giving the impression of offering little more than what one UK youth minister once called a “scattergun” approach to its practice rather than the “concentrated fusillade” that he required (indeed demanded – it led, in 1990, to the formulation of a “curriculum” for youth work, an idea that was, and remains, anathema to some youth work theorists who see the idea of curriculum, as a proactively structured pedagogy, as essentially contradictory to the idea of youth work, as constructed on mutuality: relational, negotiated and responsive to the expressed perspectives and position of the young people involved).

## **The contributions to Section I**

We see, in the contributions below, many manifestations and interpretations of the dilemmas outlined above. Redig and Coussée (Chapter 2) seek to celebrate the tensions and diversity of youth work while counselling against raising unrealistic expectations about what it can achieve or “produce”. There is huge value for young people and society, they maintain, in young people having their own free zone to be young together, and having the opportunity to escape “the paternalistic power of adults”. In Flanders (Belgium), where youth work has historically been conscientiously kept separate from schooling and social work (despite its roots in both), there are risks of it becoming more focused on “problem solving” and it being required to be useful, rather than “playful”. Redig and Coussée warn us of some of the more negative consequences for youth work of becoming more connected to other youth policy agendas and more professionalised.

The strength and longevity of youth work traditions in Flanders is then contrasted quite dramatically with the embryonic development of youth work in the post-Soviet countries of eastern Europe and the Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the Russian Federation. Youth work there struggles to shrug off past perspectives concerned with dealing with “problem” youth and to adopt and accommodate contemporary European ideas that youth work is about

learning and opportunity. Petrivska (Chapter 3) notes that youth work is usually only a small item within much broader youth policy, policy that is now focused significantly on the challenges of youth unemployment, having passed through phases embracing other “youth policy” priorities since the demise of the Soviet Union. Many more marginal groups of young people have little possibility of even engaging with youth work that exists. The concept remains in its infancy and the practice under-developed.

Pudar Draško (Chapter 12) takes a similar approach in her attempt to capture the differential development of youth work across the countries of South-East Europe. Like the Soviet Union, work with young people in the Balkan region had formerly been youth care – the organisation of young people in the interests of the state. Since around 1989, and following conflict in the region, rather different pillars for the advocacy of youth work have been constructed: peace building and human rights, non-formal education, networking and advocacy for youth policies, and project-based work undertaken by youth organisations. European frameworks for “youth work”, articulated both by the European Commission and by the Council of Europe, have been key drivers and vehicles for promoting “modern” ideas about youth work. To date, however, this has had a relatively modest impact, with few countries making explicit reference to youth work in their embryonic and evolving youth policy documents. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia and especially Serbia are exceptions to this situation. Serbia has taken a strong lead in promoting youth work. There may be some criticism of this (see Potočnik and Williamson 2015) but there has certainly been political commitment to, and professional development of recognisable forms of youth work practice, even if resources have been limited and implementation often patchy. Pudar emphasises the importance of being aware of the often significant gulf between rhetoric and reality, and the huge challenge around producing sustainability in youth work practice; too much remains project-based and state concerns are strongly focused on the current key issue of youth unemployment and “employability”.

Kiilakoski (Chapter 4) moves away from an historical perspective to one that threads through the political, economic and social landscape within which youth work in Finland takes place. Like Flanders, Finland has had a robust commitment to youth work for many years. This has been embedded and endorsed, according to Kiilakoski, through “socio-political” affirmation of youth work as a public service with commensurate professional standing, “cultural-discursive” attention to defining and understanding what youth work is for, and “material-economic” provision of the resources to serve the needs and interests of young people as individuals and in groups. Despite some changes in approaches to youth work around social inclusion and new forms of youth participation, this virtuous triangle of commitment to youth work continues to provide legitimacy for forms of practice focused on education, citizenship and development, thereby avoiding the risk of youth work becoming individualised, institutionalised and problem-oriented, which can easily become the direction of travel for youth work in a neo-liberal age.

Indeed, the situation in England (Chapter 14) demonstrates what a risk this can be. Without a theoretical and political framework to guide it, Grace and Taylor contend, it slips uncritically away from the “fragile, yet fertile world of process-led youth work

practice” and comes to be governed instead by the very antithesis of its dialogical tradition – by the “naive embrace” of outcome-driven imperatives, spurious theories of change and individualised concepts of youth development. Such revisions to youth work can be considered, by the outsider, to be providing “much-needed order to a practice [often] perceived to be unruly and rudderless”. But is it still “youth work”? Grace and Taylor maintain that, even in this neo-liberal age, youth work can – indeed, must – hold on and defend alternative ideological positions concerned with politics, radicalism and democratic education. Youth work remains a contested, ideological and theoretical space; they draw on Devlin’s view that youth workers have to be skilled in the “negotiation of ambivalence” and need a framework of thinking that enables them to contest the “smoke and mirrors” of contemporary youth policy that seeks to confine and condemn “youth work” to a poor shadow of its *raison d’être*.

Devlin himself (Chapter 7) points out that the Republic of Ireland is one of the few countries with an explicit legal definition of youth work, emphasising its educative and participative character. It is both distinctive and connected to other policy domains, concerned with both the promise and the problems of young people. Devlin makes the important observation that, in youth work, how things are done is as important, arguably even more important, than what is actually done. This engages with questions about the balance between process and product, and the values that inform the practice. There may be aspirational and specified outcomes, but the work still has to be informed by principles such as ensuring voice, commitments to inclusion, and providing challenges and enjoyment. Professional youth workers may be more adept at the delivery of such “planned, purposeful and conscious” youth work though, as with Flanders, while the professionalisation of youth work may strengthen its role and recognition, it also produces greater expectations about the contribution it can make, especially through interdisciplinary activity. That, paradoxically, can also lead to the weakening of the distinctive identity of youth work. It is no surprise that Devlin speaks of the need for the negotiation of ambivalence.

Building bridges not just for young people in transition but also with other related domains of practice with young people is, of course, another scenario for youth work. Besse, Camus and Carletti (Chapter 5) report on the various reasons for the historical weaknesses attached to the idea of youth work in France, and how it is uneasily and weakly positioned between, and overshadowed by, the professions of social work and schooling (education). Youth work (in its French form, *animation*, though “*travail de jeunesse*” is now also sometimes used) does not have the strong identity of other professions, but it has found a place supporting both more included young people in processes of youth participation and engagement, and more excluded young people in social and labour market integration. Those are now the strengths of contemporary youth work in France, winning it provisionally greater recognition despite the fact that no specific qualifications are required to do it; its weakness lies in the fact that these forms of youth work generally fail to reach or touch the vast majority of young people who are neither on pathways to active citizenship nor dropouts or delinquents.

Bridging gaps is not new to youth work in many settings. But where it is new is in the recently professionalised practice of youth work in Malta. Traditionally, even those who qualified as professional youth workers through the Programme of



Youth Studies at the University of Malta remained volunteers. There was no paid employment for youth workers. But since the very recent establishment of the Maltese Youth Agency and the increased political recognition of youth work, through legislation and a code of ethics, a professional cadre of paid practitioners has come into being. As with Belgium and Ireland, this professionalisation has been accompanied by greater expectations to support positive outcomes in young people's lives, in the case of Malta in relation to labour market insertion and destinations. Teuma (Chapter 9) argues, however, that far from being subsumed and subordinated within an employment and employability agenda (even if this is the paramount rationale for the youth work involvement), youth work has helped to shape a more constructive learning programme through the injection of youth work principles and practice. And, rather like in France, youth workers in Malta serve as go-betweens, facilitators, mediators and negotiators between the worlds and aspirations of young people in "NEET" situations and the labour market contexts that may be open to them. Some youth work philosophies may rage against such connections, but Teuma maintains that, far from "selling out", this is more about "raising the game"; the outcomes secured with the support of youth work, which has demonstrated its capacity to rise to new challenges and address new possibilities, have strengthened its reputation and recognition.

Malta is very clear that youth work is not linked to social work. This is in stark contrast to Germany, where a great deal of youth work practice remains formally attached to child and youth welfare provision. As Thimmel (Chapter 6) observes, there is voluntary youth work provision that embraces much of the educational and democratic philosophy of one strand of youth work, but what is supported by public resources is more precisely conceptualised as youth social work, targeted towards more disadvantaged, troubled and troublesome young people and sometimes requiring involuntary participation (which is anathema to many prevailing definitions of what counts as youth work). Thimmel suggests that educational and democratic youth work is being steadily subordinated to a youth work that is expected to be concerned with guidance, prevention and targeting through special projects and outreach work aimed very specifically at the young unemployed or young migrants. Parallels with the English context should be evident.

Youth work in Spain remains characterised by enormous diversity and no formal qualifications are required to undertake it. Nor is there really a Spanish word for "youth work" though there are many similarities in practice with other parts of Europe. There is limited central direction, and youth work (like other youth policy) is largely decentralised and a matter for regional or local autonomy and determination. Like many other parts of Europe, youth work activity in Spain can be broadly categorised into the traditions and practices of youth movements, the work with young people undertaken within youth policies, and specific, more welfare-oriented provision for marginalised, vulnerable and "at-risk" young people. But while other contributors have pointed to the often quite significant gulf between "free-time" education concerned with empowerment and citizenship, and social work-related interventions concerned with social integration and control, Pareja (Chapter 13) contends that "painting things in black and white serves no purpose". Youth work may have different traditions but these are often closely connected. He does, however, make the point

that youth work is recognised through both legislation and through funding for its work in supporting both the transitions of young people and their civic and political participation. In that respect, his arguments resonate closely with the “bridges” and “spaces” that epitomise the common ground of youth work.

Yet another story emerges in Italy, where the emergence of fascism interrupted an earlier position and tradition of non-interference in youth-led spaces, allowing association-based youth education outside the school to thrive. Where the state did intervene, it was for reparative purposes, derived from social work. After the defeat of fascism, greater democratic “self-government” was promoted by the Allies in the youth field but there was also momentum to regain ground by the Catholic Church. As a result, participatory experiences and experiments did not last and “youth work” as a concept largely receded for a number of decades, resurfacing only at the turn of the millennium. Current developments, according to Morciano (Chapter 8), can be slotted comfortably into a typology developed some years before in Ireland (Hurley and Treacy 1993), around the themes of personal development versus mutual association, and character building versus democratic renewal. Morciano’s contribution emphatically demonstrates the challenges youth work faces around continuity and change.

The different challenge for France and Spain in finding a suitable linguistic phrase for “youth work” is also faced by Poland, where Krzaklewska (Chapter 10) informs us that any literal translation can be misleading. Nonetheless, despite historical links with social work, youth work in contemporary Poland, like Spain, is characterised by diversity and decentralisation. And like many other countries, too, there is some clear distinction between more educative, developmental, open access and “bottom-up” forms of practice and those that are more therapeutic, compensatory or correctional. The former is premised on voluntary participation; the latter may require attendance and engagement. Like Portugal and Malta, youth work practice has recently been professionalised in Poland through the formal inclusion of the occupational role in the List of Professions and Specialisations. Yet as a result of very limited central direction, there continues to be a pluralisation of local initiatives. Such a multiplicity of frameworks within which youth work has the possibility of flourishing presents the greatest challenge for current trends towards professionalisation and standards.

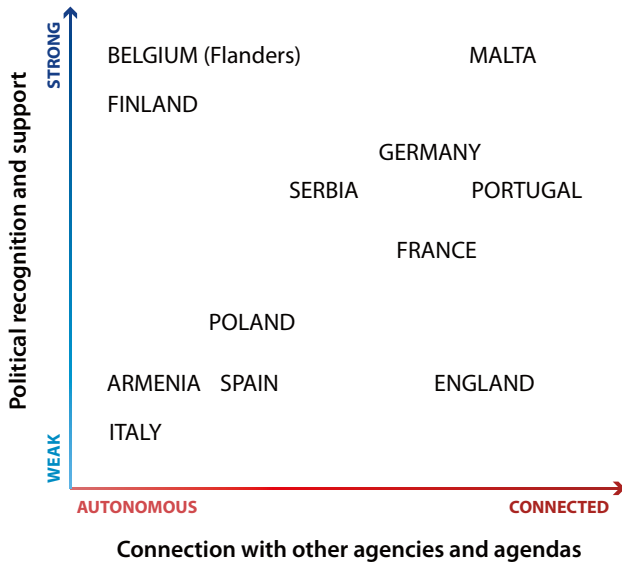
## **Conclusion**

From these 12 country accounts it becomes very clear that while there is a complex mosaic of “youth work” across Europe and within different countries, there are also many common threads that connect at least some of those different countries, and common concerns as well as common grounds for advocacy of particular approaches to youth work, anchored by common philosophies, though sometimes these derive from their roots in progressive education and at other times they emanate from social work and social welfare traditions.

It should not be surprising that such diversity prevails. The countries and regions discussed have very different histories, lineages, contexts, and approaches to advocacy and understanding. We could map many of them onto a grid (Figure 2), with two critical axes for profiles of the state of youth work in a given country: its level

of recognition and support, and its dependence on links with other agencies and other youth policy aspirations.

**Figure 2: Recognition and autonomy of youth work in selected countries**



Of course, none of this is cast in stone forever, nor are we always on a progressive upward path towards robust political and financial support and purposeful and positive connections. England is a sad example of a youth work story of dramatic ebbs and flows, erratic and changing political expectations, and a recent downward spiral to the point of almost decimation (Unison 2016) – except in terms of practice committed to the “retrieval” of young people depicted as NEETs or the promotion of community volunteering and social action. More historically, elsewhere, Morciano points out why the state has kept its distance from involvement in youth work since 1945, when “The Allies simultaneously helped to lay the foundations for a process of de-fascistisation among youth, developing educational programmes based on the principles of personal initiative, accountability, respect and mutual aid, the practice of freedom and ability to self-govern”. As in France, state intervention and interference in the world of “youth work” carries unhappy historical memories, and development is left to local self-determination.

Such local self-determination may be no bad thing, except that it produces huge inconsistencies in what might be called the “youth work offer” to young people. Should it really be a geographical lottery that dictates young people’s access to the kinds of opportunities and experiences conferred by youth work? Equally, should youth work stand alone and apart from the big issues facing many young people throughout Europe today – their (non-)working lives, their (un)healthy lifestyles, their marginalisation, their unwanted mobility, their immigrant status and more? But if it seeks to connect or is required to connect, on what terms are such connections

forged? To paraphrase Pareja – the diversity of youth work can be an asset but there is also a need to improve co-ordination and connections among the different stakeholders and institutions and to gradually overcome each one's inertias and traditions, if they are holding them back.

Many obsolete boundaries and barriers (though we must be sure that these are “sacred cows” to be slain and not “cherished values” to be defended) obstruct the common goal of the integration and emancipation of young people – if that really is the common goal not just of youth work but of wider work with young people, through a transversal and cross-sectoral youth policy framework. Not that this has yet been achieved, anywhere, but it should remain our aspiration.

As Pareja concludes, we must avoid defending youth work from a purely sectoral standpoint, as it is very difficult to close up (down?) a field that, by definition, is open, complex and interconnected. We have to celebrate our diversity, as the 1st European Youth Work Declaration did, but we also have to be confident and clear about our common ground, the subject of the 2nd European Youth Work Declaration. The chapters in this section demonstrate just how varied a contribution, anchored firmly within a number of shared principles, youth work can make to young people and the societies in which they live.

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