

Youth worker, probably the most difficult job in the world

Filip Coussée, PhD
Ghent University – Uit De Marge
Belgium

Howard Williamson PhD
University of Glamorgan
Wales, UK

Youth work, a field of social and pedagogical tensions

Youth work in many European countries forms a third pillar within the social and pedagogical context, alongside school and youth care. It is, however, different from schools and many youth care settings. Young people's attachment to youth work is voluntarily and the focus is not upon certification of measurable skills or on child protection and public care, but on life skills - biographical, institutional and political competencies. The strength of youth work lies in its capacity to create free spaces for young people characterised by safety, a sense of belonging, the art of conversation, challenge, recreation, friendship and convivial relationships.

This non-formal setting implies that being a youth worker (be it a volunteer or a paid worker) is a fairly challenging job. Youth workers need to connect to the lived reality of young people, while at the same time seeking to challenge young people to broaden their horizons through participating in new opportunities and experiences. This pedagogical task of the youth worker can be tough going; young people are not always open to activities that go beyond the already known. From their perspective widening the horizon can be threatening and alienating. It is up to the youth worker to determine a relevant and meaningful balance between the 'comfort' and 'stretch' zones of young people with whom they work, and to work out the pace at which to work.

Furthermore, beyond its pedagogical function, youth work also has a clear social mission. Youth workers have to support young people in getting access to the resources society provides in order to strengthen young people's possibilities for autonomy and self-determination – what is sometimes referred to as 'emancipation'. The distribution of these resources – if left to the powers of the market – takes place in an uneven way. In this respect youth work has a redistributive function. This is another challenging commitment as society is not open to redistributive activities that go beyond existing social arrangements. It is again up to the youth worker to find the right balance.

Recreation and instrumentalisation

The social and pedagogical tasks of youth work are connected to each other in an insoluble, yet indissoluble, tension. They are glued together through a third function: the recreational. This recreational function helps to ease the inherent tensions in youth work practice. However, all too often recreation functions no longer as the appetizer or bait, but becomes the meal itself, attracting the vicious criticism of youth work as little more than 'adolescent child-minding'. Such critics have a point: youth work in this form then becomes an a-pedagogical and a-social activity, entertaining young people and keeping them off the streets. This is one of the main reasons that debates on 'youth work' have become predominantly a methodological discussion: *how* to reach out to young people, *how* to capture their interest,

how to equip them with certain skills. The ‘how to’ consequently overshadows the question ‘what’ the meaning is or could be of youth work, from different perspectives including that of young people themselves, is being overlooked. There is a lack of youth work theory, especially theories that are grounded in practice (Jeffs and Smith, 1987; Giesecke, 1998). This absence makes youth work vulnerable to instrumentalisation. Currently, against a background of financial and economic crisis, youth workers – like other social pedagogues – find their tasks being reframed. In the context of the ongoing transformation of a so called passive welfare regime into an enabling welfare state (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1989), and against the backdrop of rising youth unemployment, demands are being increasingly placed upon youth workers to educate, or even instruct, young people. It seems that their pedagogical function is being reassessed (or simply overlooked and passed by), especially with regards to vulnerable young people, who historically have been a prime target group for youth work attention and engagement. However, this pedagogical function now no longer relates to pursuing a critical education, broadening horizons, providing the possibility of involvement and reflection on new experience, but rather refers quite centrally to increasing the employability of vulnerable young people. Education becomes training, so that individual young people might have the skills to grab the diminishing labour market opportunities open to them. This is, indeed, a re-pedagogisation of youth work, but without a re-socialisation, and thus it comes quite close to what has been called a moralisation strategy (Lorenz, 2001), in which social pedagogy is reduced to a method of being empathic, loving and creative, but at the same time shaping a practice of which the outcome sought is acceptance and compliance. Can it really be the aspiration of youth workers to ‘teach’ young people to adapt to the situation they occupy? Or is it rather to enable young people to think about how to question their situation and translate their private troubles into public issues (Mills, 1959)?

The lack of theoretical background disempowers youth work practice. Many youth workers seem simply to undergo, without comment or critique, this redefining of their work (Williamson 2008a). In some Nordic countries youth work and streetwork are increasingly reduced to almost psychotherapeutic, individualised work, though they may sail with social pedagogy as a flag of convenience. The same ‘de-socialised pedagogisation’ has been happening to youth work in the UK (especially in England), in the Netherlands, and Belgium will probably also follow this trend. Kant once observed that ‘*There is nothing as practical as a good theory*’ (Lewin, 1952, p.69). In this paper we argue that a grounded social pedagogical theory – grounded in history and in practice – enables youth workers to re-establish an emancipatory youth work practice. Our contention is that social pedagogical thinking has the potential to support youth workers to cope with the inherent dilemmas and tensions in their work, without reducing youth work practice to methodical issues and thus exposing themselves to instrumentalisation. Just as the social and pedagogical functions of youth work can easily be eclipsed by the recreational function, so the social pedagogical theoretical back-up that is concerned with a *social* question can quite easily be superseded by psychological and sociological ideas focusing on the youth question. Here, also, is a tension to be kept alive and to be made transparent.

The social question: an integrated social pedagogical approach of young people

Hämäläinen (2003) traces the roots of social pedagogy back to Plato and the ideas of the Ancient Greek on the relationship between the individual and the state. In modern Western Europe social pedagogical ideas have their origins in the enlightened ideas carrying the belief in individual growth and – in line with that – the belief that the social order is not God-given, but shaped by human activities. Drawing on this societal project education becomes a central

theme. Society becomes too complicated to introduce children directly into their social roles. People feel the need to mediate the participation of children through involving them in a protected lifeworld, a child-friendly representation of adult society (Mollenhauer, 1986). These ideas find their way, over time, from elites to working-class families. The Industrial Revolution and the social transformation that accompanied it brought a focus on the upbringing of working-class young people. Charity and repression were no longer sufficient to guarantee social cohesion. A renewed concept of social pedagogy was, as a result, embedded in this 'social question' and the resultant need for some form of community education: the social challenge was how to respect social diversity while at the same time preserve social cohesion? (Vandenbroeck, et al., 2011). This social/political project found its way through distinctive social pedagogical practices. Educational thinking up to then had been quite abstract, disconnected from the concrete, lived realities of children and their families. In contrast, the first social pedagogical theorists of the 'modern' world engaged in concrete social pedagogical practice. It is not a coincidence that they found inspiration in the ideas of Vives (1492-1540), Comenius (1592-1670) and Pestalozzi (1746-1827). They worked with people living in poverty and with uncared-for children. The first youth work initiatives directed towards working-class young people were run by people such as Don Bosco - social pedagogue, educational theorist and youth work practitioner in one. Theory, policy and practice were inextricably bound up with each other in the social question.

The youth question: youth as a psychological and sociological construct

Social pedagogical thinking underpinned the first youth work initiatives, but it was then gradually eclipsed by developmental psychology. The introduction to the 4th edition of the book of William Forbush (1902) on social pedagogy was written by Stanley Hall. Two years later Stanley Hall published 'Adolescence' (1904), one of the first theoretical reflections on youth as a separate category in society with shared characteristics. Developmental psychology was a growing discipline in which the importance of a well-balanced, 'normal' adolescence was emphasised. Pedagogical ideas were linked to this abstract standardized thinking and became disconnected from reality, especially from the realities of working-class young people, who became marginalised by the approaches and practices based on them. The dominant thinking on education became more prescriptive than descriptive. Working-class youth was depicted as experiencing a deficient, incomplete adolescence. Educational ideas no longer derived their starting points from the lived life of young people, but from conceptual ideas around 'normal' developmental stages. Emancipation was now connected to age, not to social conditions (Coussée, 2010). Reflections on the relationship between youth and society became positioned above the concrete reality in which young people were brought up. The institutionalisation and differentiation of educational activities was then underpinned by this decontextualised view on psychological development and social education.

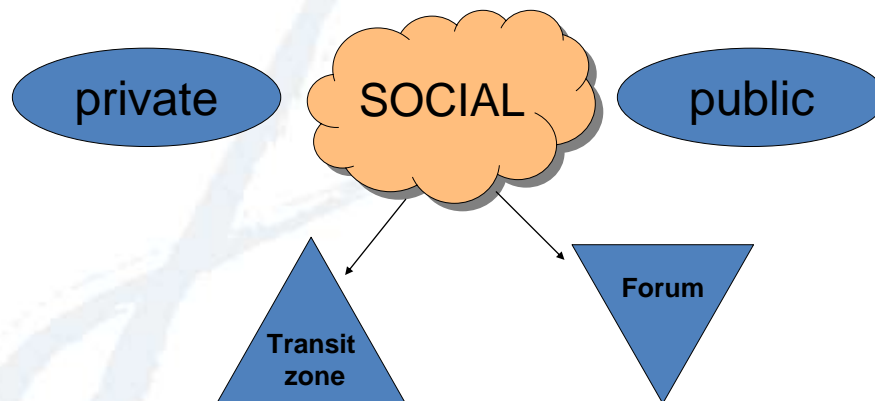
In the aftermath of World War II, however, there was, once more, a growing concern about the social integration of young people. This, potentially, created space for a renewed social pedagogical strategy, but the arguably rather pessimistic pedagogical perspectives were, this time, also superseded by a more technical sociological view of youth as a distinctive social category. From then on, as a result, ideas on youth and youth work were underpinned by developmental psychology and youth sociology, advancing notions of, respectively, youth as a life stage and youth as a social category. Both approaches overemphasise the differences between youth and adults and underemphasise the internal heterogeneity in youth. Both inform a quite functionalistic perspective on the development of young people and their integration in society, in which the social and the pedagogical functions of youth work tend to

be neglected. The focus is on participation *in* youth work, not on participation *through* youth work.

Concerns on social cohesion

From time to time, there is a period of ‘social pedagogical embarrassment’ (Mennicke, 1937). At these moments, as today, the observation is made that leading young people to youth work and other institutions that are supposed to contribute to individual development and social integration is simply not sufficient to preserve society’s cohesion. These moments of embarrassment create a new round of social pedagogical upheaval questioning the relation between young people, education and society and calling for a more efficient approach. There is often, as a result, a cry for more ‘social education’. These are the moments that social pedagogical tensions in youth work come to the fore, shifting the attention from the accessibility and outcomes of educational practices to the question what exactly happens in youth work, how useful youth work is, and can be, and for which young people, and how – more precisely - youth work contributes to social integration. The central theoretical ideas that surface at these times have a lesser focus on individual development or the behaviour of groups of young people, and instead magnify attention to educational practices and on the way these practices bridge the gap between (different) young people and society. These ideas help youth workers to realise a relative autonomous youth work practice in which both social and pedagogical functions are highly valued. No doubt they also produce tensions that are difficult to handle, but at the same time they create the promise of a dynamic practice.

A quite simple scheme can be used to situate the pedagogical and social functions of youth work, bridging the gap between the private *lifeworld* and aspirations of young people and the public *system* and expectations of society. On the one hand, youth workers have to educate young people, to introduce young people into the adult society. On the other hand they have to question the social conditions in which integration can become possible and the resources that can be accessed and utilised by young people. Therefore youth work is, simultaneously, a *transit zone* between young people and society, focusing on integration in the existing social order, and a *social forum*, addressing issues through questioning with young people the way the existing social order produces resources for some young people and marginalises other young people. In this sense youth work is both an *instrument for social education* (socialising young people, educating them to behave in a social acceptable manner, enabling aspirations for them to become active and social citizens), and a *social educational practice* (a platform and space to question and discuss the ongoing transformation of social problems into pedagogical questions and the other way round).



The power and autonomy of youth work

There is an ongoing tendency to resolve these tensions by distancing the social from the pedagogical. Many policymakers and practitioners tend to *de-socialise social pedagogy*; this paper concludes with a plea for the retention and advocacy of a holistic child-centred approach. This is important, because the relationships between youth workers and children and young people are at the very core of youth work practice. However, what can be at risk in this 'core formulation' of youth work practice is the downsizing of the social in social pedagogy, suppressing a critique of the differential social outcomes education, which in turn demands consideration of the desired social order and the more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. This position may, for instance, lead to a more humane atmosphere in residential homes, but it can then neglect the social questions underlying the development of special youth care, involving taking away children from 'unworthy' parents (Coussée, et al., 2010). Or it can lead to youth work practices in which children and young people have lots of fun, but at the same time restricts possibilities for their broader social participation, because policymakers may use youth work as a site for little more than 'positive activities', to get young people off the streets (Jeffs and Smith, 1999). Others *de-pedagogise the social*, and then what remains is the political plea for a more just and democratic society. This is obviously a reasoned and reasonable approach, because it helps youth workers to understand how young people grow up and what is meaningful to them. But an a-pedagogical approach leaves youth workers empty-handed in their daily practice and their commitment in real life situations, especially when they are working with marginalised young people.

The power of all youth work is its ability to create free spaces for young people characterised by safety, a sense of belonging, bonding and bridging, the art of conversation, challenge, friendship and relationships, opportunities and experience. It is different from schools, though youth workers also construct environments where young people have the possibility to learn. This may not concern, at least in the first place, learning for some measurable knowledge, skills or competence that should be acquired by young people. More central to non-formal learning processes are identity development by young people, an analysis of their situation and defining their own needs. The alarming number of so called 'NEETs' (young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training) or working young people that live in poverty

give youth workers little choice but to raise some uncomfortable questions. Are our social inclusion strategies focused on employability and activation in the interest of all young people? Could it be that some young people are better off in a situation considered by others as social exclusion? These kinds of questions are dealt with by youth workers and young people across the context of youth work practice (Williamson 2008b), but they can also serve as guiding questions, within the contemporary youth participation agenda, for starting a dialogue between young people and local policymakers.

Conclusion

Of course social pedagogical ideas can take a radical, progressive shape or they can be adopted by more conservative ideas around the relationship between young people and society. Nevertheless, in Belgium, and elsewhere, social pedagogical ideas increasingly help youth workers to go beyond the recreational function and to defend their practice against an often all too instrumentalist thinking from local government. At the same time it brings youth workers together. Whether working with skaters, young people with disabilities, minority ethnic young people, unemployed young people, squatters, or looked after children (those in the public care system), the basic social pedagogical tensions are the same. Therefore social pedagogy also enables youth workers to go beyond their youth work boundaries and to connect with, for example, social work and schools from a position of strength and distinction, rather than through sacrificing their own strengths or engaging with a fear that youth work provisions will be chained to joined-up services aiming for the controlled development and smooth integration of young people, whatever their social backgrounds might be. Youth work cannot and should not hide in the sand, but it has to come to the inter-professional table equipped with a clarity about its role and contribution.

References

- Coussée, F. (2010). The history of youth work. Resocialising the youth question? In: Coussée, F., Verschelden, G., Van de Walle, T., Medlinska, M. and Williamson, H. (eds.). *The history of youth work in Europe and its relevance for youth policy today*. Vol. 2 (p.9-14). Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Coussée, F., Bradt, L., Roose, R. & De Bie, M. (2010). The emerging social pedagogical paradigm in UK child and youth care: deus ex machina or walking the beaten path? *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(1), 789-805.
- Forbusch, W.B. (1901). *The Boy Problem. A Study in Social Pedagogy*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Giesecke, H. (1998). Auf der Suche nach einer Theorie der Jugendarbeit. Zur Erinnerung an Klaus Mollenhauer. *Neue Praxis*, 5, 441-447.
- Gilbert, N. and Gilbert, B. (1989). *The Enabling State: Modern Welfare Capitalism in America* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, G. S. (1904). *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relation to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion, and education* (Vols. I & II). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Hämäläinen, J. (2003). The Concept of Social Pedagogy in the Field of Social Work. *Journal of Social Work* 3 (1), 69-80.
- Jeffs, T. and Smith, M. (1987). *Youth Work*. London: Mc Millan Education Ltd.
- Jeffs T. and Smith, M. (1999). Resourcing Youth Work. Dirty hands and tainted money. In: Banks, S. (ed.). *Ethical Issues in Youth Work* (pp.53-73). London: Routledge.
- Lewin, K. (1952). *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers by Kurt Lewin*. London: Tavistock.
- Lorenz, W. (2001). Social Work Responses to New Labour in Continental European Countries. *British Journal of Social Work*, 31 (4), 595-609.
- Mennicke, C. (1937) *Sociale Paedagogie. Grondslagen, vormen en middelen der gemeenschapsopvoeding*. Utrecht: Erven J. Bijleveld.
- Mills, C. Wright (1959). *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mollenhauer, K. (1983). *Vergessene Zusammenhänge*. Weinheid/München: Juventa Verlag.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Coussée, F., Bradt, L. and Roose, R. (2011). Diversity in Early Childhood Education: a Matter of Social Pedagogical Embarrassment. Petrie, P. & Moss, P. (eds.). *Social Pedagogy and Working with Children and Young People: Where Care and Education Meet* (pp. 53-67). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Williamson, H. (2008a), 'Not all of the youth workers come from Mars', *Children and Young People Now* 12-18 March, p18
- Williamson, H. (2008b), 'Youth work is a social animal, whatever its form', *Children and Young People Now* 10-16 September, p22