
Review 04

Youth and Community Work in Ireland: Critical Perspectives

Catherine Forde, Elizabeth Kiely and Rosie Meade

- Reviewed by Anastasia Crickley

First and foremost the editors and contributors of this volume have done all of us involved with community work and youth work in Ireland an important service through making it, and their views, available for discussion, analysis and dissemination. While both community work and youth work have many critical and engaged commentators, as the heated discussion at conferences and in the organisations practitioners have been part of give testimony to, we have been slow to produce the body of literature which our unique approaches deserve. This journal and, the now well established, Irish Youth Studies Journal are useful expectations. In this short review I focus in particular on the chapters concerned with community development.

Rosie Meade's article provides some useful academic analysis for questions which practitioners are all too familiar with. She makes withering observations, backed by extensive use of eminent theorists from around the world across a very broad spectrum in practice, process and outcomes of Irish community work, which seem to be linked to a particular personal critique.

Hilary Tovey's chapter on theorising community uses classical theory from this field to good effect, providing useful insights including the dilemmas of communitarianism in individual and community spaces.

In her overview of the politics of community development, Catherine Forde focuses on corporatism, the formalisation of state/civil society relations and civil society as a solution, threading together the views of a number of commentators. Her final section criticises community workers and activists and comments that Irish community work has taken the route of supporting the status quo.

Seamus Bane in his chapter on professionalisation also reminds us that community work can liberate or domesticate. He provides a useful overview of literature on professions and professionalisation correctly acknowledging the differences as well as the similarities between youth work and community work. However his continued use of the term youth and community work – which is also the confusing title of the book overall and in effect means youth work – somewhat contradicts this. Chris McInerney's exploration of community development through the lens of the potential and reality of participative democracy raises some interesting and well informed questions, including about the capacity of the administrative and political elites to share their own power. This is a caution which might well be recalled as we move towards a possible general election and pin hopes on changes in main political power holders.

This book, as stated at the outset, provides a significant contribution to our written discourse in both community work and youth work. However, for me it also highlights the ongoing challenge for community work - to find appropriate and rigorous ways to do theory and analysis rather than provide space for the reinterpretation of the accepted wisdom of other disciplines and contexts, often written by people disconnected from what they write about.

Practitioners in my experience do not overestimate their analysis or actions. Those of us who teach, write and

do community work are generally very clear about the difference between the real and the ideal, between what we set out as our stall and what we can achieve. We also know the limits of community development, acknowledge the fact of different views of the world among, and between, practitioners and participants, and are wary of frameworks when describing useful but unrelated activities.

Our challenge, and one which colleagues who contributed to the book make more urgent, is to write in our own terms about the pitfalls and possibilities of the discipline we have struggled to shape over the past thirty years.

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