



Maurice Devlin

Youth work in Ireland – Some historical reflections

→ Introduction

A pervasive theme of the first Blankenberge history workshop and the ensuing publication was the seemingly “perpetual identity crisis” of youth work in many or most parts of Europe (Verschelden et al., 2009). While youth work in Ireland has by no means been free of, or has fully resolved, such a crisis, it is perhaps not surprising given the historical context that Bernard Davies’s comments on the relative clarity of the identity (or at least the identifying features) of British youth work also apply to Ireland:

... over the past century and a half in England – and indeed, it could be argued, over the UK generally [all of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom until 1921 and the six north-eastern counties still are] – the core features of a way of working with young people have been formulated and refined so that, overall, they provide a well-delineated if unfinished definition of a distinctive practice that we now call “youth work”. (Davies, 2009: 63)

The definition of youth work in the Republic of Ireland is also perhaps

“unfinished”¹ but unlike the situation regarding youth work in the United Kingdom and most of Europe – and indeed unlike the situation that pertains in most of the social professions everywhere – there is in Ireland a law that says explicitly what youth work is: the Youth Work Act 2001. This should certainly not be taken to be a “finished” definition since it is itself an amendment of an earlier piece of legislation (the Youth Work Act 1997) and it could be amended again: Helena Helve informs us that in Finland “legislation governing youth work has been enacted regularly since 1972, being reformed every ten years or so (1986, 1995 and 2006)” (Helve, 2009: 120). However, the two definitions of youth work in Irish law have both been broadly in keeping with the “core features” of youth work as it has evolved historically; the main difference between them being that the key role of the non-governmental or non-statutory sector is made explicit in the second and current version, largely due to successful lobbying by that sector itself (for further detail on the reasons for the introduction of amending legislation and the relationship between the two definitions see Devlin, 2008). The definition in the Youth Work Act 2001 (s.3) is as follows.

[Youth work is a] planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary involvement...which is –

- (a) complementary to their formal, academic and vocational education and training; and
- (b) provided primarily by voluntary organisations.

This definition has been criticised for being “determinedly structured” and for relying on concepts which are themselves “all contestable” (Spence, 2007: 6-7), but for the current author the formulation in the Youth Work Act neither prescribes nor proscribes too much and in fact it might be argued that the contestability of certain concepts allows some useful “room for manoeuvre” in practice. Most importantly, while the definition may have the rather technical or instrumental character that legal language typically does, it explicitly and unmistakably enshrines a few key points – or principles – that would command widespread agreement among people involved in youth work in Ireland today, as they have throughout its history. The first is that youth work is above all else an educational endeavour and it should therefore complement other types of educational provision. In fact it is sometimes called “out-of-school education”, but that designation is misleading because youth work can in some cases take place in school buildings. It is now more common therefore to refer to it as “non-formal” and/or “informal” education (for comments on the relationship between these terms see Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 10; Youth Service Liaison Forum, 2005: 13). The emphasis on the twin dimensions of the “personal and social development” of young people is in keeping with definitions of and approaches to youth work throughout most of Europe (Devlin and Gunning, 2009; ECKYP, 2009; Lauritzen, 2006).

The second key point is that young people participate in youth work voluntarily: they can “take it or leave it”, a situation which is markedly different from their relationship with the formal education system. The third is that youth work is for the most part carried out by organisations which are non-statutory or non-governmental (although as we will see the state has on occasion been proactive in relation to direct youth work interventions and a key provision of the Youth Work Act is the

1. As Davies says, youth work is a social construct and one of his key concerns is to show how contemporary policy makers, at least in England, are determined to “reconstruct” its historical character.

imposition of a statutory responsibility to ensure that the provision of youth work programmes and services by voluntary organisations actually takes place). Furthermore, it is in the nature of these “voluntary organisations” that many – perhaps most – of the adults who work with them do so on an unpaid basis. Throughout its history Irish youth work has relied enormously on “voluntary effort”, both individual and institutional. This is partly an expression of the principle of subsidiarity which has underpinned social policy and social services in Ireland since their inception; and it is also (and relatedly) a result of the links from the outset between youth work on the one hand and religious and political movements on the other. These points will be explained further in the following two sections. The purpose is to highlight some selected aspects of the history of youth work in Ireland, illustrating elements both of continuity and discontinuity with the present. There is not time here (and it is not in any case the main purpose in the present context) to go into the many significant administrative and policy developments in youth work in Ireland in the last few years, but if the reader is interested these can be explored elsewhere (Devlin, 2008; 2009; Forde et al. (eds.), 2009; Lalor et al., 2007).

→ Subsidiarity, religion and politics

As was the case in other countries, the major social professions in Ireland – including youth work, social work and social care – were part of the broad philanthropic movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries concerned with “rescuing” (or controlling) needy, destitute and troublesome children and young people, whose numbers and visibility had increased substantially as society industrialised and urbanised. Social work developed a significant statutory dimension relatively early although it has retained strong links with the voluntary and charitable sectors (Kearney and Skehill eds., 2005). The particular direction that social care took was shaped by its links with the industrial and reformatory school system and with provision for young offenders (Lalor et al., 2007: 290). The path taken by youth work (and its emergence as a separate area of practice) was due to the fact that the early combination of philanthropic concern and “moral panic” (Cohen, 2002) gradually merged with other impulses that associated youth not just with the problems of the present but with the promise of the future and with the potential to defend and promote certain political, cultural or religious values and beliefs.

Most of those engaged in such defensive or promotional work were doing so on a voluntary basis, as individual volunteers or activists within voluntary organisations. This was certainly not the only country where youth work (and other work with young people) had its origins in voluntary activity, but in Ireland the emphasis on voluntarism took on a particular character because of the fraught nature of the historical relationship with Britain and the fact that the great majority of the country’s population, particularly south of the border after independence, was Roman Catholic. In this context voluntarism was among other things an expression of the principle of subsidiarity which was emphasised by Catholic social teaching. According to this principle – most explicitly and systematically developed by Catholic intellectuals in Germany (Kennedy, 2001: 188; see also Geoghegan and Powell, 2006: 33-34) – the state should only have a secondary (“subsidiary”) role in providing for people’s care, welfare and education.

The State exists for the common good, and that common good is best achieved when families and individuals are enabled to fulfil their proper destinies ... The State does not exist to do for individuals and families and other associations what they can do reasonably well themselves. (Kavanagh, 1964: 57)

Of course these “other associations” included the churches and all of the organisations and services they established and ran, and the institutionalisation of the principle of subsidiarity in Ireland after independence meant that the churches had formal ownership and control of vital areas of social services (for example most primary and second-level schools; most hospitals) and the state’s main role was to offer funding and support. This is a situation that is only now, and only slowly, changing (although a series of scandals in recent years involving members of the Roman Catholic Church in particular have given added impetus to calls for reform).

In youth work too the application of the principle of subsidiarity meant that the main early providers (who in some cases continue to be among the main providers today) had links with one or other of the churches. But as already stated the association of youth with the nation’s future also meant that some early youth movements had a significant political dimension; and indeed sometimes the religious and political dimensions overlapped (as they have continued to do on the island of Ireland up until today, and up until recently with tragic and violent consequences). The effect was that there were often different groups or organisations providing substantially similar services for young people with different religious and/or political affiliations (the main ones being “Catholic/nationalist” and “Protestant/unionist”). Just a few examples will be given here of a pattern whereby groups established as part of a UK-wide organisation and associated either in fact or in the minds of the majority Catholic population with Protestantism, came to be mirrored by “national” or even explicitly “nationalist” alternatives, most commonly set up, like the original organisation, along gendered lines and often leading to tension – implicit or explicit – between the parallel providers.

The pattern started early. The Young Men’s Christian Organisation or YMCA, “widely regarded as the UK’s first national voluntary youth organisation” (Davies, 2009: 65) was established in 1844 with the aim of “uniting and directing the efforts of Christian young men for the spiritual welfare of their fellows in the various departments of commercial life”. It operated throughout the United Kingdom which of course then included all of Ireland. Within just five years the Catholic Young Men’s Society (CYMS) was established in Ireland (1849). An address to the YMCA group in Bray, County Wicklow in 1860 made it clear that the organisations were perceived as having not only different religious catchment groups but incompatible political outlooks. They may have had in common a concern with the spiritual well-being and development of young men but the speaker suggested that the YMCA was encouraging “the right kind of volunteering”, whereas:

The so-called Catholic Young Men’s Associations ... [aim] to make the members of them disloyal to the Government, and to send them out as volunteers to Italy; to support the temporal authority of the Pope. (*Irish Times and Daily Advertiser*, 28 September 1860)

The establishment of the Boy Scouts by Robert Baden Powell in 1908 was a further important milestone in the history of youth work in Britain and Ireland and one that (like the YMCA) went on to have an international impact. Less well known outside of Ireland is the fact that there was another organisation called Na Fianna Éireann (“soldiers of Ireland”, also known as the National Boy Scouts). Although the idea pre-dated Baden Powell’s organisation, having been established by John Bulmer Hobson in 1903, it was only in 1909 that the “Fianna” was successfully re-launched (by Bulmer Hobson and Countess Markievicz). It played a significant role in the nationalist movement and two of its early recruits, Con Colbert and Seán Heuston, were among those executed during the 1916 rebellion (the “Easter

Rising"). A key aim of the Fianna was to stop young Irish men from joining the British army, as a recruitment leaflet made clear:

National Recruiting Campaign, 1913. – Boys, will you enlist? Not in the English Army, but in the Irish one. Join Na Fianna Éireann (*Irish National Boy Scouts*).

The course of instruction includes: – Squad and company drill, Morse and semaphore signaling, first aid and ambulance work, pioneering and camp life, Irish language and Irish history, physical culture etc. etc. (*Weekly Irish Times*, 14 March 1914)

It was not until several years after Irish independence that the Catholic Scouts of Ireland were established in 1927 as a Scouting organisation for Catholic boys but without any militaristic trappings (and it took almost 80 more years for the two Scouting bodies to merge, as Scouting Ireland, in 2004).

This situation was roughly paralleled in youth work services for young women. The Girl Guides were established in Ireland in 1911 as part of the UK entity and as a "sister" organisation to the Boy Scouts. Baden Powell in fact remarked (without apparent intended irony) that "the girls' branch is more important [than the boys'] since it affects those who will be the mothers of the future generation of boys" (quoted in Davies and Gibson, 1967: 38). The Guides, in Ireland as elsewhere in the United Kingdom, played their part in the "war effort" during the First World War. In 1919 Chief Commissioner, Colonel W. Edgeworth-Johnstone commended them after an inspection. The newspaper reported him as saying that "all loyalists had appreciated the patriotic and useful work which had been carried out by the Girl Guides during the war. They were living in times when all loyal citizens ought to devote a certain amount of time and energies to the good of their country" (*Irish Times*, 23 June 1919).

Some years after independence, in 1928, the Catholic Guides of Ireland were set up as an alternative to the Girl Guides and as well as having a different religious ethos the organisation set out to play its part in the process of building the new "nation" and state. They were also engaged in a "war effort" of a different kind: according to Diocesan Commissioner Mrs B. Ward in 1933, they were attempting to counter the "war on religion". Moreover, she said:

The Catholic Girl Guides [are] a National organisation, and every guide worthy of the name [should] work for her country and help towards the revival of its Gaelic culture. One of the biggest things the Guides have to do in that respect is to study the language of their country, to play their native games, and learn the native dances and songs. (*Irish Independent*, 28 February 1933)

In addition to being stratified along religious, political and gender lines, early uniformed youth work organisations in Ireland were also frequently characterised by class differences between the adult volunteers (or "leaders" or "helpers") and the young people they were working with. This also applied in the youth club movement. One of the earliest youth clubs was established in Dublin in 1911 by a probation officer called Bridie Gargan. In 1918 it became the Belvedere News-boys' Club, and in a booklet published in 1948 to mark its 30th anniversary the following account is provided on the nature of a "club":

A club is what happens when a group of young men actuated by Christian charity, and more or less of middle class, and a group of boys of the slums form individual and collective friendships. A club is not a building or anything else on the material

plane. It is like a bridge across the great gulf of class, environment, age, that exists between the two groups. (*Belvedere Newsboys' Club*, 1948)

While parts of the sentiment expressed here – and the particular wording used – may seem dated or even objectionable to many contemporary readers, the passage also contains an acknowledgement of a vitally important aspect of youth work practice that nowadays we would describe using words such as “process” and “relationship”. Both facts – that some of the content jars and that some has a positive resonance for the modern youth work reader – are illustrations of Bernard Davies’s point about the core features of youth work having been “formulated and refined” during the course of its history. The historical examples highlighted above are from the voluntary sector. The next section will show that the same is true when we look at the first, and to date most significant, direct intervention by the state into the provision of youth work in Ireland.

→ A role for the state

The major exception to the historical pattern of voluntary (that is, non-statutory) predominance in the delivery of youth work in Ireland has been in the capital, Dublin, where since the early 1940s there has been a statutory youth service. It is significant that this initiative took place at precisely the same time that there was a breakthrough in the role of the state in British youth work. Bernard Davies notes that despite the historical primacy of the voluntary youth work sector in Britain, by the 1940s “the popular mindset on state intervention had changed significantly”, not least because “whole populations and their economic and social institutions had to be mobilised to fight two total wars” in the space of a few decades (Davies, 2009: 73). Ireland had been part of the United Kingdom during the First World War and while formally neutral during the second it was still badly affected (the period was referred to nationally as “the Emergency”) and it is therefore perhaps not surprising that significant state intervention in youth work began at the same time. In 1942 – the very year that all 16- and 17-year-olds in England, Scotland and Wales were required to register with their local office of the Ministry of Labour, in part to “secure contact between them and the Youth Service” (Board of Education/ Scottish Education Department, 1943: para 1; quoted in Davies, 2009: 73) – the Minister for Education in Ireland instructed the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC) to take appropriate steps to deal with the problem of youth unemployment in the city. The result was the establishment of a sub-committee of the CDVEC called Comhairle le Leas Óige (Council for the Welfare of Youth), since re-named the City of Dublin Youth Service Board (CDYSB).

The setting up of CDYSB (as it now is) might appear to run counter to the principle of subsidiarity discussed above, but in fact the minister was acting at least partly in response to pressure from the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr John Charles McQuaid. That the Catholic Church’s most powerful figure in Ireland at the time was prepared to see the state take an active role in relation to “youth welfare” can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, the initiative was taking place within the vocational education sector rather than the “mainstream” secondary sector which remained firmly in the control of the churches and which (from the perspective of church figures) would be seen as much more important in shaping the values of young people. The emphasis of CDYSB in its early years was to be on the establishment of youth training centres (which were to become known as *brughanna*, roughly the Irish for “clubs” or “centres”) to provide both “formal education in suitable i.e. very practical] subjects” and “physical culture, sport, hiking and camping, the cultivation of allotments, illustrated lectures and talks,

craft work of various kinds, songs and plays"; in other words, broadly speaking the kind of "social and physical training" envisaged by the Board of Education in Britain at the time (Board of Education, 1940: i).

Secondly, and much more importantly perhaps, there was by this time in Ireland an overwhelming consensus between the Roman Catholic Church and the state since the latter was no longer regarded as alien, secular and inimical to the church's interests but on the contrary was to a large degree at the church's disposal. The constitution which came into effect in 1937 had enshrined a "special position" for the Roman Catholic Church, and even if that had not been the case the church could rest assured that most of the political figures who took the key decisions and most of the senior civil servants who implemented them had studied in Catholic schools and colleges and were in possession of "safe pairs of hands". The consensus was made quite explicit on the opening night of the first *brugh na nóg* in Dublin on 8 September 1942. The event was attended by the Taoiseach [Prime Minister] of the day, the Minister for Education, the Lord Mayor of Dublin and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr McQuaid. The first chairperson of the new youth service, Fr D. Vaughan, remarked on this:

Functions such as this are accustomed to be favoured with the attendance of distinguished guests; but I, at least, feel that Comhairle le Leas Óige is singularly privileged to have on its opening night this concord of Church, State and Municipality – co-operating to do honour to our purpose and to do justice to the cause for which we stand. We are conscious of this great honour, for we fully realise that, however tentative and experimental our efforts on behalf of youth may be, tonight we are sent on our mission of youth welfare with the Blessings of the Church, with the sanction of the State, and with the assurance of Municipal co-operation. (Comhairle le Leas Óige, 1942: 1)

Again paralleling the British experience, attempts were made to allay fears that statutory involvement was intended to impose uniformity or regimentation on voluntary youth work or have it swallowed up by an anti-democratic national youth movement as was happening elsewhere in Europe. The British Government circular requiring registration of 16- and 17-year-olds with the labour office stressed that it was not intended "to apply compulsion to the recruitment of youth organisations" (Board of Education/Scottish Education Department, 1943: para 1; quoted in Davies, 2009: 73). The new youth welfare service in Dublin reassured the public that it was not a youth movement in the sense in which that term was used elsewhere.

An Chomhairle [the Council] does not ... presume to take the place of good home life, or to waive the authority and influence of good parents in giving leisure facilities and instructions to the young, but it is honoured in being permitted to defend all youths from influences detrimental to their characters as citizens of Dublin and of Eire. Its influence, therefore, extends more over those whose home life is weakened either by internal disruption or external forces, and it does not claim to be a Youth Movement except in the sense that it urges its youths to "move on" from the street corner and the toss school into the better atmosphere of educational centres and the more natural influences of the home. (Comhairle le Leas Óige, 1944: 5)

Apart from the question of a "movement" and the relationship between youth work and the family, the above remarks raise another issue that has been central to debates about youth work policy and practice in Ireland ever since; namely the question of whether youth work should be "targeted" at specific groups (the

“needy”, the “disadvantaged”, and more recently the “socially excluded”) or provided on a universal basis. This is not just an Irish issue of course. It arose in several contributions to the first Blankenberge history workshop and publication, as the editors note (Verschelden et al., 2009: 157; and for comments on the Flemish case see Coussée, 2009: 48-49).

In fact, in one of the earliest sustained Irish contributions to what we now call youth studies, the Jesuit priest Fr Richard S. Devane discussed both the merits and demerits of youth movements and the related issue of (what we now call!) targeting, as well as questioning the motivations of the state relating to youth and youth work. While rejecting the totalitarian ideologies associated with certain European youth movements, he suggested that their concern with embracing “youth as a whole” was something from which democratic societies could and should learn. Writing around the time of the first significant statutory intervention in youth work in Ireland he wrote:

The difference of approach to Youth between the democratic and anti-democratic states may be said to lie in this: the former have not envisaged Youth as a whole, not even the whole of working Youth. They have been concerned only with the unemployed element of young workers. Moreover, they have been moved to action as regards this helpless section, not so much in the interest of unemployed youth itself as by the fact that danger was to be feared to the State from the demoralisation arising from unemployment of youth; the State acted in self-interest rather than in the interest of youth. (Devane, 1942: 52)

Like the ongoing debate about the relationship between youth movements and youth work (Coussée, 2009) and the question of whether youth work should be universal or targeted (Devlin and Gunning, 2009), the issue of whose interests are being served or promoted by statutory involvement in youth work is a recurring one. It was explicitly referred to in the title of Davies’s publication (1979) challenging the policy move in the United Kingdom “from social education to social and life skills training”. In the Irish context it is one of the key issues addressed in a recent collection giving a critical assessment of contemporary youth and community work theory, policy and practice (Forde, Kiely and Meade, 2009; Treacy, 2009). It is important to remember, of course, that the same question can and should be asked about any institutionalised adult provision for young people, whether “statutory” or “voluntary”.

→ Youth work’s “core features” – a case of continuity?

So far in this article we have come across a number of significant historical dimensions of youth work in Ireland, some of which have lost or are losing their relevance or potency (the role of the churches and most strikingly the Roman Catholic church; the significance of the “national question” in the formation and development of youth organisations) and others that remain central, some of which were summarised in the last paragraph above. To these we might add certain “core features” such as those mentioned earlier, at least some of which have now been officially enshrined in the legislative definition of youth work (and others of which are, I would argue, entirely compatible with it). These include the educational purpose of youth work, particularly its focus on non-formal and informal learning, the voluntary participation of young people and the centrality of positive relationships, the importance of starting with the needs, interests and aspirations of the young people themselves (“where they are at”), but also of striving to go beyond these. To make it clear that matters such as these have been conscious concerns of youth

workers in Ireland for many years, we need only consider some incisive remarks from a magazine published by Comhairle le Leas Óige (now the City of Dublin Youth Service) in 1944 to mark the first Dublin “Youth Week”. In one contribution a “club chaplain” comments as follows:

It is in many respects more difficult to be a youth leader than a schoolmaster. Both are educationalists. To the one the pupils come compulsorily, to the other voluntarily. This is a vital difference. In the one education is direct, in the other indirect. For the one there is a definite programme fixed by outside authority, for the other the programme conforms to the needs and the desires of the members, who have to be inspired by the leaders themselves... (Comhairle le Leas Óige, 1944: 21)

Elsewhere in the magazine a “youth leader” writes about “my club experience”:

The leader has much to give, but what he gives must be the spontaneous offering of a heart fired with a great love of youth, and a will to understand and sympathise with its problems. He must strive ceaselessly to awaken in those young hearts committed to his care a love and trust from which will arise naturally a confidence in his guidance and leadership culminating in the establishment of a bond of friendship which will endure beyond the years of youth. (Comhairle le Leas Óige, 1944: 28)

Of course for the youth worker to adopt such an approach and maintain it consistently it is necessary that he or she possesses a requisite body of knowledge and skill but also the necessary personal qualities, and it cannot simply be assumed just because someone is keen or willing to work with young people that that he or she has these, or has had the chance to develop them. This raises issues of training which have come to be regarded as crucial today but which were also beginning to be recognised in Irish youth work even in the 1940s.

In the main, the leadership of Youth is now carried out by people who have performed a full day's work. The whole responsibility cannot be theirs. In many cases the leaders are completely unsuited for the work ... The establishment of a Training Centre for Youth Leaders should provide the opportunity for [leaders] to come under the influence of corrective training. (Comhairle le Leas Óige, 1943)

The author of these words, in acknowledging that the “whole responsibility” for youth work practice cannot be left with people who have other full-time occupations, was implicitly raising the issue of professionalisation and the associated question of the relationship between the paid worker and the volunteer. This too remains a key issue for contemporary policy and practice. Most commonly the term “professional” is used to mean not only effective, efficient and ethical but also employed (or, specifically, paid). This can create tensions for volunteers who feel that their contribution is demeaned by being regarded as less than or other than “professional”. The National Youth Work Development Plan in Ireland attempted to address some of these concerns. It acknowledged that youth work is a profession – an important statement in itself – but its approach to professionalism is one that need not exclude volunteers.

The doing of youth work, in the sense understood in this Development Plan, requires a particular combination of knowledge, skills and personal qualities. This is the case whether the person in question is a volunteer or a paid worker, and is more important than ever in the light of the current concern with child protection and related matters.

Youth work is not just a vocation, although almost inevitably the people who do it have a particularly strong sense of personal commitment to the work and to the wellbeing of young people. It is a profession, in the sense that all those who do it, both volunteer and paid, are required and obliged, in the interests of young people and of society as a whole, to carry out their work to the highest possible standards and to be accountable for their actions. (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 13)

The working out of such an approach to professionalism and professionalisation in practice is just one of the significant challenges confronting the youth work sector in Ireland at present. In this as in so many other ways it has much in common with its European neighbours.

→ Conclusion

This paper began with the definition of youth work in Ireland's Youth Work Act 2001. It suggested that this definition provides the youth work sector in Ireland with a certain degree of clarity regarding its nature and purpose (although there are of course tensions and challenges when it comes to implementing it and in practice the relationship between youth work and other forms of provision for young people is still sometimes unclear). It also suggested that the definition reflects the historical origins and development of Irish youth work, and the remainder of the article gave selected examples of important elements and events in that history, focusing (of necessity, for reasons of space) on the early years and attempting to identify points of continuity and discontinuity with the present context. The educational focus of youth work, the emphasis on the voluntary participation of young people and the primacy of voluntary organisations in the direct delivery of youth work are aspects of its history that have not only continued into the present but have been enshrined in the legislative framework enacted in 2001.

The author knows from conversations with youth work colleagues in other European countries that this is a situation many would like to be in. The legislative definition is certainly a most important affirmation of significant aspects of the "core features" of youth work as they have been "formulated and refined" over the years (Davies, 2009: 63). Moreover, the publication two years after the Youth Work Act of the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science, 2003) and, flowing from that, other recent developments such as the establishment of an all-Ireland professional endorsement framework for youth work education and training (the North South Education and Training Standards Committee, NSETS) and a Quality Standards Framework (QSF) for the youth work sector (currently being finalised for implementation after the evaluation of a pilot phase) have helped to put in place an infrastructure that has the potential both to serve and sustain youth work's distinctive contribution, through non-formal and informal education, to young people's individual and collective needs.

However, a further very important development must be noted at the conclusion of this paper. In mid-2008 the recently appointed Taoiseach, Brian Cowen (who succeeded to the office after the resignation of Bertie Ahern), announced that the Youth Affairs Section located within the Department of Education and Science (as it had been for most of the previous 40 years, in keeping with the view that youth work is primarily an educational process) was to be integrated within the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), to be re-named the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). The OMC was established in 2005 and is attached to the Department of Health and Children, but it also serves as a "strategic

environment” within which that Department’s responsibilities relating to children can be better co-ordinated with early years’ education (the responsibility of the Department of Education and Science) and the Youth Justice Service of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Lalor et al., 2007: 288). The integration of the Youth Affairs Section within the OMCYA (as it is now called) is likely to prove as significant in the long term as any other initiative in the history of Irish youth work, but it is too early to anticipate the full implications. One immediate result was that responsibility for youth work, assigned under the Youth Work Act 2001 to the Minister for Education, was reassigned by statutory instrument to the Minister for Health and Children, despite the fact that youth work is defined in the legislation as a programme of education and the related fact that the statutory bodies given responsibility under the act for ensuring its provision (primarily by voluntary organisations) are the vocational education committees.

These apparent incongruities may turn out to be relatively minor administrative matters, and may be far outweighed in the long term by the benefits of integrating policy and services for young people with those for children (and there are many obvious potential benefits). However, the experience elsewhere of such “integration” would suggest the need for caution, particularly the experience in England and Wales where the distinctive educational role of youth work has been severely undermined by developments in policy and services for “children and young people” in recent years. Bernard Davies quotes the words of Beverly Smith, the British Government’s “youth minister”, in 2005: “Primarily [youth work is] about activities rather than informal education. Constructive activities, things that are going to enhance young people’s enjoyment and leisure ... I want activities to be the main focus” (Davies, 2009: 64).

Nothing that has happened since then suggests that the alarm felt by most youth workers who heard (or heard of) those words was misplaced. Hopefully everyone involved in youth work in Ireland – policy makers themselves, practitioners and the young people they work with – can learn from the experience of our near neighbours and ensure that the advances made in recent years through the youth work legislation, the national development plan and related initiatives, can be consolidated and built upon further in a manner that acknowledges and responds appropriately to the challenges of the contemporary context but also recognises and retains the valuable dimensions of youth work that have evolved over the last (first?) 150 years of its history.

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