# Youth Work: Changes and Challenges

by Maurice Devlin

### Introduction

The NYF/CDYSB Youthcert initiative provided a valuable opportunity for experienced youth workers to share ideas about the issues and challenges they currently face by hosting a seminar on the 'changing face of youth work' in June. The seminar was designed to explore changes in the context within which youth work is practised and the implications of these changes for roles, tasks, responsibilities, training and support systems.

### Social and institutional context

The discussion made it very clear that the social and institutional context of youth work has become considerably more complex. The social problems confronting youth workers - and which they are often specifically employed to deal with - have become more severe and demanding. The number of Government departments and statutory agencies with an interest in youth work and closely related services has increased, and sources of funding, nationally and internationally, are much more diverse. The fact that the Youth Work Act was passed in 1997 was also regarded as significant. Although amending legislation is in preparation, the key features are likely to remain, and the important point is that there will be for the first time a legislative framework for youth work.

Other relevant aspects of the changing social and institutional context are the increased concern with child protection and related issues (which has led among other things to the recent publication of Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children); and the broad trend whereby people in all walks of life are more concerned with formal qualifications and certification than before (a trend towards what sociologists call "credentialism"). Taken together, these factors have had a huge impact on volunteering, which was one of the key issues at the seminar.

# The Volunteer Base

There was widespread agreement that the profile of youth work volunteers has changed significantly over the past few years. In simple numerical terms, the volunteer base has diminished considerably. Furthermore, volunteers are now more likely to expect something concrete from their volunteering - in terms, say, of certified training or of entry into a paid youth work job. In particular, it seems more difficult to recruit male volunteers. Various reasons were suggested. There is perhaps a heightened sensitivity to the child protection issues already mentioned, and perhaps also a perception that there are as yet insufficient 'volunteer protection' mechanisms in place; or it may be that working lives are busier in general (for women and men) and the 'culture of volunteering' in decline. There is, unfortunately, little reliable quantitative data available to allow us to reach firm conclusions, but the participants at the seminar seemed, on the basis of

experience, in little doubt about the nature and direction of the trends .

It is probable that the above trends have also been affected by the growth in the sheer number

### Professionalisation?

of paid youth work jobs, making it more realistic for people who would previously have seen themselves as long-term volunteers to think in terms of paid employment (for reasons of space I'll leave aside here the question of CE schemes). This raises the question of whether, and in what way, youth work is 'professionalising'. The afternoon session of the seminar provided some interesting perspectives on this question. Prompted by a small group 'simulation' exercise in which participants had to pretend to be the management committee of a community-based youth project and decide how best to allocate financial resources on key personnel (i.e. whom to employ, with what kind of background or training and what kind of skills/competencies?), the variety of views which emerged essentially crystallised into two alternative 'models' of youth work as a profession.

# 'First and Foremost Youth Workers'

The first model puts an emphasis on the core components of the job of youth worker and on the importance of everyone in a youth work context having a particular profile of competencies or skills. Those with the requisite additional management/ supervisory skills or aptitudes would then gain access to senior positions, usually after some years of 'direct' experience of practice. This model is, in fact, close to that seen in other relevant 'social' professions (e.g. teaching, social work).

# 'Different Jobs, Different Skills'

The second model makes a distinction between the skills and qualities needed to do 'direct' work (with both young people and adults) and those needed to fulfil the responsibilities of management positions (coordinating, supervising, overseeing, policy development and so on). This approach is one that can be seen in practice in many youth organisations, where it is not uncommon for people in management positions to have backgrounds in fields other than youth work itself (although it was suggested this pattern may be changing).

## **Questions and Challenges**

The ensuing discussion focused on the way in which these two alternative approaches - both of which have advantages and disadvantages - highlight some of the key questions and challenges facing youth work at this stage in its development. There was general agreement that youth work is 'professionalising', if only in the sense that more and more it is a job that people get paid for and for which they are expected to have certain demonstrable skills and aptitudes. However the challenge is to reach broad agreement on what kind of profession we want to see it become, and how it can meet these challenges without undermining the value of volunteers and volunteering.

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