



## **AN INVESTIGATION OF YOUTH WORK, AS A PROCESS OF INFORMAL LEARNING, IN FORMAL SETTINGS**

### **Key Findings**

- ◆ There is a positive response from young people, principals and teachers to youth work practice. Young people were able to differentiate between youth workers and teachers in terms of learning and interventions.
- ◆ Youth workers in schools are following a personal and social development agenda. Those Education and Library Boards that are moving in this direction appear to see their role as complementing the education process.
- ◆ There is no 'one size fits all' delivery mechanism. Many youth workers use the group process as a vehicle from which to develop their programmes. These 'process-driven' groups are normally based on personal and social development using the young persons experience for engagement. They draw heavily on traditional youth work principles, such as building relationships, voluntary attendance, person centred approaches, respect, trust and non-judgemental attitudes.

- ◆ The school based learning environment is, at times, problematic for some young people. Youth workers engage with these 'disengaged' youth in a variety of ways primarily influenced by the ethos of the school. The need to have a specific learning environment for the delivery of youth work in schools is something that needs to underpin the work with those disengaged.
- ◆ Having to work in a school context needs to be further explored in the light of alternative projects like Youthreach. This programme offers an alternative approach and a learning environment that may be more conducive to non-formal and informal approaches to learning.
- ◆ Youth work is mainly associated with non-accredited personal and social development. The need to maintain a school based curriculum that, in parts, is alien to many young people at certain times in their lives needs to be addressed.
- ◆ There is a need to share practice with other professionals dealing with young people. The disaffected must be offered a holistic education which involves not only cognitive development, but affective and skills development as well. No one agency can hope to make such a provision on its own.

## INTRODUCTION

1. The fundamental focus of this research is on the interface between informal learning and formal settings. Recent 'experiments' involving youth workers working with those young people who are having difficulty 'fitting' into the education system suggests that this 'informal' approach to learning has a role in 'education'. Research by Harland, Morgan and Muldoon (2005) for the Department of Education [The Nature of Youth Work in Northern Ireland: Purpose, Contribution and Challenges], recommended that there should be further research and discussion about the role, value, purpose and intended outcomes of youth work in schools. The research further suggested that there was tension between informal and formal approaches to learning, assessment and personal development and that this factor should be taken into consideration when planning and delivering youth work in the school environment. This would involve early discussion to determine the precise role and function of the youth worker and subsequent programming in the context of a formal educational establishment. Harland et al (2005), go on to say that the unique role of the youth worker and the voluntary nature of a young person's participation should not be compromised when working in co-operation with other professions.
2. Measurement within youth work, while problematic in itself is equally difficult to assess within a formal context as it is assumed to have the same potential as the common curriculum with prescribed outcomes. The need is to measure pupil's personal development and self-esteem and to look at how the effectiveness of schools and various alternative educational approaches can be assessed so that the impact and outcomes from these interventions can be measured, or at least understood, in terms of a young person's development. The concept of 'soft outcomes', often linked to informal education, are an important aspect of the learning process for many 'marginalised' young people but are deemed to have little or no currency in the formal credential school system. The concept of assessment, while crucial in itself, needs to be complementary with examinations or awards. Furthermore, it may mean placing informal learning along a continuum of 'lifelong' learning so that young people see progression.
3. Certain schools are now deemed to be domains that can facilitate not only the 'academic' development of young people but other less obvious aspects

of their lives, for example, social and personal development. One might add spiritual to many schools in Northern Ireland. The school, or more specifically, Secondary schools have the captive audience that would normally be difficult to access by professionals. The school setting offers those working with vulnerable young people a captive audience. Teachers assess, both consciously (through predefined tests) and unconsciously (by understanding the background of some students), the needs of young people. However, as indicated, this suggests a move from academic needs, such as curriculum based subjects including literacy and numeracy, to more individualistic or personal needs. The school now appears to deal with family issues, peer problems, social issues and aspects of the community deemed detrimental to the growth of young people. Some schools have student support staff, others have youth wings and youth tutors, others bring in youth workers for sessions, while others bring in outside agencies to deliver topics such as suicide awareness, car crime, drugs awareness and health promotion. Some agencies 'impose' themselves on the schools because they believe they have something to offer the young people. Whatever the reason for 'youth work' in schools there is no doubt that it is happening and that it is needed.

4. This research project investigates the thinking behind youth work in schools from a youth work perspective and a school perspective. It discusses theoretical concepts so that youth work can be understood in a formal context. Youth workers, teachers in relevant schools and young people exposed to this intervention were interviewed. The findings were analysed and discussed and the project concludes with a set of recommendations.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

5. The objectives of this research were:
  - To seek clarification of the outcomes of youth work in schools.
  - To assess the delivery mechanisms of youth work in schools.
  - To investigate the 'ecology of the learning environments' in terms of youth work approaches to learning in schools.
  - To understand the curriculum around youth work for marginalised/disaffected/disengaged young people in formal settings.

## MAIN FINDINGS

6. Expectations are changing about the nature of learning for those young people perceived as either marginalised or disengaged within the formal educational sector. With the expected development of an extended curriculum leading to an 'extended schools' programme there appears to be a movement that involves more emphasis on student-led learning. This research suggests that if schools need to expand their remit from a subject-led curriculum to a more student/learner-led curriculum youth workers are well placed as effective partners.
7. For many years youth workers have been involved directly or indirectly with schools in terms of delivering programmes that complement and supplement the curriculum. As young people become disengaged or, as this study suggests, often become 'quietly-disengaged' then the 'added-value' of this type of work needs to be given increased recognition.
8. There is a positive response from young people, principals and teachers to youth work practice. Young people were able to differentiate between youth workers and teachers in terms of learning and interventions.
9. The use of group work and the building of relationships are viewed as central to effective youth work practice. The nature of this relationship with young people was explored and highlights the need to understand the difference between youth worker and teacher relationships with pupils, particularly those deemed to be disengaged.
10. In order to draw some comparisons the research investigated the Youthreach programme in the Republic of Ireland which offers a 'parallel' educational experience for marginalised youth. One of the advantages of this programme was that it has evolved over a long-term period as opposed to short-term funding-led approaches in Northern Ireland.
11. An interesting new development in Youthreach is the use of a 'profiling web' that not only monitors the needs of young people but guides the interventions used throughout their involvement in the programme. The profiling web is a structured mechanism that facilitates the tangible development of young people in three areas of their lives, i.e. personal development, practical factors and education.

12. There are lessons to be learnt from this approach such as a quality assurance process involving inspectorate visits and its independence from schools while continuing to be perceived as an integral part of mainstream provision.
13. Programmes involving youth work or informal inputs into schools are invariably viewed by young people as 'visiting adults' coming into the schools. The findings suggest that most young people and some teachers do not differentiate between youth workers and these 'visiting adults'. This suggests that some informal educational inputs may not need to be carried out by youth workers.
14. A lack of strategic planning has led most youth work providers to offer programmes that are short-term and influenced by factors such as funding. Schools, on the other hand, need to know in advance about the length of the programme and how it will affect their timetable.
15. Some schools view inputs from youth workers as complementing the subject-led curriculum leading to increased participation and educational attainment. These schools may need to discuss issues such as literacy problems in order to maximise the potential of young people, especially if there is accreditation associated with personal development programmes.
16. Other schools view the input from youth workers as supplementing aspects of the curriculum which they feel can be delivered more effectively by 'experts' from the community.
17. For those interested in informal educational approaches to learning this study offers a valuable insight into two disparate but related worlds. Young people who are disengaged from learning can be re-engaged through more subtle and youth work orientated approaches using group work and relationship building as fundamental 'corner-stone' principles. Youth workers and teachers, together, can increase the learning potential of the disengaged and 'quietly-disengaged' by developing partnerships outside the school, with family, the community and other providers. Youth workers can make demands on the school as a conduit between the family and community on behalf of young people and by increasing their understanding of 'expected outcomes' from their interventions.

18. One interesting point worth noting is the absence of any mention of ICT as a vehicle for engaging disaffected youth.
19. While the research findings are positive about the relationship between the two worlds engaged in the development of marginalised youth there are unintended consequences of bringing youth work into the domain of the formal school system. For example, the nature of 'relationships' with young people, the issues of measuring outcomes for traditional youth work, the changing role of youth work, the power relationship between young people and adults in the context of the school, short-term interventions, issues associated with 'time' and 'timetabling' and the nature of personal and social development in a school setting. However, there is no doubt that new practice involving informal approaches to learning, through youth work in schools, has something to offer young people in terms of maximising their learning potential.
20. Some of the most salient points of the research are presented below under the main objectives of the research.

### **To seek clarification on the outcomes of youth work in schools**

21. The research findings suggest that youth workers in schools are following a personal and social development agenda. Those Education and Library Boards that are moving in this direction appear to see their role as complementing the education process. However, the researchers feel that youth workers may need to critically analyse this role in terms of the unintended consequences it may be having on some of the fundamental principles that underpin their profession. This research report may help guide the debate.

### **To assess the delivery mechanisms of youth work in schools**

22. The findings clearly indicate that there is no 'one size fits all' delivery mechanism. Many youth workers use the group process as a vehicle from which to develop their programmes. These 'process-driven' groups are normally based on personal and social development using the young persons experience for engagement. They draw heavily on traditional youth work principles, such as building relationships, voluntary attendance,

person centred approaches, respect, trust and non-judgemental attitudes. Young people can differentiate between delivery mechanisms used by youth workers and those employed by teachers.

### **To investigate the 'ecology of the learning environment' in terms of informal approaches to learning in schools**

23. The school based learning environment is, at times, problematic for some young people. Youth workers engage with these 'disengaged' youth in a variety of ways primarily influenced by the ethos of the school. The need to have a specific learning environment for the delivery of youth work in schools is something that needs to underpin the work with those disengaged. Having to work in a school context needs to be further explored in the light of alternative projects like Youthreach. This programme offers an alternative approach and a learning environment that may be more conducive to non-formal and informal approaches to learning.

### **To develop a curriculum around informal education for marginalised/disaffected young people in formal settings**

24. The need for a curriculum should take place after a debate about the specific role of youth work in schools. Identification of this role will allow the youth work and teaching professions to come to an agreement about what model, function or role they prefer. For example, should the curriculum complement, supplement or offer an alternative to what currently exists. More importantly, how will young people benefit from a revised curriculum and will all aspects be accredited or measured?

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Youth Work related:**

25. Youth workers should identify 'specific' aspects of their work that will be optimised in a school setting. For example, personal development through the use of group work processes should be an entitlement for all KS3 and KS4.

26. Youth work programmes should continue to listen to the voices of young people. The voices should extend beyond the disengaged youth to those 'quietly-disengaged' in school life including, if possible, all school-going young people.
27. The differing needs of schools and young people will be served by a variety of models of practice.
28. Youth workers in schools should have additional training in counselling and advanced group work skills.
29. Youth workers should see themselves as a conduit for the development of learning experiences in the 'whole' school.

**Schools related:**

30. Where youth wings exist they should become 'multi-purpose' centres explicitly integrated into school and community.
31. There should be some analysis of the role of the school-based student support worker.

**Joint Youth Work and Schools related:**

32. Youth workers in schools should encourage more inclusion of the community in the school and in their programmes. Schools' Senior Management Teams need to explore initiatives with youth workers to facilitate this recommendation.
33. The voluntary and statutory youth sectors should design specific inputs for schools. These inputs should take cognisance of the needs of the formal sector in terms of timetabling, interventions and appropriate school settings.
34. Localised partnerships should be developed for the future of second level education.
35. There should be more staff development for youth workers and teachers before, during and after programmes in schools.

### **Training related:**

36. Teacher training pathways, such as, early professional development, continuing professional development and professional qualifications for Headships should include more aspects of informal or non-formal learning processes which experienced youth work practitioners could facilitate.
37. Initial youth work training should include aspects of formal education facilitated by experienced Senior Managers in education.

### **Research related:**

38. More research is needed into the micro-politics of the schools. With localised partnerships envisaged for the future, this concept needs to be 'named' and addressed urgently.
39. There should be an evaluation of short-term funding led projects which work in schools.
40. Further research is needed into the nature of informal learning processes relating to the role of Further Education Colleges.
41. Research is needed into the role of ICT as a vehicle for engaging disaffected youth in schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

42. The researchers used a variety of data collecting methods that are complementary to qualitative research:
  - In-depth interviews (28) with key informants from youth work, schools and Youthreach;
  - A worksheet/questionnaire for young people (117) with experience of informal practices in formal settings;
  - Focus groups (5) for young people to ascertain their views;
  - Observation analysis carried out during the research;
  - Documentary evidence underpinning programme development.

43. The sampling frame was as follows:
- Schools involved in collaboration with statutory and voluntary youth work provision;
  - Teachers from schools involved with youth work provision;
  - Youth work practitioners working in schools;
  - Youthreach programme as a parallel educational experience for marginalised young people in the Republic of Ireland;
  - Young people involved in relevant programmes.

## **THE PROJECT**

44. The Project was undertaken for the Department of Education by the University of Ulster. The cost of the project was £19,973.

## **FULL REPORT**

45. The full report entitled "Youth work in schools: An investigation of youth work, as a process of informal learning, in formal settings" by Dr Tony Morgan, Pat Morgan and Brian O'Kelly, is available on the Department of Education website at [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32statisticsandresearch\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32statisticsandresearch_pg.htm)

*This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.*



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