The interesting histories of European youth work and policy

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In May 2008, we – the team for international youth policy in the Agency for Socio-Cultural Work for Youth and Adults of the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe – organised the first workshop on "the history of youth work in Europe and its relevance for today's youth work policy".

Why this interest in the history of youth work and youth policy? In recent years, several youth movements and organisations have celebrated their 75th, 80th or even 100th anniversary with a variety of activities, alongside efforts to safeguard their heritage. Especially at local level, they have organised exhibitions and explored their archives to present the origin and history of their organisation, in many cases publishing a commemorative book with pictures, reminiscences and text. In 1981, for instance, one of the authors of this introduction, Jan Vanhee, together with other youth leaders set up a whole project to celebrate the 35th anniversary of their Chirogroup.

At universities, particularly in departments of social and cultural studies, sometimes students write a paper or an essay on youth work or a related topic, and occasionally one can find a PhD dissertation. For example, some years ago Filip Coussée was defending his PhD at the Ghent University. It was fascinating to get such a historical and pedagogical overview, but it was especially amazing to see the links and parallels with similar developments in other countries like the UK and Germany.

Since the end of the 1990s, international co-operation in youth policy has grown rapidly, particularly within the European Union, but also in the Council of Europe. In the latter the major focus from the early 1970s was on capacity building of youth organisations and the training of youth workers and youth leaders. This changed in the 1990s completely with the introduction of youth policy reviews and later youth policy advisory missions. (For more information, see: www.coe.int/youth, the homepage of the Directorate of Youth and Sport of the Council of Europe.)

Thus not surprisingly it was at that time, the end of the 1990s, that the authors of this introduction joined bodies involved in European youth policy development. From then on, in international meetings and conferences, we heard from to time – but never systematically organised – interesting historical reflections and opinions about the development of youth work and policy in various countries.

The key to youth policy must be a better knowledge and understanding of youth. If we are to learn from experience, it is obvious that a historical dimension of this knowledge is crucial for youth policy and policy making. Until now this historical knowledge was only nationally and incidentally produced and collected; we concluded that it was time to start bringing together different trends and realities in a joint framework. Therefore we started collecting interesting documents, studies, opinions and views on this theme from different parts of Europe and assembling everything in a kind of jigsaw puzzle. Another important step was of course to identify the right experts in various regions and countries of Europe, not the easiest exercise.

From the very beginning we had in mind to invite experts in the field to jointly reflect and exchange insights in a small workshop. The main aim was to increase the attention given to the history of youth work and youth policy, and to start a discussion on this issue, putting it higher on the European youth agenda. We also intended the workshop to identify the close links between youth work and policy developments, and broader social, cultural and historical trends.

One of the major objectives of the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe is to produce and provide knowledge on youth in Europe; for this purpose the Youth Partnership organises thematic events (seminars, workshops) and some studies on specific issues. The relevant information and knowledge gathered in these activities are distributed via the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy and by special publications – in both cases the aim is to contribute to what is called evidence-based youth policy.

The Youth Partnership organises many of its activities in co-operation with other partners. An excellent example is the May 2008 workshop, whose scope and positive outcomes (including this publication) were achieved in co-operation between the Flemish Community and the Youth Partnership.

In this publication you will find contributions to this first workshop. We invited eight experts from seven different countries: Louis Vos and Filip Coussée from Flanders (Belgium), Bernard Davies from England (UK), Miriam Teuma from Malta, Christian Spatscheck from Germany, Marcin Sińczuch from Poland, Helena Helve from Finland and Patricia Loncle from France. To start, Walter Lorenz (Free University of Bolzano, Italy) gave a keynote speech in which he commented on the function of history in the debate on social professions in Europe. Pierre Mairesse and Rui Gomes contributed to the opening and closing sessions respectively on youth policy development at the European level.

It is also our the ambition to continue this process, especially in view of the lessons that we can learn for developing youth work and youth policy in Europe today! May we invite you to contribute to this continuing exercise?

Hanjo Schild and Jan Vanhee

Filip Coussée

The relevance of youth work's history

Any profession that fails to learn from its past is doomed to repeat its mistakes. Community and youth work has made a huge contribution to the wellbeing of communities but, with a few honourable exceptions, it has failed to produce its own histories. By neglecting to record its successes and its failures, it has left itself vulnerable to those who would foist on it warmed-over policies that have been tried and found wanting in the past.

(Gilchrist, Jeffs and Spence, 2001)

➜ Youth work's identity crisis

Youth work is a polyvalent and multi-faceted practice. It takes place in a wide range of settings, it varies from unstructured activities to fairly structured programmes, it reaches a large diversity of young people, touches a lot of different themes and is on the interface with many other disciplines and practices. This versatility is one of the strengths of youth work. Young people grow up in very different situations. Youth work has the power to respond in a flexible way to this diversity. The fragmentation and methodical differentiation originates in the unremitting attempt to increase the reach of youth work, but at the same time this versatility leads to fragmentation and product vagueness (Thole, 2000).

As Williamson (1995: 36-45) argues: "If anything goes it is hard to identify the defining features of youth work."

Youth work throughout Europe seems to suffer from a perpetual identity crisis. This crisis is spurred by ambivalent attitudes towards youth work. Youth workers and youth policymakers are torn between excited words of praise and obstinate criticisms on youth work practice. Youth work is a powerful educational tool, youth work is a school of life providing the required skills to survive in our risk society, youth work broadens the social environment of young people … but youth work does not reach the hard-to-reach young people and if it does then youth work does not seem to reach big things with challenging or vulnerable young people. Society's ambivalent attitude towards youth work seems to work out different depending on the status of youth work provision. In some countries we can observe a widening gap between voluntary youth work and professional youth work provision. Moreover it seems hard for youth workers to put their work into words which makes it even more difficult to go beyond the statement that "youth work that works is not accessible and accessible youth work does not work" (Coussée, 2008).

Youth work tries to cope with its identity crisis in different ways. In some countries youth workers and even youth policymakers tend to turn their back to their critics. Unintentionally this splendid isolation makes youth work even more inaccessible and/or useless for vulnerable young people. In other countries the attention shifts from an identity crisis to an efficiency crisis. Youth work has to produce certain measured outcomes. In still other countries the identity crisis turns to an existential crisis. Do we still need youth work?

Due to the lack of a clear identity youth work risks to become the plaything of powerful social forces serving goals and functions that are at first glance improper to youth work: smooth integration in the prevailing social order, individual prevention of all kind of social diseases, removing young people from public space, preventing young people from school drop out …

An international comparative perspective has the potential to broaden the view on our national youth work policies and their inherent paradoxes. The Youth Partnership built up some tradition in international exchange. With the attention for the history of youth work this seminar combines the international perspective with the elaboration of another broadening perspective: a historical view on youth work.

➔ Youth work's history

Historical consciousness is not really strong in youth work (Giesecke, 1981; Taylor, 1987; Davies, 1999). That is just part of its nature with quick changes of participants for instance, but it is also an observation that can be made in the broader field of the social professions (Lorenz, 2007). Volunteers as well as professionals tend to concentrate on the order of the day and to make plans for tomorrow. Despite the fact that many questions are recurrent, we tend to turn to the newest publications and the most actual debates (Imelman, 1990).

The workshop definitely did not aim at purifying an essential youth work concept irrespective of historical and cultural context. Rather it was the purpose to identify the close links between youth work developments and broader social, cultural and historical trends. What are the beliefs and concepts that underpin youth work? How do they relate to the recurrent youth work paradox saying that youth work produces active and democratic citizens but at the same time seems inaccessible for young

people who are excluded from active citizenship? Tracing back the roots of youth work and identifying different evolutions within and between countries must help us to initiate a fundamental discussion on today' youth work identity and cope in a constructive way with the recurrent youth work paradoxes.

Therefore we need to go beyond the boundaries between different youth work practices, but there are other boundaries to transcend.

- Boundaries of time: we can clarify our ideas if we shine a light on aspects that self-evidently structure our discussion, but are themselves not open to critical inquiry (Heyting, 2001). Thus, aspects of youth work that seem self-evident need to be situated in their historical context. Changes in youth work also need to be situated in their economic, social, cultural and political context, which brings us to the next point.
- Boundaries of place: we can link the ways different countries see youth work's identity crisis to broader discussions that touch all social professions. In countries with a social pedagogical tradition (e.g. Germany), discussion is focused on existential questions; in countries with a social policy tradition (e.g. the UK), youth work tends to engage in questions of effectiveness and efficiency. Bringing together these two perspectives can lead to a fruitful discussion.
- Boundaries between policy, practice and theory: the social pedagogical perspective (why do we organise youth work?) seems to be discussed mainly in academic circles, while questions of efficiency are mainly defined and tackled by policy makers and managers. In both cases we can see the risk that discussion is disconnected from practice. We lack a youth work theory that is grounded in practice (Giesecke, 1984; Jeffs and Smith, 1987). Bringing together policy, practice and theory – often described in Europe as "the three angles of the magic triangle" (Milmeister and Williamson, 2006) – was therefore of major importance in this workshop.

➔ A workshop on youth work history

The organisers – the Flemish Community and the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe – invited keynote speakers from a wide range of countries across Europe to give their view on the evolution of youth work in their country.

Following the logic that we need to situate youth work histories in their socio-economic and political context, the organisers wanted to highlight changes in youth work from the different types of welfare system (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990; Gallie and Paugam, 2000): social democratic, liberal, conservative/corporatistic, Mediterranean. This classification corresponds to the regimes of youth work defined in the IARD Study (Schizzerotto and Gasperoni, 2001) and adopted in the ISS Study (Bohn and Stallmann, 2007): the universalistic/paternalistic system, the liberal/community-based system, the conservative/corporatist system and the Mediterranean/sub-institutionalised system.

Therefore the programme featured participants from the so-called social-democratic welfare systems (Finland), from countries typified as liberal (UK) and from conservative regimes (Germany, France, Flanders). Malta exemplified a more southern-European welfare type (although strongly influenced by the UK). These categories originated in a rather Western logic, so Poland was invited to bring a story from a post-communist country (as did Germany in part). In the sequel to this first history workshop we see a need to complement this scope by paying explicit attention to South-East Europe and Russia, for instance.

Key questions for the speakers

On youth (work) policy:

- When was the concept "youth work" used for the first time? From what day on can we speak of "a governmental youth work policy".
- Youth work is said to be a typical third-sector intervention, but youth work seems to have its roots in the second educational milieu (work or school). How did this change?

On the pedagogy of youth work:

- What were the influential theoretical concepts that underpinned youth work? Can we see an evolution in these concepts?
- Youth work is between emancipation and control. Unfortunately youth work seems to empower the powerful and police the vulnerable. Has it always been like that?
- Did emancipatory youth work ever work with non-emancipated youths? If yes, did it do so in a non-individualised way?

On youth work methods:

- Some youth workers and policymakers say that real youth work is voluntary work: ideally there are no professionals involved. When did professional youth workers make their entrance in youth work? Why?
- The voluntary participation of young people is another key dimension of youth work. Are there examples of compulsory youth work? How did they turn out?

Key questions for the discussion

On the relation between young people, youth work and youth policy:

- What is youth work?
- Youth work usually follows social change, though sometimes youth work may be ahead. Or is it true that youth movements and cultures have always come into being outside youth work?
- Youth workers – although youth work never was a mass activity – pretended to represent all young people. Is that why youth work seems to reinforce a divide between organised, well-educated, well-behaved, participating young people and those who are unclubbable, unorganised, marginalised, disaffected and disadvantaged?

On actual perspectives for broadening youth work research:

- What was the first youth work research? What were the research questions? How have youth work research questions evolved through the years?
- What has been the role of youth work research? Has it fed evidence-based policy or delivered policy-based evidence?
- Youth work research seems very much influenced by prevailing youth work practice. In fact, youth work research tells us more about the characteristics of unorganised young people than about existing youth work practice itself.
- Does youth work have (counter)productive effects? Is youth work – seen as non-formal education – measurable? What does history teach us on these recurring questions?

To help prepare the participants, we sent a booklet in advance: *A century of youth work policy* (Coussée, 2008). A rapporteur, Dr Griet Verschelden (University College, Ghent), summarised the discussion.

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