The Purpose and Outcomes of Youth Work

Report to the Interagency Group

Maurice Devlin and Anna Gunning

The Purpose and Outcomes of Youth Work

Report to the Youth Services Interagency Group

Maurice Devlin and Anna Gunning

June 2009

PRESS

Published by the

Irish Youth Work Press
20 Lower Dominick Street,
Dublin 1.
Tel: 01 8729933
www.iywc.com

ISBN 978 1 900416 72 6

Design and Print by

Metaphor
Gandon House,
Lucan Village,
Dublin
Tel: 01 6212007/6212008
Fax: 01 6212017
Email: meta2@indigo.ie

Contents

Foreword

The environment in which Youth Work functions is changing at an unprecedented rate. Economically we are facing recessionary times. In policy terms we are increasingly approaching the work with an integrated and collaborative intent. A focus on young people's rights, equality and youth participation has become more central to our work and there is a greater emphasis on identifying outcomes. The challenge we face, particularly in a youth service setting, is to remain focused on the essence of youth work, while working effectively across a range of issues.

The evolution of Youth Work over many decades has brought us through numerous permutations as a sector. With that evolution has come clarity of purpose, definition of our role and function, clear and well defined models of practice and increased effectiveness. In short we have developed as a distinct and professional discipline with a significant contribution to make in supporting young people through their transition to adulthood.

Youth Work is a voluntary and non-formal education process taking place in an informal setting, and as such it has a significant contribution to make to many aspects of the lives of young people. Youth Work addresses issues of formal education, health (including drugs, sexual health and physical well being), community, housing, family life, crime, employment, parenting, relationships, citizenship and many others impacting on young people.

This broad interest has created opportunities for Youth Work to collaborate with many agencies on shared agendas but it has also brought with it an assumption by many that youth work is simply a 'method' of working that can be shoehorned into work programmes that are problem focused and welfare based rather than educational, developmental and rights based. Indeed many agencies with no background or understanding of the youth work discipline are appointing what they call 'youth workers' to engage in work with young people that cannot honestly be defined as 'youth work'. Youth Work can contribute significantly to these shared agendas, but that contribution will be more effective where the youth work process is understood.

It is also important to understand the contribution which volunteers make to youth work. The term youth worker is used generically to describe volunteers, full and part time staff. Indeed volunteers far outnumber the paid staff in our employ. Volunteerism should not be equated with amateurism however. Volunteers are subject to comprehensive training and are expected to comply with the same standards of reflective and supervised practice as paid staff. This amounts to a service that is extraordinarily cost effective as well as professional. More importantly, it is a service that is driven by principle, values and commitment.

As a group of agencies working in a youth service context the Youth Service Interagency Group (YSIG) are cognisant of the need to better articulate the purpose and outcomes of our work. We were therefore delighted when the Irish Youth Foundation agreed to support our research initiative. Our confidence in appointing Anna Gunning and Dr Maurice Devlin to carry out the research was well based and we are satisfied that the work contained in this report represents a key statement on the position of youth work in contemporary Ireland.

The report considers how youth work is defined and explores the programmes and activities that contribute to youth work practice. It addresses the informal educational nature of the work and the personal and social development of young people engaged with. It explores the outcomes and impact of the work. It considers the youth work process and the centrality of youth participation and the relationship between young person and youth worker in that process and finally it explores how youth work contributes to the development of social capital. Most importantly it illustrates all of these themes through the insightful and clear observations of young people and youth workers.

The conclusions arrived at are unambiguous. Youth Work has a clearly defined and broadly understood purpose and it delivers effectively on that purpose with significant impact. Our work is far from over however. These important results can be built on further in the future, with more detailed and longitudinal studies building on our culture of critical reflection as we continue to deliver quality, focused and effective practice in collaboration with others.

Diarmuid Kearney
On behalf of the Youth Services Interagency Group

Acknowledgements

Youth Services Interagency Group

The Youth Services Interagency Group would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this research.

In particular we would like to thank Anna Gunning and Maurice Devlin who have produced a piece of work which is both scholarly and accessible and which will, we are sure, provide an invaluable resource for practitioners, managers and policy makers into the future.

We are also most appreciative of the young people and youth workers who gave so generously of their time and insight and without whom the work would not have been possible.

Finally, we want to thank the Irish Youth Foundation for their generous financial support and encouragement to the initiative.

Authors

The authors would like to express their sincere thanks to all the young people and youth workers, paid and volunteer, who gave so freely of their time and participated so constructively in the research project, and the members of the Interagency Group for their advice and support throughout the process.

They would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Orla Hill and Kathryn McGarry of the Youth Research Programme in the Department of Applied Social Studies at NUI Maynooth for their very valuable assistance with data input and analysis.

Disclaimer

Dedication

This publication is dedicated to the memory of Tony Reid, who contributed to this research as a youth work practitioner and whose untimely passing we acknowledge with great sadness.

Tony, a dedicated Foróige Leader, had a strong commitment to Foróige and his beloved Loughglynn Foróige Club. He was actively involved in the organisation for some twenty two years and provided strong leadership to North Roscommon District Council. Tony firmly believed in the unique capabilities of every young person and instilled a yes we can attitude in all those he worked with. Members and leaders alike speak of Tony with sincere respect and admiration. He was a remarkable man who saw the best in everyone and endeavoured to develop the innate goodness in the young people of Loughglynn.

Tony's community spirit was one of his most endearing characteristics and through his work he instilled a feeling of belonging to their community in the young members. He encouraged them to be actively involved in the world around them and take responsibility for how their community develops. Tony left a strong club and a legacy of can do attitude for which he will always be remembered.

1. Introduction

This report presents the results of a research project commissioned by an Interagency Group comprising several of Ireland's largest and longest established youth work organisations: Catholic Youth Care (CYC), City of Dublin Youth Service Board (CDYSB), Foróige, Ógra Chorcaigh and Youth Work Ireland. The research was funded by the Irish Youth Foundation. Its key objectives were:

- To develop a definition of youth work which can reflect the common ground held by the organisations commissioning the research while accommodating difference.
- To consider how youth work and youth services relate to the work of other youth-related disciplines and services.
- To identify the outcomes of youth work and recognise its boundaries.
- To identify the knowledge, skills and experiences that are gained by young people through engagement in the youth work process.
- To identify what is particular about youth work's method and approach and the relationship between this and its outcomes.
- To assess the social benefits of young people's and adults' engagement in the youth work process.

The research design as finally agreed by the researchers and the Interagency Group consisted of a combination of qualitative and quantitative research in five case study sites in different locations and attached to different organisations, supplemented by desk research into the literature (Irish and international) on the nature and outcomes of youth work. The five case study sites were:

- Blanchardstown, County Dublin (Blanchardstown Youth Service, Foróige);
- Ennis, County Clare (Clare Youth Services, Youth Work Ireland);
- Loughglynn, County Roscommon (Loughglynn Foróige Club);
- Rialto, Dublin 8 (Rialto Youth Project, CDYSB)
- Ronanstown, County Dublin (Ronanstown Youth Service, CYC).

The qualitative research took the form of semi-structured interviews with key personnel (nine respondents in total), focus groups with selected workers, paid and volunteer (33 in total), and focus groups with young people in each location/group (41 in total). The quantitative research consisted of questionnaires completed in each site by paid and volunteer youth workers (64 in total) and by young people participating (172 in total). *These were not intended to be systematically representative* but rather to provide an indicative overview of some of the attitudes and opinions of young people and adults and to generate insights and questions for further consideration. In the case of all of the methods employed (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires) the emphasis was on respondents' perceptions of the nature of youth work, its purpose, benefits and outcomes. Further detail on methodology and copies of the questionnaires are provided in the appendices.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. Section 2 summarises the findings of the desk research into the literature on youth work. Section 3 presents the findings relating to the views of adults, and Section 4 the views of young people. Section 5 briefly synthesises the findings and relates them to the literature and Section 6 presents the key conclusions arising from the research.

2. Youth Work – A Literature Review

Definition

It was agreed at the outset by the Interagency Group that the definition of youth work in the Youth Work Act 2001 would provide a starting point for the research. According to the Act (S3), 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 participation, and which is:
> **a** Complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and
> **b** Provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.

This definition had been designed to take into account the views of youth work organisations and interests and was broadly in keeping with the approach to youth work taken in successive policy documents over the previous twenty years (Department of Education, 1980; National Youth Policy Committee, 1984; Government of Ireland 1985, 1995; NYCI, 1994). The definition stresses 'the fundamentally developmental and educational nature of the work; the fact that it rests on the voluntary participation of young people; and the fact that it has been, and is, in the main provided by voluntary organisations' (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 13).

Programmes and Activities

For many people not experienced in youth work, the term immediately suggests a certain type of activity (usually recreational) organised in a particular type of place (a club, 'den' or centre). As will be made clear below, for youth workers themselves it is at least as important *how* programmes and activities are facilitated and engaged in as *what* the programmes and activities are or *where* they happen. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify in broad outline the type of activities and programmes which young people take part in through youth work. The list below comes from the *National Youth Work Development Plan 2003–2007* (Department of Education, 2003) and it very closely corresponds to the outline of activities and programmes included in a publication sponsored by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (Curriculum Development Unit, 2003). Youth work can include:

- Recreational and sporting activities and indoor/outdoor pursuits, uniformed and non-uniformed;
- Creative, artistic and cultural or language-based programmes and activities;
- Spiritual development programmes and activities;
- Programmes designed with specific groups of young people in mind (including young women or men, young people with disabilities, young Travellers, young lesbians, gay men or bisexuals);
- Issue-based activities (related to, for example, justice and social awareness, the environment, development education);
- Activities and programmes concerned with welfare and well-being (health promotion, relationships and sexuality, stress management), and
- Intercultural and international awareness activities and exchanges.

(DES, 2003: 13).

We could add to this list more informal activities like socialising and meeting friends, engaging in conversations with other young people and with adults in a safe and comfortable environment. Even this informality, however, does not just happen; it needs to be planned, facilitated and managed so that young people can gain the maximum advantage from their involvement in youth work. This means paying attention to process.

> *… what all of these various methods and activities share, in the youth work context, is the focus on process: on the ongoing educational cycle of experience, observation, reflection and action, and – essential for this to happen – on the active and critical participation of young people. The successful facilitation of this process clearly requires substantial experience and a high degree of skill on the part of those responsible, the educators, whether paid or volunteer (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 13).*

The Personal and the Social

It is significant that the definition in the Youth Work Act uses the term 'personal and social development' of young people. This suggests that youth work is concerned both with the individual young person and with her/his place in the wider world, her/his relationship and interaction with the community and society of which s/he is a part. This is also the view of youth work which has prevailed in Britain (not surprisingly given historical links between the two countries):

> *There is widespread consensus that youth work's core purpose is the personal and social development of young people, provided through informal education. Linked to this, its purpose is increasingly framed in terms of its contribution to social inclusion [and] the development of social capital (Merton, 2004: 5).*

Furthermore, while there are some significant differences in how youth work is perceived and provided for in continental European countries, it seems that the twin dimensions of the personal and the social might provide a common denominator, as the following definition from a current Council of Europe/European Commission partnership publication makes clear:

> *[Generally] youth work is defined as a domain of 'out-of-school' education and thus linked to non-formal or informal learning … Most definitions contain two basic orientations reflecting a double concern: to provide favourable (leisure time oriented) experiences (of social, cultural, educational or political nature) in order to strengthen young people's personal development and foster their personal and social autonomy; and at the same time to offer opportunities for the integration and inclusion of young people in adult society by fostering societal integration in general or preventing the exclusion of disadvantaged groups (Lauritzen, 2005; ECKYP 2008).*

This approach is also broadly in line with the definition of youth work in *Investing and Empowering*, the 'youth strategy' recently published by the European Commission (2009).

Non-Formal and Informal Education: the Youth Work Curriculum?

It will be noted that the latter two quotations above introduce the related concepts of social inclusion/exclusion, social integration and social capital. These, and the role of youth work in relation to disadvantage, will be returned to later in this report. First some other aspects of the nature and purpose of youth work require further comment. One is the distinctive nature of the learning and development that takes place in and through youth work. The terms 'informal' and 'non-formal' have both been introduced already. While these are different in meaning, it is important to stress that both are relevant in a youth work context. A recent publication from the Youth Service Liaison Forum in Northern Ireland defined them as follows:

> *Non-formal education refers to learning and development that takes place outside of the formal educational field, but which is structured and based on learning objectives. This is differentiated from informal learning, which is not structured and takes place in daily life activities within peer/family groups etc. Youth work interventions typically result in both non-formal and informal learning (Youth Service Liaison Forum, 2005: 13).*

Given the longstanding consensus that youth work is above all else a form of education, the question arises whether the concept of *curriculum*, so central to formal education, is also relevant in youth work. Opinions have been divided on this for some time, with many people rejecting the notion of curriculum as being overly prescriptive, inflexible and inappropriate to the youth work context where the needs, aptitudes and aspirations of the individual young person are paramount. However, a view has gained currency recently that the concept of curriculum may provide a useful focus on the need for an overall sense of purpose and direction while still accommodating an emphasis on the needs of the individual (such an emphasis being in fact a *key part* of youth work's purpose and direction, its own curriculum). The 'model for effective practice' guiding youth work in Northern Ireland adopts this approach to curriculum, regarding it as being principally an expression of values, principles and processes and a means whereby youth workers can communicate the nature, purpose and value of their work to each other and to external interests:

> *We view the term curriculum from a broader perspective [than in formal education]. In this context [curriculum] is an attempt to identify the central elements of an educational process in a form that is open to scrutiny and capable of being translated into practice (Curriculum Development Unit, 2003: 8).*

In a similar vein, a recent text on youth work 'process, product and practice' in Britain provides a working definition of curriculum as:

> *… the means by which the educational values, purposes, methods, processes, as well as possible outcomes [of youth work] are made explicit (Ord, 2007: 110).*

Outcomes and Impact

What might some of the 'possible outcomes' be? Not surprisingly, it is possible to look at them in terms of the twin dimensions of the personal and the social already introduced. A comprehensive report commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills in England set out to evaluate the impact of youth work provided and secured by local youth services (Merton et al., 2004). It drew on a documentary review of fifty local services and in-depth reviews of fifteen such services, as well as thirty case studies of practice and a survey of 630 young people who participated in youth work. The survey findings show that young people believe youth work to have positive outcomes for them as individuals, in terms of increased confidence and self-esteem, new friends, new skills, information and advice and enhanced opportunities, including increased employment prospects. The interviews and case studies also provide qualitative evidence of tangible outcomes which young people and youth workers attribute to youth work, including

re-engagement with formal education or reduction in drug use. In addition, the reviews and case studies demonstrate a wider impact on young people's relationships with local communities and with society at large.

> *By working with young people in schools or hospitals for example, youth workers are able to help young people to make better use of those services; and in some cases, enable the services themselves to become more responsive, and hence more effective, in meeting young people's needs and aspirations. There is also evidence of consequential impact upon communities. There are examples of youth work widening the social and recreational opportunities available to young people; mediating between different groups of young people, and between young people and local adults, leading to impact on social cohesion; or enabling young people to influence and improve civic life (Merton et al., 2004: 8).*

Further evidence of the impact and outcomes of youth work – specifically street-based youth work – are reported in another British study entitled *Reaching Socially Excluded Young People* (Crimmens et al., 2004). This study used a ten point 'social exclusion inventory' to identify problems addressed by youth work projects and to chart the progress of young people over the course of their participation. The authors acknowledge the difficulty of being certain that any improvements discerned can be attributed to youth work alone, but taken together the findings nonetheless make a persuasive case for the positive impact on young people of involvement in youth work even over a period of a few months.

- Almost 29 per cent were unemployed or not in education or training when the research team first visited the project. This fell to 21 per cent at the second visit 3–6 months later.
- Those with no income and not in receipt of benefits fell from 24 per cent to 20 per cent between visits.
- Those deemed to be a core member of a group involved in 'anti-social' activity declined from 18 per cent to 4 per cent (a decrease of more than three quarters).
- Regular attendance and active participation in structured youth activities rose from 26 per cent to 37 per cent; the proportion banned from youth provision dropped from 3 per cent to 0.
- The numbers known to be offending diminished by almost a third, from 45 per cent to 31 per cent.
- The proportion in adequate accommodation rose from 62 per cent to 68 per cent and the numbers sleeping rough fell from 7 per cent to 1.5 per cent.
- The numbers of young people maintaining contact with statutory welfare agencies over the period increased from 4 per cent to 15 per cent.

Overall, this study concluded that 'street-based youth work with socially excluded young people does work – not always, not everywhere, but probably more effectively than any other method yet devised for reaching these socially excluded young people' (Crimmens et al., 2004: 70).

A study of the benefits of the youth service in Northern Ireland provides further examples of positive outcomes for young people in terms of both their personal and social development (Youth Council for Northern Ireland, 1998). It included a survey of more than 726 participants in 92 different youth groups which found that these groups were identified by the young people as important providers of educational and recreational opportunities and significant sources of information and advice on social and personal issues. Over one half of members of uniformed groups and groups with full-time workers, and just under one third of members from groups with part-time workers, were involved in some form of community service through youth work, a significant indication of youth work's broader social contribution. The groups with most opportunities for young people's active participatory involvement were those with a high staff-member ratio, a low turnover of staff and those which owned rather than hired their premises. A representative control group of 82 non-members of youth groups were found to be almost twice as likely to think that their opinions were not listened to or valued by adults (23% feeling 'unvalued' as opposed to 12% of the members). Qualitative research with young people who expressed high levels of satisfaction with their youth group membership highlighted in particular the chance to socialise and make new friends, the variety of activities, the fun and enjoyment, the opportunities to test values and learn new skills and knowledge (something of which members were consciously aware), involvement in decision making, exercising responsibility, and very positive, trusting and equitable relationships with workers (YCNI, 1998).

In Scotland, youth work is regarded as one element of 'community learning and development' (CLD) which is defined as having two broad sets of outcomes, closely corresponding to the dimensions identified above: personal development and building community capacity (Communities Scotland, 2006). A recent study which aimed at 'identifying and quantifying the outcomes of community learning and development' (Scottish Government, 2008) assessed the perceived positive outcomes for 231 participants in a range of CLD settings and – while cautioning that the research findings were subjective and retrospective and need to be augmented by other methods – the authors concluded that:

> *Overall, there was a positive distance travelled toward the defined outcomes by the respondents who completed the personal development indicators. This means that CLD is supporting people to become more confident individuals,*

> *more effective contributors, responsible citizens and successful learners. Equally, across a range of indicators, those involved in community capacity building provide evidence of improvement in how their groups function and the impact that this has on communities (Scottish Government, 2008a: 4).*

An interesting example of an Irish study which provides quantitative evidence of the developmental outcomes of a programme using a youth work approach is the report on the North Mayo Project run by Foróige in partnership with three post-primary schools and with Area Development Management Ltd and Meitheal Mhaigheo. Complementing a range of qualitative evaluation data, a standardised measure of young people's development over the period of a year was implemented in the form of the 'Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory' which was administered to the 45 programme participants and to a matched control group of non-participants on a before-and-after basis. The key finding was that the self-esteem of the participants improved by a statistically significant amount over the course of their involvement in the programme.

> *At the beginning of the school year, the average self-esteem of the project participants was significantly lower than the control group, while at the end of the school year there was no significant difference between them. As judged by the Coopersmith Inventory, the project has had a measurable impact on self-esteem. This finding is hugely important for the project. It is strong objective evidence to place alongside the subjective accounts of the impact of the project on the various intra- and inter-personal and technical areas of personal effectiveness (Canavan, 1998: 28).*

The significance of a research finding such as this goes beyond the benefits for the individual young people, because research has also shown that people with higher levels of self–esteem are more likely to be active participants in and contributors to community life and to be tolerant and sensitive to the needs and circumstances of others (see for example Locano and Extebarria, 2007; Sotelo, 2000). Building self-esteem is therefore a prudent investment at the levels of community and society as well as the individual.

Values

Judgments about what to invest in, whatever the nature of the investment – personal, emotional, social, financial – are based fundamentally on *values*, and it is possible to make explicit some of the core values which underpin youth work (many are implicit in what has gone before). The recently reviewed UK Occupational Standards for Youth Work include a statement of values which can reasonably be taken to be widely shared in the youth work sectors in both Britain and Ireland, since the review process included representation from both parts of Ireland as well as England, Scotland and Wales, and the works referenced include Ireland's *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education, 2003) as well as the relevant British sources. These values include:

- Young people choose to be involved in youth work, not least because they want to relax, meet friends, make new relationships, to have fun, and to find support.
- Youth work starts from where young people are in relation to their own values, views and principles, as well as their own personal and social space.
- It goes beyond where young people start, to widen their horizons, promote participation and invite social commitment, in particular by encouraging them to be critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them.
- It treats young people with respect, valuing each individual and their differences, and promoting the acceptance and understanding of others, whilst challenging oppressive behaviour and ideas.
- It is underpinned by the principles of equity, diversity and interdependence.
- It recognises, respects and is actively responsive to the wider networks of peers, communities, families and cultures which are important to young people.
- It works in partnership with young people and other agencies which contribute to young people's social, educational and personal development.
- It is concerned with how young people feel, and not just with what they know and can do.
- It is concerned with facilitating and empowering the voice of young people, encouraging and enabling them to influence the environment in which they live.
- It safeguards the welfare of young people, and provides them with a safe environment in which to explore their values, beliefs, ideas and issues.

(Lifelong Learning UK, 2008)

Taken together, this list of values communicates a strong sense of the *ethical* dimension of youth work, its commitment to human well-being, both at the level of the individual and of the broader common good.

Process, Participation and Relationships

All those with an interest in youth work – young people, parents and communities, youth workers, managers, policy makers and funders – have a legitimate concern with establishing how effectively this ethical commitment gets translated into practice. The examples given earlier of the quantitative evidence of the impact and outcomes of youth work will probably not surprise those most closely involved in youth work practice, who encounter instances of its positive effect on young people's lives on a regular basis – this is largely why they have become involved in the first place. It has become widely recognised however that being able to express the personal and social benefits of youth work in a language that makes sense to people outside the immediate youth work environment is increasingly important, all the more so in a context of straitened public finances and a heightened policy emphasis on accountability. The challenge is to do this in a way that is authentic and that keeps faith with the principles of youth work and the values outlined above. These principles and values demand that the informal educational dimension is recognised as being as important as the non-formal, but as one writer has recently put it, 'nowhere is *informal* education the language of policy':

> *Making eye contact, smiling or grieving can find no comfortable place within a set of directives which stress 'life and social skills' and 'sex education'. Yet youth workers want to communicate that when a young person cannot usually smile, the mundane act of smiling becomes hugely significant. The critical interventions of youth workers can make a mundane nothingness into something extraordinary (Spence, 2007: 8).*

The 'critical interventions of youth workers' can only be effective if the workers – whether paid or volunteer – have developed (through training and experience) the knowledge, skills and personal qualities to be able to intervene appropriately: in the right way, at the right time, in the right place. As the *National Youth Work Development Plan* puts it, youth work is not just a vocation, it is a profession, specifically one concerned with the facilitation of learning and development, in other words with education. In a passage quoted earlier, the *Development Plan* states that:

> *The successful facilitation of [the youth work] process clearly requires substantial experience and a high degree of skill on the part of those responsible, the educators, whether paid or volunteer (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 13).*

A large part of the skill involved has to do with facilitating the active, constructive and critical *participation* of young people in all aspects and at all levels of the work. This has been a key element of the framework for understanding and developing youth work as far back as the National Youth Policy Committee's report (the 'Costello Report') in 1984. More recently, participation is recognised as fundamental to youth work in both the Youth Work Act 2001 and the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (2003). Participation is a central part of the *process* of youth work: it is a way of working which allows young people to be involved in decision making and to exercise responsibility. In addition, participation can be an *outcome* of youth work: because of youth work, young people may choose to participate more actively in society, individually and collectively; and structures may be put in place whereby young people can participate in decisions about services and policies which impact on them.

Structures are certainly an important part of participation, and without appropriate structures it is difficult to ensure that participation formally happens; but at least as important is the nature of the *relationships* between the adults and the young people because without positive relationships young people will not even want to avail of the opportunities to participate, and their participation when it happens will not be meaningful and wholehearted. Good relationships require that adequate space is created for the *informal* dimension of youth work practice, a dimension that is sometimes difficult to quantify. Informal education is important both intrinsically for what it offers the young person (positive feelings and enjoyment, a chance to feel good about oneself and how one relates to others, the opportunity to care and be cared about) and instrumentally for the other things it allows to happen. This brings us back to the point made earlier that youth work is about both non-formal and informal learning. As a recent article in *Youth Studies Ireland* suggests:

> *… Non-formal education relies upon the informality of youth work relationships for its success, especially with those young people who are targeted because of exclusion or disaffection (Spence, 2007: 7).*

Social Inclusion and Equality

The mention of exclusion and disaffection raises the important question, touched on briefly earlier, of the extent to which youth work is or should be regarded as (and provided as) a universal service for all young people who want it and can benefit from it or a targeted intervention for young people who are in one way or another disadvantaged (personally, socially, economically or educationally). Of course youth groups exist in all kinds of neighbourhoods, communities and localities throughout Ireland, but in practice public funding to support youth work (and specifically the employment of full-time paid workers) tends to be targeted at areas which meet certain criteria for being classified as disadvantaged, and the Youth Work Act explicitly provides for 'particular regard' to be had to the

needs of young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. While the principle that scarce resources should be targeted at areas of greatest need is not contested, the mechanisms for assessing need, and locating it in spatial terms, are not as robust or discriminating as they could be. In any case, the idea that youth work is particularly associated with disadvantage does a disservice to all young people, having the potential (at least) to stigmatise those who take part in certain types of project or programme, and lessening the chances of others to be exposed to opportunities and experiences from which they, and their communities, could benefit. The *National Youth Work Development Plan* itself makes a strong statement about this matter and its relationship to general public perceptions of young people.

> *The view of young people, and of youth work, which underlies [the Plan] is an unequivocally positive one. Young people are not a 'problem' to be solved, any more or less than adults; and youth work is not primarily about solving social problems. It is rather about adults and young people working together to further personal, community and social development. Given this positive orientation, it follows that youth work should be regarded as something from which all young people can benefit, rather than a remedial service for those whose needs are not being met otherwise. It also follows that an investment in a comprehensive youth work service is an investment in a better future for society as a whole (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 14).*

This last point makes it clear that youth work at its best is socially inclusive in a number of related senses. As the framework of values presented above makes clear, it should be open to all young people, should promote equality and should not discriminate unfairly against individuals or groups. Of course like other 'goods and services' as defined under the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004, youth work must not discriminate against any young person or adult on any of the nine equality grounds (gender, religion, 'race' and ethnicity, membership of the Traveller community, disability, sexual orientation, family status, marital status, age). However, the commitment to equality in youth work is not simply a matter of adhering to legal requirements. The *National Youth Work Development Plan* set out to uphold the provisions of the equality legislation 'in spirit as well as in letter' and presents a vision of youth work 'which values diversity, aims to eradicate injustice and inequality, and strives for openness and inclusiveness in all its dealings with young people and adults' (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 15).

A review of contemporary youth work literature suggests that as well as promoting equality youth work should also facilitate young people collectively – again, all young people, not just some – to contribute to social development and positive social change. This too has been recognised as an important part of youth work's purpose since the National Youth Policy Committee's report more than a quarter of a century ago:

> *If youth work is to have any impact on the problems facing young people today then it must concern itself with social change. This implies that youth work must have a key role both in enabling young people to analyse society and in motivating and helping them to develop the skills and capacities to become involved in effecting change (NYPC, 1984: 116).*

Social Capital

A further, related sense in which youth work is socially inclusive is that it provides particularly rich possibilities for the development of social capital. A very influential idea in contemporary social policy, social capital has been defined by its best known advocate as 'the features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives' (Putnam, 1995: 664–65). Youth work might be said to rest above all on the building of positive 'networks, norms and trust' among young people and – vitally – between young people and adults. It therefore provides abundant opportunities for the development of intergenerational solidarity, a form of social capital which is particularly important to sustain at a time of rapid change and instability and one which will become even more significant in the years ahead when intergenerational tensions are likely to intensify as fewer people work and more require care. This was recognised in the *National Youth Work Development Plan.*

> *While Ireland has … in proportional terms … a larger youth population than the European average, it shares in the longer-term trend towards an ageing of society as a whole. However, this does not in any respect lessen the importance of effective and adequately-resourced youth work provision. Quite the contrary: the need for social cohesion, stability and equity in the future, when the dependency ratio will be substantially greater than at present (i.e. the numbers of 'economically active' will be proportionally much lower) makes the social, civic and political education of young people, in formal and informal settings, much more important, not less* (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 2).

3. The Views of Youth Workers

This section will present the views of youth workers, paid and volunteer, about the nature, purpose and outcomes of their work. In the case of the qualitative data, emphasis will be placed on the words of the workers themselves. Names, when given, are pseudonymous (except for those of the researchers/interviewers). Only where it is thought relevant will particular characteristics or attributes of the speakers or respondents be pointed out (for example gender or age, voluntary/paid status, type of group or area). Quantitative findings drawing on the questionnaire survey are in most cases summarised in diagrammatic form. It is important to emphasise – as stated in the introduction and detailed in Appendix 1 – that the surveys of youth workers and young people were based on 'non-probability' sampling and do not claim to be representative of youth work in Ireland.

The Purpose of Youth Work

While the precise words used varied, there was virtual unanimity within the focus groups that the key purpose of youth work is primarily educational and developmental. It might be suggested that the 'dominant discourse' of youth workers, when they are asked spontaneously to identify the purpose of their work, is personal development within a community context. This worker's view was not untypical:

> *One thing I hold dear is the sense of our mission or our purpose. That to me is the point I bring most people back to about what we're doing, what we're trying to achieve … enabling young people to develop themselves and contribute to the development of their communities.*

Responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire survey (as interpreted and analysed by the researchers – see Appendix 1) confirmed the primacy of personal development but also the recognition by workers of a range of other dimensions to youth work's purpose, including the building of positive relationships, caring for young people, giving them opportunities for association and developing the community. As Figure 3.1 shows, the personal development dimension featured in more than half of the responses when youth workers were asked to complete the statement 'In my own opinion, the *key purpose* of my work with young people is …'. There were however some interesting differences relating to the status of the respondent as a full-time paid, part-time paid or volunteer worker. Among volunteers, as Figure 3.2 shows, there was a more even distribution between the most commonly mentioned categories, with association and caring for young people being the two most commonly mentioned and personal development in third place.

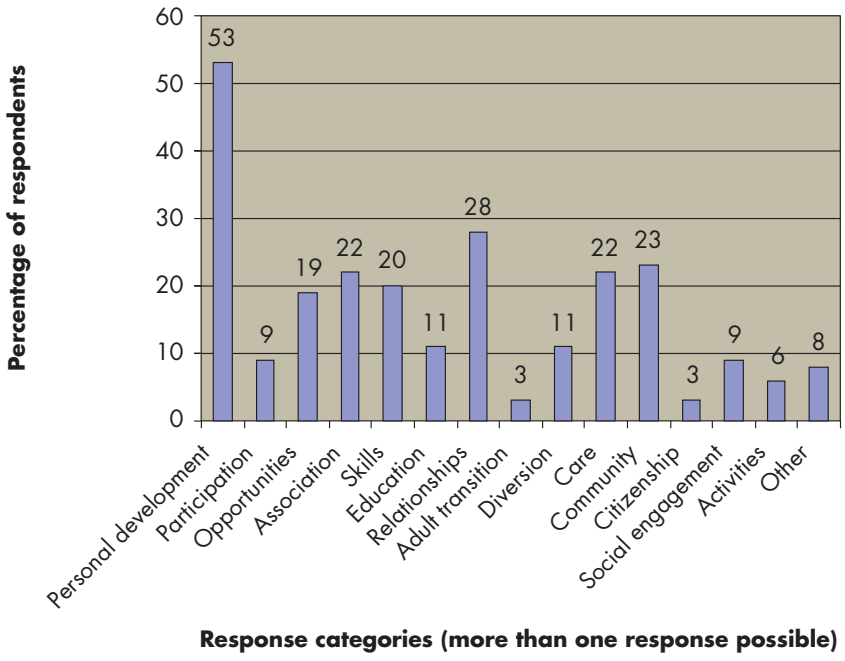


Figure 3.1: The key purpose of my work is …

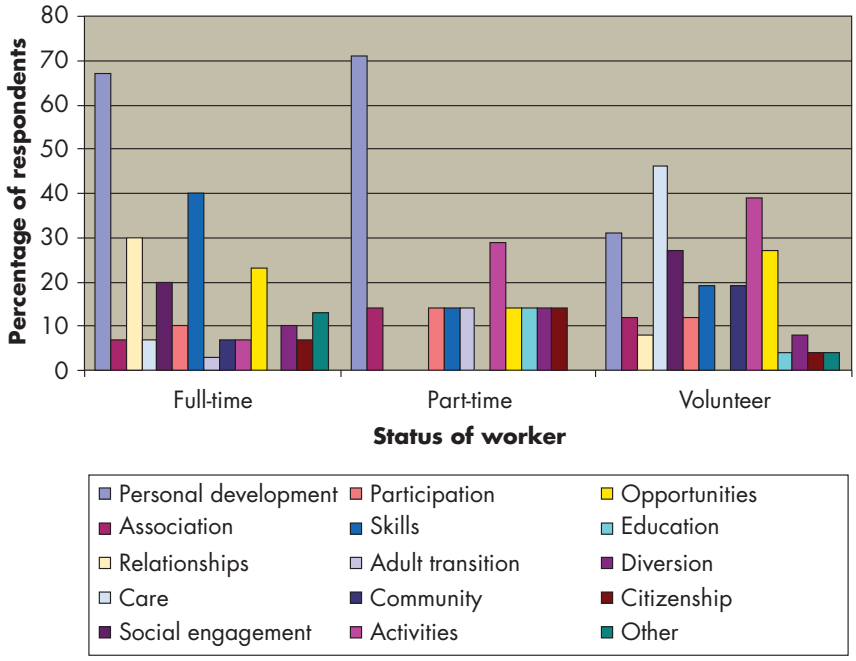


Figure 3.2: Key purpose by status of worker

These findings may be compared with the responses given when youth workers were presented with a fixed range of options for identifying the purpose of youth work (as opposed to being asked an open-ended question). A separate question in the survey listed ten statements of possible aims of youth work and asked respondents 'how much importance would you attach to each of these aims in your own work?', on a scale ranging from 'none at all' to 'a great deal'. The full list of statements can be consulted in Appendix 2. For the purposes of analysis the ten can be categorised here under five broad headings. In many ways these headings correspond to the 'sociological models of youth work' outlined by Hurley and Treacy (1993), based in turn on the framework of Burrell and Morgan (1979) for understanding models of education – except that an additional category (care and welfare, the second below) is included. The headings are:

- *Traditional* ('character-building') aims.
- Aims focused on the *care and welfare* of young people.
- *Personal development* aims.
- *Social education* aims.
- Aims concerned with promoting *social change*.

Figure 3.3 shows that personal development aims receive the highest scores (the mean score for each category is indicated, the closer the bar being to ten the more popular the aim). Whatever the status of the worker (volunteer, part-time paid and full-time paid) personal development aims score the highest (with means of more than nine in each case), but *all four other types of aim also receive high scores*, especially among volunteer workers. Taken together the findings appear to confirm the view that youth workers see the personal development of young people as the key purpose of their work but in a context where other aims are also important.

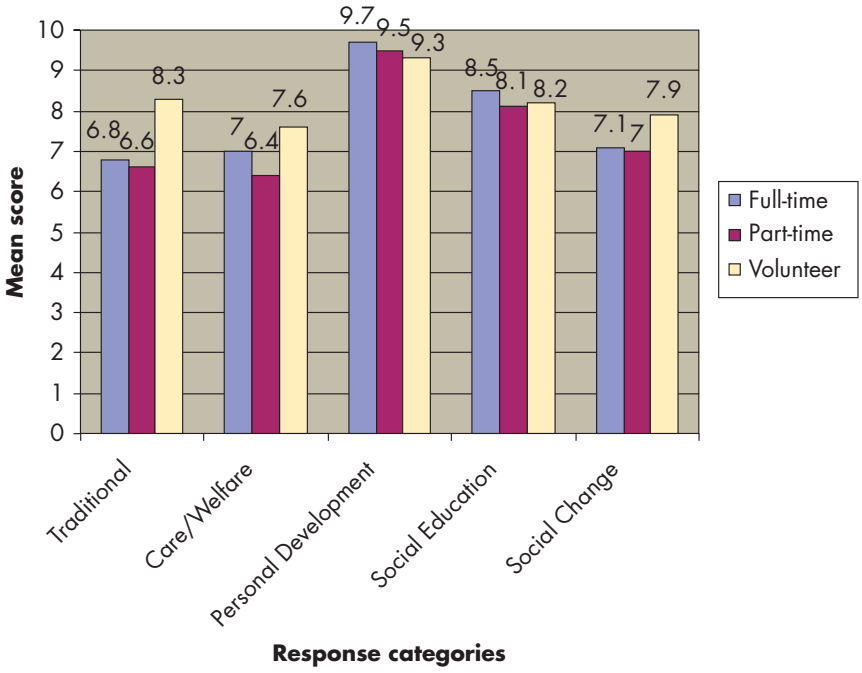


Figure 3.3: Perceived importance of youth work aims by status of worker

Universal Benefit of Youth Work

It is important to note that in discussing the purpose of youth work, responses tended to focus on the educational and developmental benefits for young people in general rather than for particular target groups. The prevailing view was that youth work is equally relevant for all young people regardless of socio economic status, although there was also a recognition that funding is currently not adequate to reach out to all young people who wish to participate. The following quote reflects a common perception among the workers.

> *And then there's pressure on us to go into the other direction in the other part of [the community], where there is a huge youth population, but it's not a disadvantaged area. Sometimes I think that's a problem for youth work, it's become ghettoised, it's become seen as a response to [the] disadvantaged.*

The definition of 'disadvantage' was also an issue for respondents. The focus on socio-economic disadvantage - while important in terms of recognising and responding to material inequalities – was seen by many to limit the potential for youth work to reach out to all young people.

> *And I also think, we would find an awful lot of youngsters who are supposedly quite advantaged, in serious crisis in their lives, seriously lacking skills around communicating, around expressing their needs and concerns, youngsters who are self-harming because they don't have a way in which to talk about what is going on in their lives. I know we do prioritise communities where there is a greater need, but we do recognise that any youngster can benefit from youth work service.*

It was suggested that a mix of social backgrounds within youth groups was inherently beneficial for young people and also can have advantages from the worker's point of view.

> *...yeah, in terms of the make up of the group and the risk levels, so you can counterpoint things and you can manage it differently, because if you've too many of the same [issues or problems] it is counter productive, it's very difficult to manage, it's just so difficult to manage.*

The issue of the benefits of diversity within youth groups will be returned to later in this section.

Starting from Needs, Discovering Potential

Returning to the focus group discussions, it is clear that the individual young person is regarded by youth workers as being at the heart of the work they do. The starting point is to recognise young people's needs and their possibilities for growth and to value the fact that they have *voluntarily* entered into the youth work relationship with empathetic and supportive adults:

> **Mary** I think while you're encouraging them to take a lead in their own development, they are the core person and it's about them at the end of the day.
>
> **Joan** But they are responsible for their own lives.
>
> **Mary** They choose to turn up every week and it's up to us then to try and help them achieve whatever they want to achieve and try to meet the needs that they have.

This requires an openness on the part of the youth workers to what the young people will make of the opportunities they are offered.

> *You want to give the young people the opportunities and information that they can have a better life that they don't have to accept what's there. It's giving them the information, provide them [with] the skills to make new decisions, to look at new opportunities. Each of our groups go, in a way, where the young people take you. We don't go in and say I want to do A, B and C with this group and I want these outcomes. It's very hard to predict some of the outcomes that your groups are going to have. You might have a certain idea in your head and all of a sudden you have to go this way and that way. I suppose it's the needs of the young people have to be priority and that they take very quick ownership of the group and they bring the group where they need it to go.*

In allowing young people the space to 'bring the group where they need it to go' it is very important to recognise that each of them is starting from a different point, and each will have different potential. Even enabling them to begin to think in terms of their own potential may be a very significant outcome.

> **Kay** It depends on the starting point as well, where they're at when they come in. For some, they may be more advanced and will end up on the Board of Directors, for others, just to be turning up and starting to participate and engage with leaders and youth workers, that would be an outcome. It does depend on that.
>
> **Anna** More like a potential, an individual reaching their potential?
>
> **Kay** Yeah. Actually, if you had a youngster who is concerned with their potential, I think you have achieved a huge amount, as opposed to just drifting through life …

The Group as a Resource

Most youth work takes place in groups of one kind or another and the collective dimension is seen as very important by workers: the group is itself a resource, a means through which young people can develop new skills and qualities. However it must be small enough, and meet frequently enough, for the workers and the young people to get to know each other as individuals (and of course that has resource implications).

> *I think when you have smaller groups as well and you're seeing them maybe twice a week or three times a week, you're able to build up that relationship and you might take a long time for them to trust you, but you might be the only significant person in their lives and I suppose building up to that stage when you have that trust.*

Relationships

This raises the vital issue of relationships and their centrality to the youth work process. Time and again this was highlighted by respondents.

> *I mean it's primarily about relationship right, I'm fed up listening to myself saying this but I am totally convinced of the relationship and of how central and important it is to young people buying in and getting involved. It's about opening up all sorts of conversations with them without any obvious conclusion to them only that you're interested and it's the interest and the relationship that I think is the thing that actually gets work done and once you have the relationship you can generally do whatever you like.*

The findings suggest that youth work rests on the simultaneous operation of multiple different types and levels of relationships. One is the relationship of the young people to the adult workers, who may be the only adults outside their own families (or unfortunately in a small number of cases even including their own families) with whom they consistently engage in constructive and positive interaction.

> *We are also an adult with a listening ear and that's something, besides their family member who could be too busy in a lot of cases today. We are an adult … who they can bounce things off and we're not going to say 'that's a terrible idea, that's a dreadful idea, but if you want my opinion, do you want to hear mine, this can happen, that can happen'. So I think we are a listening ear.*

Youth work also facilitates the development of positive relationships between young people themselves, within the peer group or across different age groups, where the model of the youth worker-young person relationship can act as an example.

> *[The] youngster has an experience of having been met by an adult who will actually sit and listen to them, who will respect them for who they are, who will accept them for who they are and who will offer them an opportunity to whatever, be heard, get involved in activities. We would have a strong tradition of organising summer camps for younger children, it's the only thing we do with pre-teens, the only reason we do it is that the older teenagers work as volunteers on the programme. For a lot of young people it's the first time they experience that level of responsibility, where they are responsible for looking after 9–13 year old children.*

A further dimension is the way in which young people have the opportunity to observe positive relationships *between adults* or within adult groups, and – most importantly – adults have the opportunity to have positive experiences of young people. This can have a very important knock-on effect on local intergenerational relationships and community spirit – significant elements of social capital as discussed earlier.

> *It's part of their lifestyle here to come in and the familiarisation with staff who have been here for a long time and everybody is on first name terms … there is always a little bit of a laugh going on here with the staff … young people just love coming in and seeing what's going on. They hear the laughter so it feels happy to them.*

Another worker summed up the multiplicity of the relationships at play as follows:

> *They get important social skills developed inside the youth club because they are with their own age group, they are with the members, the senior members, the leaders, they are kind of speaking to all different age groups, they are speaking to their own age, younger age[s], their peers, older groups, so there is more confidence there.*

Participation and Empowerment

It is clear that the youth work relationship is different from the type of institutional relationships between young people and adults which prevail in most other settings. It is an explicit part of youth work's concern as described by these workers to facilitate the active engagement and participation of young people, to promote their empowerment and the development of a sense of working together as partners. Of course this has also been an important policy aim in youth work for many years: the White Paper published to mark the UN International Year of Youth in 1985 was titled *In Partnership with Youth* (Government of Ireland, 1985). One of the focus group participants was a former teacher who thought that his own approach to working with young people was very different in the youth work context.

> *[As a teacher] … I used to take a lot of sport, take the kids away on trips, all sorts of trips, field trips or whatever it was. Then I realised that … although I got on better with the ones that I had spent more time with outside the classroom – that's natural isn't it – we were still the boss, in all these situations. You still had the power thing, it was totally different and it was very much on my terms.*

Another participant who also had experience both of youth work and formal education made a similar point.

> *The big difference between the teacher relationship and the leader relationship is the leader is encouraging a member to take control, they want them to take control … of the situation and handle the situation and they are just there to support them, to just point out something that is going on that maybe they don't see. You were asking about what they've got from it … For me, observing members, I would say the one big thing I see and you can actually see it happening as the year goes on, the way they can speak …*

Developing 'the way they can speak', giving young people a 'voice', is an important aim and an explicit principle of youth work in Ireland (Department of Education and Science, 2003). This means that constructive challenge from young people to adults is to be encouraged, just as they should find their relationships with youth workers challenging in a constructive way.

> *You know young [name] … she is quite an intelligent young person, beautiful, quiet, very, very quiet girl, she was with us for fifteen months, coming every week to the club, getting involved, very quietly, speaks very gently. One day I said something and her whole body language, she sat up in the chair and she took me on and I said thank you God. She said 'I hope you're not offended?' I said no, you've just made my day! All of a sudden she felt that she could challenge, at last … she had all the skills, but she needed the permission nearly, to take on an adult.*

Attitudes and Values

This approach to relationships, participation and empowerment reflects the fundamentally positive attitudes of youth workers to young people. This too is in keeping with the policy position: the previous section quoted the *National Youth Work Development Plan* which was based on an 'unequivocally positive' view of young people and youth work. 'Young people are not a "problem" to be solved, any more or less than adults; and youth work is not primarily about solving social problems' (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 14). This view is not always widely shared outside youth work, and changing attitudes to young people at community level and in society more generally is part of what youth work sets out to do.

> *A lot of the young people we work with would be viewed in a particular light. A lot of the work is with the most at risk, [but] not all of it. The young people are viewed in a particular way at times within the community. A lot of the work we do has been about how those young people find their voice and then feed back in a positive way what it's like to be them, in their own community.*

This positive attitude is reflected in youth work's 'open door' policy, its determination to create space for young people and to continue to try to engage with them even when there are difficulties.

> *I think the door is always open here in some sense and that's not like some kind of fairytale, it doesn't mean it's not hard, that the struggle and the conflict is not very difficult sometimes, because it is, but the door still needs to remain open and negotiations need to be able to happen. I think for some young people in schools, rule breaking is very black and white and maybe there are particular judgements that are attached as well for young people, like where they're from or the type of behaviour or family that has gone before. The base here for us is to try not to do that, it's trying to do something different, it's trying to negotiate in a different way with young people.*

Attitudes are closely related to values and for some workers the core values have a faith dimension.

> *I suppose the underpinning [value] is the passion for young people and to see young people doing well, I think that is common across the youth service. I suppose the approach is how you treat people, probably, I would have to say there is a Christian approach here, I won't say a Catholic approach but there is definitely a Christian approach here … I suppose you are looking at young people and you want the best for them.*

Taking Time

It follows from all that has gone before that for youth work to be successful, sufficient time has to be allowed for relationships to develop and for growth and development to take place.

> *… in my experience I get a lot of particularly vulnerable young people, they come in and they have very little self-confidence, they have very little attention span, very little want or need, they think, to learn. So it takes a lot of time to actually build them up to the stage where they are actually achieving things and recognising their achievements. Once you see them actually doing that and once you see their faces, when something clicks and they realise, God, I've done this myself, I never thought I could do this, it's just that glimmer.*

There were numerous references in the focus groups to the need for patience and the importance of recognising that while there are often valuable outcomes for young people in the short term, more profound benefits can often take years to emerge.

> *I mean [it's been] four and five years and some of them now are coming through as leaders, when you really feel a huge shift, a huge change, really measurable change, but that's over a period of time of them buying in as children. It's over a long time, there are a lot of highs, a lot of lows as well within that and they've worked with different youth workers and very strong relationships with the youth project …*

Workers in one project spoke about a young person whose behaviour had been particularly challenging and who would have been 'given up on' long ago in most other settings. Eventually, and just recently, they had seen a breakthrough.

> **Clare** I would have started about ten years ago in the homework club and he was extremely challenging as a child then. It's been a really intense long road with him and workers at a different point have had intense contact with him through different processes and [name] would have done a lot of work with him around the group that went on an exchange … . I would say that he really pushed boundaries, he really pushed boundaries with us, he really tested us, up to last year, up to this year.
>
> **Sean** If he had been in school, he would have been expelled twenty times over, no problem.

In another project the entire approach is based primarily on long-term group work with young people, although different staff might be involved at different stages. This has the added benefit that young people are having positive relationships with a wider range of adults.

> *We don't run short pieces of work, or at least we try not run short pieces of work, because the value of them is limited. Sometimes you might work with a group, for us a short piece of work might be two years, but we would have other histories where we are working with groups of young people in a much longer context. It might not be necessarily the same staff that work with them, they could pass through a variety of types of groups here, which means that their involvement in the service here could be ten years, fifteen years.*

As a result of this intensive engagement over time between young people and the workers, the youth group often comes to hold a special significance for the young people in the long term, and it can continue to be a source of support and guidance even after they have stopped being a regular participant or 'member'. The following is just one of many such examples which were cited in the focus groups.

> *We would certainly try to create an environment where anyone at any age could come back in, whether they were older or young, whether it's a year gone or five years gone. We had a youngster come back to us recently who must be twenty seven and had a very difficult relationship with his father, but hadn't spoken to anyone about it. Since he was a teenager he was getting help from us but his father died and he just hit a complete [ ] and he rang one of us and said 'Can I come for coffee, I need to talk?' Not been here, not been inside the door for at least five years, the guy is well into his twenties, but just needed to get over that. He actually needed to go for bereavement counselling, but we were able to … we are not necessarily the answer, but we can help somebody work out what it is they need …*

Outcomes: Positive Feelings

The young man in the example just given had gained something lasting and invaluable from his involvement in youth work – a sense of confidence that there were people who would be there to support and comfort him in difficult times. Emotions and feelings are difficult to quantify but they are an unmistakable part of all social life and they play a vital role in youth work. As long ago as 1980, in his influential publication *Creators Not Consumers: Rediscovering Social Education*, Mark Smith highlighted the importance of positive feelings, alongside knowledge and skills, as part of the personal attributes which youth workers are attempting to enable young people to develop. Furthermore, because of the absence of a formal curriculum based on syllabi and precisely measured individual performance leading to a situation where there must inevitably be 'winners' and 'losers', youth work allows for attention to the feelings of the individual young person to an extent to which formal education never can. There were many examples of this given in the focus groups, including one of a young man who had a very negative experience of formal education but was given the opportunity to 'shine' within the youth work context because the workers allowed him to demonstrate his expertise in fishing, and to act as a guide for the adults and other young people on a fishing trip.

> *In the lunchtime club [we had] a slot where people got to show their skills, that they never got a chance when they were in school. [Name] was an example of that … he was a walking demon in school … He went through that whole process [of a fishing demonstration] and it was a huge turnaround for him, because he then suggested, in his evaluation, that the … group should go for a fishing day … and of course he was 'cock of the walk' because he caught everything, we caught nothing.*

Outcomes: Positive Experiences

The youth workers in all the case study sites highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for young people to have a good time, to enjoy themselves and take part in activities that make them feel good about themselves. This in itself is an important outcome.

David [about an awards event] It was terrific, the whole thing was just terrific.

Ann The smiles on the young people's faces, they will go up and tell you everything about their club. It's great.

Ciara It's great for getting them to reflect, it's not just about the end product, it's the process as well, for them to come out and actually say what benefits they have gained from doing the project.

Outcomes: Positive Behaviour

Placing an emphasis on positive feelings and on positive experiences means that workers are also encouraging and reinforcing those aspects of young people's *behaviour* which are positive, and obviously thereby discouraging negative behaviour, including anti-social behaviour but also behaviour which is harmful or damaging to the self.

[S]ome young people might come in and their behaviour might be quite challenging and they take over the group and try and … sabotage the group … then you might notice, it could be a year later, it could be only a few months later, that they start maybe not to do that and to participate more and stuff. I think that's a result for that person, that they have learnt to look at their behaviour and manage it and change it in a way that is beneficial to them. They might be able to come in and say, rather than coming in shouting and screaming, they might be able to say, I'm not in good form today … I know they are quite small [outcomes] and they are very hard to put down on paper, but I think that is a huge thing.

There were other similar examples of young people becoming more reflective and 'self-conscious' of how their behaviour impacts on themselves and on others. One young man who was training to be a leader was able to look back and think about his own negative behaviour and relate that to how he would go about working with young people himself.

[Name] is doing his junior volunteer [programme] now … and he was really nervous. I was talking to him about it and he would have been a very angry young man and he [used to] lash out really, really badly, just verbally. We were sitting down and he was telling me he was nervous about working with young people that are like that. But he was able to say, I think what I'll do is lower my voice tone because I know … if people shout at me, and they used to shout at me, I get louder and louder, so I'm going to try and [change] that. For him to say that.

Outcomes: Positive Influences and Social Integration

The importance of relationships has already been stressed above. These include relationships with others (both adults and other young people) whom the young person might not otherwise know or have significant contact with, and they can be an important source of positive influence.

[One young man] also developed a group of friends which he probably wouldn't have made friends with [otherwise] and they were from his area. They were from much more stable families and probably if it had been a different environment I would say their families would have been reluctant to allow their kids to involve themselves with this young lad. He had all the look of the troublemaker on the street, this fella had. He is still involved. The [centre] has been refreshed. He was involved in the re-fitting out of it and came down voluntarily. He calls in to check in with us and he'd chat away. He's now doing an apprenticeship in plumbing …

Workers also gave examples of how young people from different areas, neighbourhoods or social classes were coming together in the youth group in a way that did not (and would not) happen otherwise.

Then there is some people in the community who will say ah well you only work with the hooligans and thugs. Or other people who will say well you work only with the kids from the posh area. And we do have a really good mix of youngsters on a lot of the projects. Which I think has real benefits for both. I think the fact after a night here you'd be dropping a kid into a local authority estate and back out to a posh house, the fact that they've come together and been friends. They will only get that experience here because they won't get it in school or in any of the other social groups they are likely to be doing.

Outcomes: Learning from Experience

Related to the point made earlier that there is no formal 'passing' or 'failing' in youth work programmes is the overall emphasis on learning by doing or 'experiential learning'. This means that all experiences are looked at positively as providing opportunities for experimentation and reflection. Evaluation is an integral part of the process, regardless of the precise nature of the activity or programme.

> *One very important thing I've learnt over the years in the club is, no matter what they actually go to do, it is never going to be actually wrong, they would learn, something mightn't turn out right, but they learn if they don't do their jobs right, as a group they've learned from the evaluation.*

Outcomes: Skills

It has already been shown that youth workers seek to promote the active involvement of young people in decision-making. This is just one of the ways in which youth work can facilitate young people to learn new skills which are transferable to other areas of their lives or which they can use subsequently in work, training or education. A youth club leader had seen this many times when he spoke to young people about their experience of school or, afterwards, third-level education.

> *I've known ex-members who are involved in societies in college who were amazed at how lacking in skills their peers were when it came to organising. I've heard youngsters in Leaving Cert and fourth year saying that when it came to organising a trip, they were nearly taking the job from the teacher and then realising, oh we're not organising it, someone else is. It was alien for them that somebody was doing the stuff. The motto [here] has always been 'Never do for members what they can appropriately do for themselves'.*

Outcomes: Qualifications

Youth workers can always offer encouragement to young people in their educational careers but increasingly they are also exploring ways in which they can become more directly involved in supporting and enabling young people to acquire qualifications. In one project young people who were alienated from the school system (in some cases actually expelled) were being given the chance to study for formal state examinations in the centre itself and there were some notable success stories.

> *We were doing Art with this young fella [name]. He refused to draw. He was going to the museums et cetera. Had the theory. He was doing a practical. We got around him and said draw. He dug the pen into the paper. We said you'll have to just let the pen go. And he started to draw. And for a week he had to draw every day. The intensity of that tuition. He got a C in Art in the Leaving Cert.*

There are numerous other ways in which youth workers help young people to gain qualifications, including liaising with businesses and other organisations to seek funding and other support.

> *We're going through a good patch now, especially with the … fund in the area here that we are involved in where anyone who goes on to what we call 'real' third level, as opposed to PLC, will get a grant and we just give it out every year in September.*

The importance attached by the respondents to working closely with other agencies and orgnisations will be returned to later in this section.

Outcomes: Jobs

Directly related to their support for young people in gaining qualifications, youth workers were able to point to examples where it was clear that their involvement with the youth club or project had an important impact on the young person's choice of occupation, or the occupational choices which became open to them.

> **Paul** We'll have our few doctors and solicitors very shortly.
>
> **Liam** We have our first ever teacher in the area.
>
> **Paul** Yeah the change in the place here, I've lived here since 1977, I'm a long, long time here and now at this stage we have something like four or five young people are in the Gardai, which would have been unheard of. So something is happening, in spite of all the negative stuff, there is something happening.

Outcomes: Families

So far attention has focused on the beneficial outcomes for the individual young person. But youth work can also have a direct and indirect positive impact on the family life of young people.

> *It's also the effect that they have on their own families, its not just them, but whatever experience they have on one of the projects, they go home and something is said that can influence the people who are surrounding them, a chain reaction that we can never put numbers on or put in a report at the end of the year.*

Furthermore, through their involvement in youth work the adults themselves, whether they are paid workers or volunteers, may find that their own approach to family life and their relationships with their children may change for the better.

> *One example, a parent who is a leader as well, said prior to becoming a leader herself if there was a phone call to be made on behalf of their child, they would be running out to do it, whereas now she'd be saying, go over there now and ring up and get the number and do all that yourself. Prior to that, she said she would have done all of that for them. There is a big tendency with parents to do too much for their children. She said because she had the experience of the club she would be much more aware of getting them to do what they can for themselves, rather than do it for them.*

It appears therefore that youth work has the potential to have positive outcomes for whole families and not just for the young people who take part.

Outcomes: Communities

Beyond the level of the individual and the family, youth work can have a positive impact on community life. Often the youth club or project was the only example people could call to mind of a community initiative involving people of different age groups.

> *You can see the benefits as well in the community, young people will involve themselves more within the community and getting involved. I have a group that are getting involved, off their own bat, with a gardening initiative with adults from the community. If there wasn't a youth project there to facilitate that, would you have these young people coming along and taking that much of an interest in their own community?*

Community integration is also facilitated by the involvement of local community members in the management and governance of the projects.

> *[The management model] allows the people sitting around the table, who are from the local community and from the other agencies to discuss, to talk, to debate, to actually develop strategies and to … influence what's actually happening in the project, as opposed to just look after the bank account and look after the reports back to the Companies Office or whatever it might be. It's an interesting model I think.*

Related to the points made earlier about time, in cases where a youth project or centre has been in existence for many years, it may have become a defining part of the community's very identity.

> *We are very lucky that the centre is twenty four years in the community, so all the young people we work with, say maybe their mothers or aunties or uncles have come through the use of the centre, so if the kids are here 'til 11 o'clock at night, the parents don't have a problem … I think the centre in itself, I know it's a youth service, but it is also community based in that you have parents and grannies and everyone coming in with every problem that isn't youth service based. They would come in with lost cats or anything …*

Outcomes: Improving Local Conditions and Services

An important part of the local community dimension is the fact that the youth project and its workers are very often to the fore in identifying local needs and problems and working with other groups and agencies to develop responses, or in some cases even being instrumental in setting up additional agencies and organisations if necessary. In this way they play a significant leadership role in local and community development.

> *Everything which has been set up since [twenty years ago], the youth project has been instrumental. Whether that was the the youth initiative, the information centre, the family centre. The youth project always did [the] work around these issues. Did some family support when there was no family support.*

The Non-formal/Informal 'Curriculum'

Just as the literature review identified some differences of opinion regarding the role of curriculum in youth work and indicated that often the differences are in fact about terminology rather than principles, the focus group participants tended to take the view that whatever term is used the important thing is to acknowledge the distinctive nature of youth work and that it is about both non-formal and informal education. This means that a youth worker never stops looking for opportunities to facilitate learning and development for young people.

> *You don't become a classroom. A lot of youth work has gone that way. Curriculum based. I'm not against curriculum. But I am against it when it becomes so regimented that you don't talk to young people from that group if you aren't in that group. That destroys the work. Use every opportunity you have to talk to young people, particularly in this type of situation. [It's] a state of mind. It's not just about the group setting. You're working with them all the time. It's about conscious practice. Dealing with young people wherever you see them.*

'Wherever you see them' might be in what appears to be a very casual encounter and it may take the form of spontaneous conversation. In the hands of a skilled and experienced youth worker, conversation is a very effective tool for learning or support, but it may not look like 'work' to an outsider. An awareness of the use of physical space and positioning and the significance of non-verbal communication is also important.

> *I think sometimes I must look like I do no work because I am the biggest offender of having young people at the desk or in that space, it's like confessions every day. Sometimes I wouldn't even be looking at the young person I'd be doing something and they would be rattling away telling me something. Sometimes I have solved the hardest crisis for them in that time, just sitting there, where they would never bring it up in their youth group or anything because they would have to announce it in front of everyone, where they would come in and sit behind me and they would tell me something terrible, maybe they're in trouble with the police or whatever the issue that day for them is.*

In a similar vein, two workers spoke about the importance of conversation with young people and of the need to retain space for spontaneous interaction. There was some concern that this could be under threat in an environment where workers have to give an account of the measurable outcomes of their work.

> **Rachel** I've had three brothers in at separate times from the age of eight to eighteen, three brothers in at different times, just come in today, just to see how things are, just to have a bit of a chat.
>
> **Ann** That's not measurable and I don't know how you can measure that, I have a problem with the new youth work message, I came from a youth work setting myself, years ago, as a young person. Then I went into work in my own community, then I came here. My problem is, I am terrified that we are going to lose the spontaneity, the relaxation, the feeling of, those people are too busy, we can't go in and disturb them.

Yet despite the emphasis on spontaneity and conversation and the recognition of the role of the informal, the workers were keen to stress that the approach to *all* aspects of their work should be rigorous and professional. The same worker who said 'sometimes I must look like I do no work' also said the following.

> *We see ourselves as being professional in the way we approach young people, the fact that we come into work and for us this is our career, our profession that we have taken on. So for us, it's important that we plan our programmes properly, that we work as a team, that we evaluate our programmes and that we are giving the best service possible that we can, depending on funding and space and other staff, that we can provide for the young people who come through the door.*

A manager in another project also emphasised the need for the work to be 'focused'.

> *We would have a very clear framework that staff would work with young people, based on identifying the young people's needs … their interests, what they want to do, based on the objectives, the outcomes we are looking to achieve with young people. Staff would plan programmes with clear measures and outcomes and would be supported then to follow through and to evaluate and share those with young people as well, in a meaningful way not to go in with a list of objectives … A lot of the outcomes that happen for young people would be small but they would be thought through. It's not unfocused.*

Being able to take such a focused approach to the work or to work out of a conscious framework of analysis and action requires that adequate training is provided for both paid staff and volunteers. One volunteer spoke of how he became aware of the importance of training, having previously thought that youth work was just something that people were naturally good (or bad) at.

> *I wasn't sure, but now when you're going out and you're doing the training and stuff you can see that some people are very natural at it, a lot of people like myself need that bit of structure to help them to learn where they're going and to think about why they are doing stuff and that. It does seem to help, you go to visit clubs and you see some of them where, people have taken the time to do the training and they sit down and talk about it and they do their planning, they have their stuff, they know what youth work is, even if they can't articulate it as easily, then you go to some other clubs and there isn't the emphasis on it … There is a big difference in what the young people get from those youth clubs. You walk in the door and you see a massive difference between … the experience and quality in the other.*

Judging Success

A key issue for youth workers, and increasingly so in the current policy environment, is the need to be able to make reliable judgements about the quality and effectiveness of their work, and to communicate this to their peers and to external interests. There was some unease in the focus groups, as already indicated, with the emerging language of indicators and outcomes, and a concern that systems based on 'measurable' results could lack sensitivity to some of the most vital and valuable aspects of youth work process and practice.

> **Mary** I suppose that's one of the difficulties, something I am not particularly comfortable with. I think once we start to name like these are the indicators, this is what you want to see … some youth services will say very strongly if you have a young person on your Board of Directors, you've achieved participation, you know it's fine. To me, that is not an indicator of any level of success, it may or may not be a measure.
>
> **Ruth** It depends on the starting point as well, where they're at when they come in.

However there was also a recognition that some explicit framework for gauging effectiveness is essential.

> *Even from our point of view sometimes personally you are very disillusioned because you don't know whether you are actually achieving anything, then you have moments of clarity where it all crystallises and you go thank Lord. But you can spend time, because you don't have goals to reach, you can't tick the boxes, you have nothing like a checklist to say, this is really working, so you can feel like you're floundering. That can be a disadvantage from the worker's point of view.*

Broadly the consensus appeared to be that it is very important to be able to *name* the successful outcomes of youth work – for young people, for adults, communities and for society as a whole – but it is not always possible to *number* them, in other words to express them in quantitative or numerical terms. There may however be possibilities for quantifying more of youth work's outcomes than is the case at present and this is something which workers thought merits further discussion, perhaps in the context of the Quality Standards Framework. The main thing is that any system recognises the distinctive nature of the youth work relationship and how it differs from other forms of practice and provision.

Relationships with Other Services

This raises the question of how youth workers think their own work relates to the work of other professions that work with young people, and how they think they are perceived by other organisations and services locally and nationally. For the most part workers believed that they are highly regarded in their communities, and that other professions respect the particular value which young people appear to place on their involvement with youth workers, but there may not always be sufficient understanding of what youth work is trying to achieve. Workers also found themselves called upon regularly to support the work of others.

> **Mary** The main thing is trying to stop them asking us to join their groups and help them. It's a real challenge for us … 'Will you be on the board, will you be on all the sub-groups, will you get involved in the cohesion process?' And we're like any time we invest in that, is time that we cannot invest in young people, so that's our thing … .
>
> **Ruth** I think there is a lot of respect for what we do, but maybe there isn't a complete understanding of what we do, which can lead to maybe us taking on more than … we have the capacity to do … .
>
> **Mary** [S]ome people … say well [the organisation] is a service provider and we're not a service provider, we're a voluntary organisation who work in partnership with young people or in partnership with the community.

Discussion often focused on relationships with local schools since this is an area in which many projects have developed partnerships. In some cases the experience was very positive, in others there were tensions.

> *With individual schools, we have some … excellent relationships, we've worked out deals where youngsters come here for a couple of hours and are at school for a couple of hours. Then we have some schools that we wouldn't have good relationships with. We won't necessarily want good relationships with them. We are open to form a relationship where we feel it can benefit a youngster. If the school is hiding the fact that it has kids on rolling suspension, things like that, an outside agency might be seen as a little bit of a threat.*

An important part of the youth work process with schools was the way in which young people themselves could be actively involved in supporting and encouraging other young people who were experiencing difficulty.

> *We ran a joint [programme] between [placename] and here, which picked up the kids at the end of fifth class, in an after school project, worked with them right through sixth class, worked with them through that transition … into first year and continued to work with them in first year. So we were the sort of stable contact with them … some of it was around improving their own personal skills, in terms of dealing with conflict, or dealing with issues … [K]ids that are constantly getting suspended because they didn't deal well with conflict, we tried to work on that … for those kids with very low self-esteem and then the kids who were already very isolated in the classroom situation about improving their social skills and maybe deliberately involving them with some of the young people who might support them in the school system.*

Age Groups

One of the few areas in relation to which there were some strong differences of opinion across the different case study sites was the question of the age group(s) which should be targeted by youth work. In some places work with younger children is included in the overall programme of the organisation.

> *We've always argued this, that the seeds should be sown for youth work early, because there is a structure around it, I used to worked very structured with them when they were that young, because that's what young children need. Then, as they move on, obviously then you'd [have] less and less structure … I know it's not considered by the VEC to be youth work, but I'd argue that point, that it's right that it should be in there from the beginning, it shouldn't be something that you should have only when things go wrong [later].*

Another view was that while work with younger children is very important, it is not the role of youth workers to do it.

> *We have taken the decision that we work with the teenagers, so we work with the kinda twelve to teenager [range], do you know what I mean? We have a lot of them going into secondary school at twelve, we work on their transition into the secondary school, that age upwards. To be honest, I think that things pre that age are really about childcare, not about youth work. I do believe that there is a need for childcare, but I don't think the youth service is necessarily the group for providing that.*

It seems that in all places, the needs of the younger age groups poses a dilemma for youth workers.

> *I find a lot of the children that are coming for the youth club are only eight years of age, it's sad and it's hard but you have to actually turn them away … I know there is homework groups and after school groups and things like that, but there is a big need there, there is a huge gap. If you can get small kids from when they are six years of age and get them into the system, not get them into a system, but get them that they are not hanging around the shops or throwing stones at buses or something like that, if you get them in from that age you have more of a chance of keeping them all the way through.*

In general there seems to be an increasing tendency to develop pragmatic responses based on local need, although one manager cautioned that youth workers should not allow work with younger groups to displace the work with older teenagers, who might be experienced as more challenging.

> *[Our age range] is twelve to eighteen … Now that is moving, that is being addressed, that's being looked at in terms of what's been described as feeder clubs, working with the younger age groups, the need and demand for that [from] the community, from the leaders in the organisation, internally themselves. It just has to be very carefully balanced that it is not in response to people just finding it very difficult to engage effectively with older teenagers and then moving the goal posts. That is something we've got to be careful about.*

Rewards and Challenges

What do youth workers find rewarding and/or challenging about their work? For some insights we can return to the findings from the questionnaire survey. In open-ended questions, workers were asked to identify the aspects of their work which they found rewarding and those they found challenging (they could identify more than one aspect). Figure 3.4 summarises the overall findings in terms of rewards. It is clear that young people's achievements are experienced as by far the most rewarding aspect for workers: almost two thirds of those surveyed identified this aspect, with significant proportions also mentioning relationships, young people's enjoyment and the appreciation shown by young people to workers. If we look at the gender breakdown (Figure 3.5) we can see that there is a somewhat different pattern for men and women: young people's achievements rank even higher among men, being mentioned by four out of five male respondents, while relationships are mentioned by more than five times as many women as men.

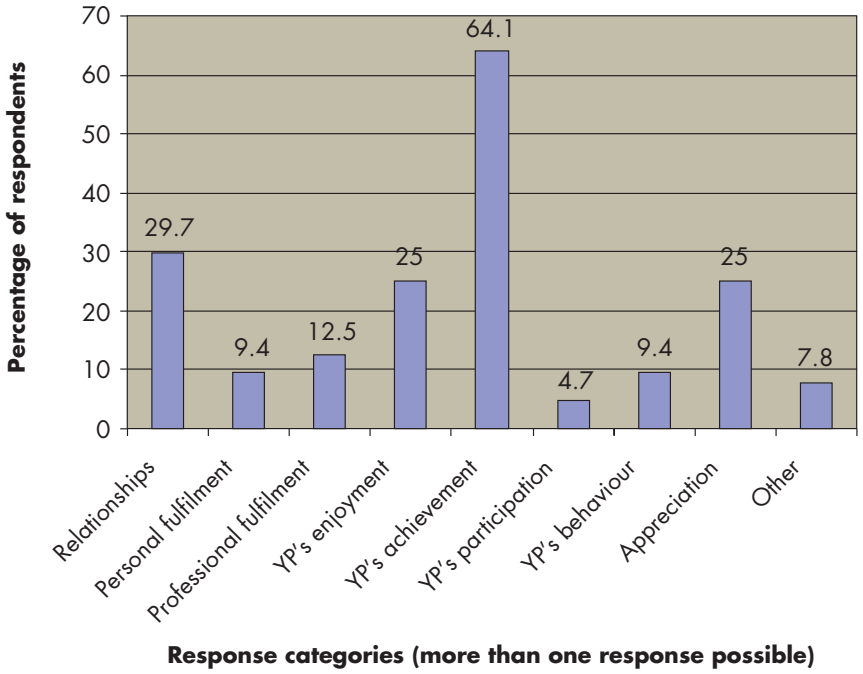


Figure 3.4: Main Rewards

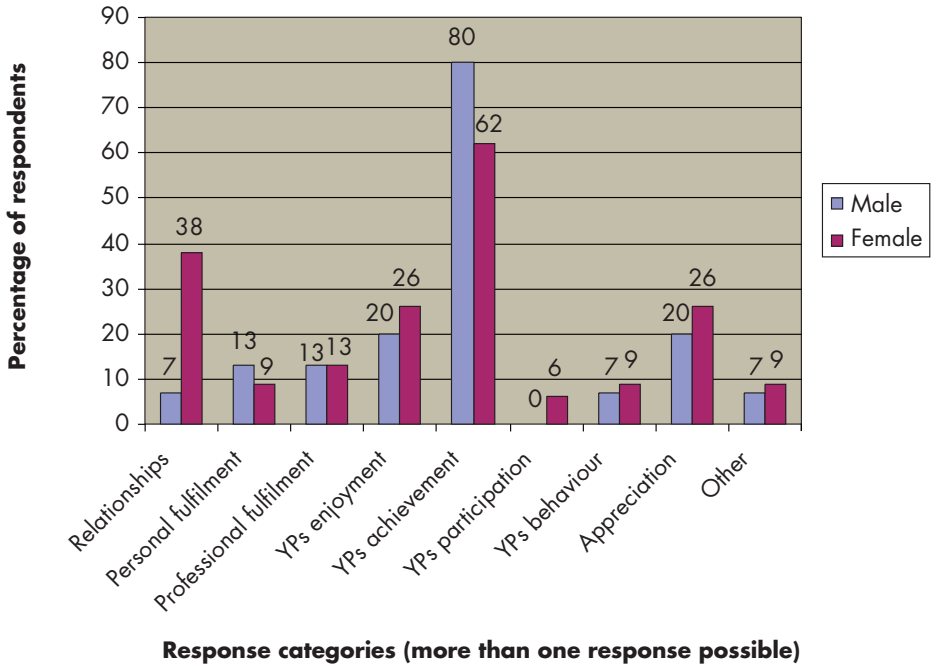


Figure 3.5: Rewards by gender

Figure 3.6 provides the overall responses regarding challenges. Behavioural aspects, funding/finances and engaging young people are significantly more commonly mentioned than any other dimensions. Once again there is a difference by gender (see Figure 3.7), with five times as many women as men identifying young people's behaviour as challenging, and slightly more men than women identifying funding/finances.

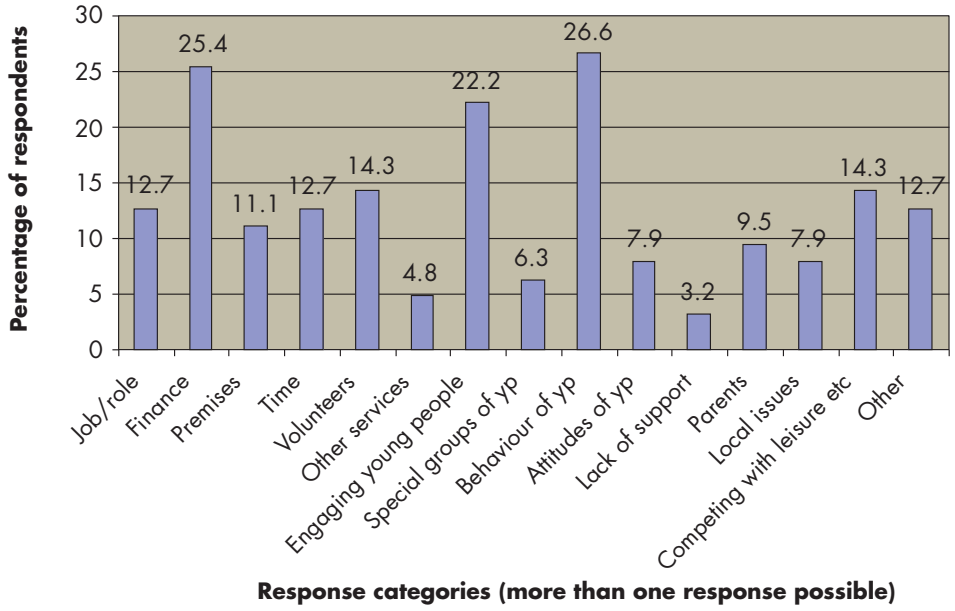


Figure 3.6: Main challenges/difficulties

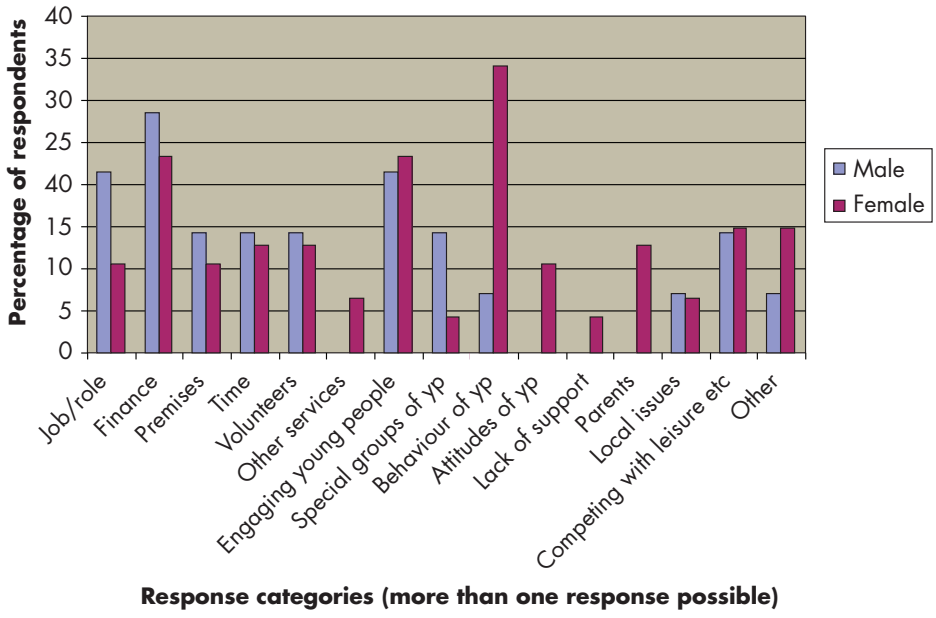


Figure 3.7: Most common challenges/difficulties by gender

What Makes Youth Work Distinctive?

Finally in this section we consider what aspects of youth work are thought to make it distinctive. Again, the findings are based on responses to an open-ended question in the survey. Workers were asked: 'If you consider the type of work you are involved in with young people and then consider the other services, projects or agencies young people might have contact with … what would you say makes the work of your project/group distinctive or different?' As Figure 3.8 shows, the responses are very much in keeping with the views expressed by workers in the focus group discussions and interviews and outlined above. The most commonly identified aspects, in order of frequency, are:

- Providing a *voice* and a *role* for young people (36.5%).
- The youth work *process* (31.7%).

- Young people's *voluntary involvement* (30.2%).
- Youth work is *needs-based* (28.6%).
- The youth work *relationship* (22.2%).

Once again there were some interesting differences by gender (Figure 3.9). Firstly, women identified a broader range of features than men. Secondly, they ranked all of the top five aspects (above) higher than men did, notably so in the case of the voice of young people and the importance of relationships (the figure being exactly double in each case: 40%/20% and 26%/13%). Thirdly, the men in this survey are a lot more likely to identify the nature of the activities in youth work as something which makes it distinctive (27% as opposed to 15%).

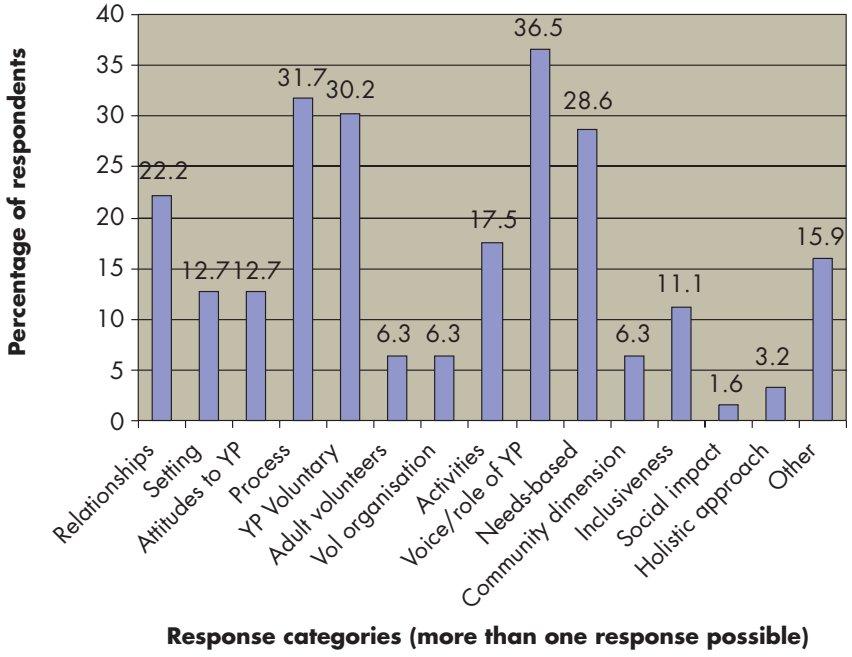


Figure 3.8: What makes youth work distinctive?

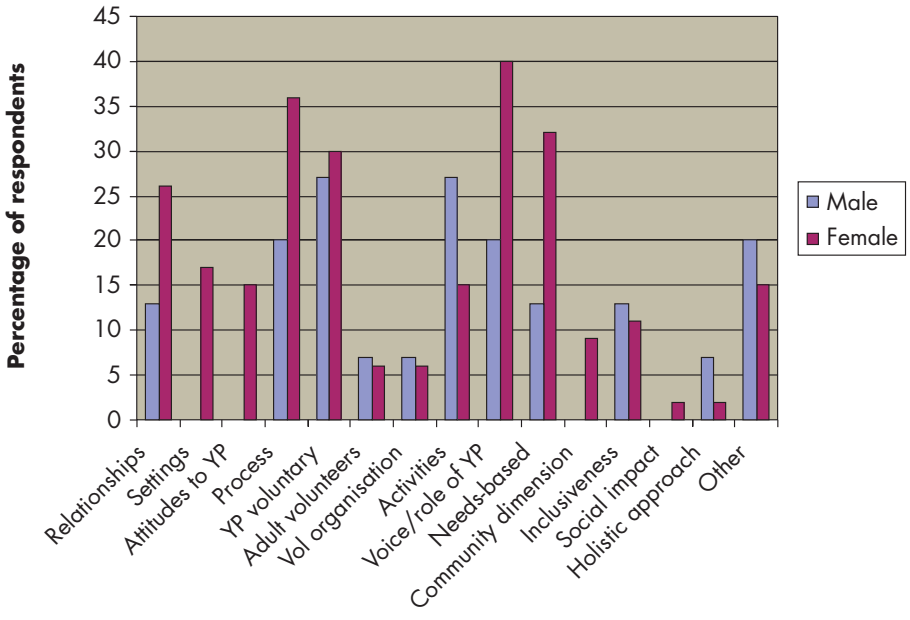


Figure 3.9: Distinctive features by gender

Taken together, the findings relating to rewards and challenges and to the distinctive features of youth work might be interpreted as suggesting that in some respects quite traditional gender differences continue to be reflected in men's and women's perspectives on and experiences of youth work.

4. The Views of Young People

This section summarises the young people's views of the nature, purpose and outcomes of youth work drawing on both the focus group discussions and questionnaire survey.

Reasons for Becoming Involved and Staying Involved

In the focus groups, when they were asked spontaneously to identify why they became involved in youth work, why they stay involved and what they enjoy about it, the young people most commonly identified the social dimension – socialising, meeting their friends and making new ones – and this was consistently related to the generally comfortable, safe and relaxing atmosphere of the youth group.

Anna Why did you come back [after the first visit]?

Kay It was all friendly and you got to make new friends and you enjoy yourself, it's not repetitive or anything, you just enjoy it.

Aoife The atmosphere was good.

Kay And the people were friendly, the people that worked with you.

Immediately it is clear that the enjoyment and relaxation are related not just to what happens – the kinds of activities or programmes that take place – but, crucially, to the *positive relationships* that exist, both with other young people and with adults.

Jason I don't know why I keep coming back. The people and the atmosphere, it's all great.

Martin You feel more secure around your own people as well.

Val You're more confident around the people that you know. I grew up with Nadine and Jason, I only came to know Martin, so I have confidence around them because I know them. When you're around people you know, you don't have to pretend to be someone else.

Jason If you have any problems you just talk to one of the leaders, because you know them so long. You know you can trust them.

Based on the questionnaire findings, Figure 4.1 shows that when presented with an open-ended question asking what they enjoyed most about attending the youth group, by far the most common response related to socialising, followed by reference to the particular activities or programmes on offer. As the Figure shows, females are even more likely to mention socialising than males (70% as compared with 58%) but the overall pattern of responses is similar.

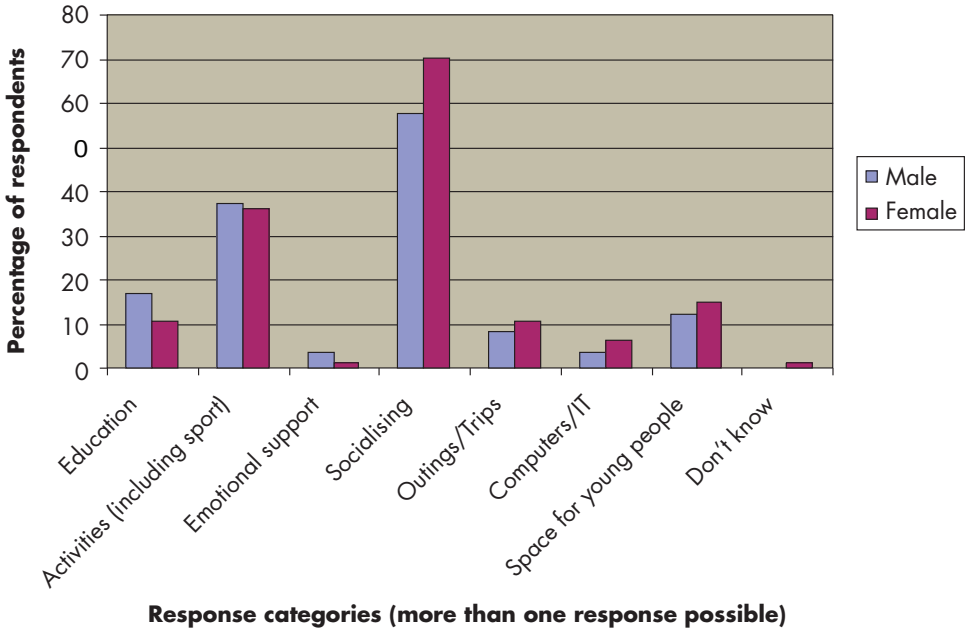


Figure 4.1: Most enjoyable aspect of youth group by gender

Returning to the focus group discussions, it is interesting to note that when young people talk about the environment being 'safe' they often seem to have in mind not so much that it is 'free from harm' but that it is comfortable, somewhere they can be themselves (although of course both aspects are important).

Ciara [Y]ou feel safe, the environment that you're in, it's grand.

Maurice That's an interesting point, could you say a wee bit more about that, feeling safe.

Ciara It's a safe environment, you know like, if you were sitting out on the wall you'd be hassled by the Gardaí and neighbours to get off the wall and move on or go home or whatever. Whereas in the club it's safe, we're able to chill out, do what we want, in a safe environment.

Susan And you wouldn't want to mess, or wreck the place or do whatever, you know what I mean, not that we …

Cian At the end of the day it's your sitting room.

Many of the young people also showed an awareness that a comfortable or 'safe' atmosphere is not just something that comes into being of its own accord: it is something which has to be created and sustained (and therefore is something which cannot be taken for granted).

Ben It's totally professional, yet more casual here.

Gemma Yeah, it's more casual here, people prefer that … .

Ben … when you take away the casualness and bring in formality, it changes the thing between you, that's what I like about this place, it's totally casual.

Gemma Whenever there are unspoken rules, they don't really tell you what you're not meant to do, but you just do it. That makes you feel responsible.

This last comment touches on the way in which matters of discipline and decision-making take place in youth work and how this differs from schools. This was often related by the young people to the question of their voluntary participation.

Voluntary Participation

It seemed to make a substantial difference to the focus group participants that they had been able to choose to take part in the youth group. In one case, the young people had been talking about their involvement in creative activities and arts work.

Anna What is it that is different that happens here in the youth service than if you went to just an art group?

Val Like in school, you have to do it. It's voluntary participation if you want to do it in the youth project, they would encourage you to do it, but it's up to yourself whether you actually want to do it or not.

Anna What keeps you coming back?

Val You have fun and you get the choice whether you want to do it or not. Obviously if you want to do it, you will come back to do it.

It was suggested more than once that youth workers actively encourage young people to be involved (rather than passively leaving it up to them).

Maurice Does it make a difference that you can choose to be there or not … how does that make a difference?

Una I don't feel you have to go, but in the youth club if you don't want to go they'll ring you and say are you coming but if you don't come they're not going to give out to you. If you have something else to do, they're not going to mind whereas in school you'd be in trouble and they'd be ringing your ma and saying were you coming. It's more of a choice in the centre, it's more relaxed.

The contrast with school was particularly likely to be highlighted when the issue of voluntary participation was discussed.

> **Debbie** … you don't have to go, that's what's good about it.
>
> **Maurice** Is it very important, that's the way it is?
>
> **Debbie** Yeah, it's good we have an option whether we want to go or not.
>
> **Lucy** We have an option of whether we want to go to school or not.
>
> **Debbie** Yeah, but you don't get told that if you don't come on a certain day, if you don't come on a certain day here, you're not able to come anymore. If you don't go to school for so many days, goodbye see you later, you're gone, up in court.

In the questionnaires the young people were also asked what they thought made the youth group different from school or from a training project (see Figure 4.2). Here the fact that their participation is voluntary was specifically mentioned by only a small percentage of young people (7.7%), but the closely related theme that there are 'fewer rules' and 'more freedom' was identified by almost two in five (37.5%) and the fact that youth work is 'more fun' by three in ten (31%).

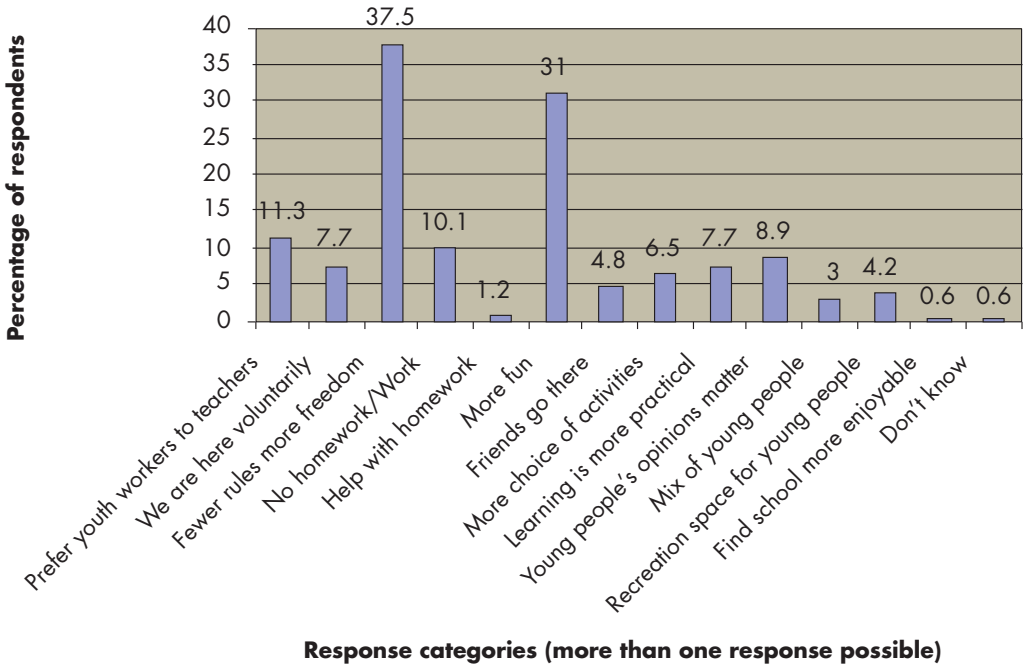


Figure 4.2: How the youth project/group differs from school

Benefits and Outcomes

The young people were asked in both the focus groups and questionnaires what they thought they had gained or how they thought they had benefited from their involvement in youth work. Their responses broadly correspond to the views of adults although with some differences of emphasis. They are summarised below under a number of key themes.

Friends

In keeping with the importance attached to being able to socialise in an enjoyable atmosphere, friends were frequently the first benefit mentioned (the following contributions were from four different young people).

> *Friends, I wouldn't have met any of these, if I wasn't here. We all met at the bands night. We met around here.*
>
> *I have a friend who moved down from Dublin a year or so ago and he didn't really know anyone, so I brought him here one day and it's great here because the atmosphere here is like the first day, whenever I walked in it was, hey what's up and the first day he came in, ten minutes later he was having a laugh with everyone. So he was up by twenty friends that day anyway.*

> *I suppose you can mix better with a group of people. A lot of people you wouldn't get to know in your own group, you mix in … people with different interests and stuff.*
>
> *Yeah, it's easier, when I went into college it's easier for me to interact with new people, because I had been in secondary school, so I had my set friends, when I came here, meeting new people, it just gets easier and easier to approach someone and sort of say, hey how are you, what's your name when I went into college. It gives you better communication skills.*

These comments illustrate the capacity of youth work to enable young people to have a more diverse group of friends than they might otherwise be able to meet, and in the process to develop skills for interacting in a broader range of settings, which are both aspects of 'social capital', the concept introduced in the first section of this report and returned to later.

New Activities and Opportunities

It has already been shown that the activities and programmes on offer are among the things that most attract young people to youth work, and most encourage them to stay involved. But activities and programmes of various kinds are available in a number of different contexts, so it is important to establish whether the young people think youth work makes a distinctive contribution in this regard. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they had taken part in activities in their project or group which they had not taken part in before or would not have been able to take part in otherwise. Well over two thirds of the respondents (69.2%) answered that they had. When those who responded positively were then asked what types of activity youth work opened up to them, 'recreational programmes' was the most common category, followed by 'outings/trips', 'new hobbies', 'new skills' and a broad category of 'educational programmes' (as with most of the other questions in the questionnaire, the question was open-ended and these categories are based on the researchers' classification of the responses). Figure 4.3 summarises the results and shows that the pattern is very similar for young men and young women.

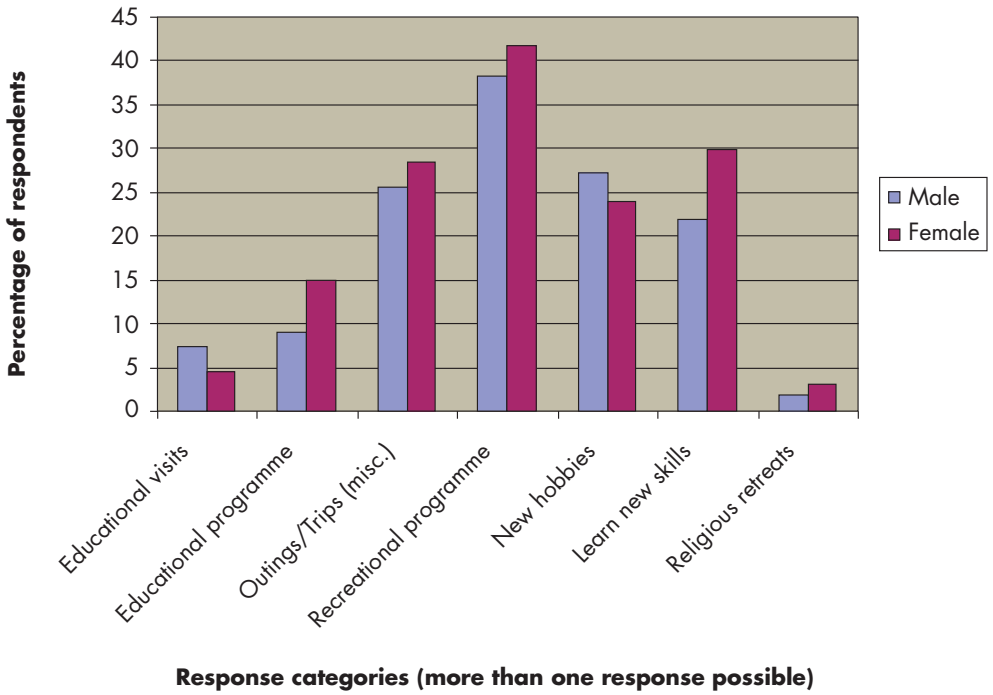
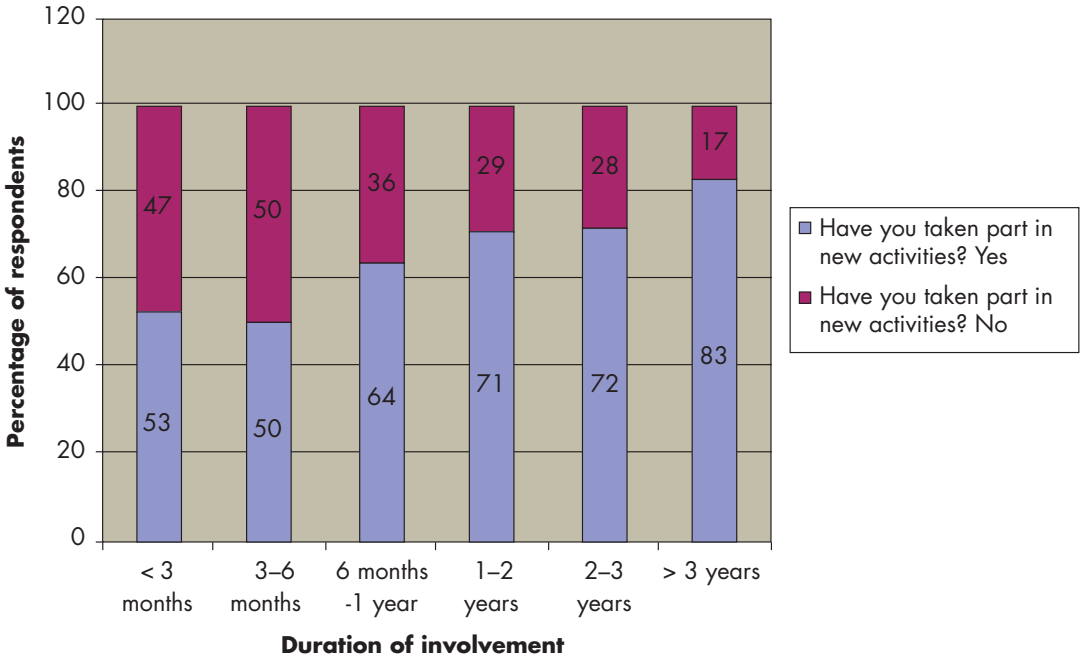


Figure 4.3: New activities by gender

Generally speaking the longer young people in this survey have been involved in youth work the more likely it is that they have experienced new activities or opportunities. This is shown clearly in Figure 4.4, where just over half of the young people involved for less than three months gave a positive response, whereas among young people involved for three years or more the figure is 83%.



Note: categories are approximate rather than strictly mutually exclusive.

Figure 4.4: New activities by duration of involvement

Informal and Non-formal Learning

Activities, then, are important in youth work. In fact it is a common perception that youth work is about little more than activities, a point made earlier in this report. This is also a view which was raised with the young people themselves in the focus groups, and which for the most part they rejected.

> **Maurice** If somebody said … ah sure all they do in there is run games, run activities, what would you say?
>
> **Orla** I'd say no, well I can't judge other clubs but from my activities, two groups and the youth café that I have been involved in, we've done loads of work. We've done loads of work around the environment, the playground over in [the local area], one of my groups was really active in the design of that playground, we went around it loads, we did loads of work against the ASBOs, loads of stuff, it's not just fun and games.

It is interesting to note that when the young people described their participation in the youth groups they often moved effortlessly between 'activities' and 'learning', as in the following exchange which took place when one of the researchers asked what made the youth group attractive to them and why they would encourage their friends to come:

> **Paul** [There are] games and the big sports hall.
>
> **Louise** Football and Eastenders at half seven.
>
> **Paul** Play Station 2, cards. You can learn about things like drugs, alcohol.
>
> **Louise** They have loads of leaflets on the table and when you're just sitting there you see them so you read them and you learn a lot of stuff.

Here the young people themselves showed an awareness of the nature and value of 'informal learning': it happens spontaneously, or at least it appears to. This point was confirmed in another focus group discussion.

> **Carol** Yeah, you don't even know its happening, it's just, you know we learned how to cook and we didn't realise it, I just remembered how to do it and rowing and orienteering and aerobics, and all about the environment, they teach like how important [it is] when all the trees and everything are getting cut down, they teach you that's bad and they tell you why it's bad and all.

Anna But you could learn that in school too. What's different about how you learn it here?

Carol It's more relaxed. In school you have to learn it because you'll be tested on it and if you don't know it you're in trouble but in this place they're not going to give out to you.

Ben It's more enjoyable that way.

Another young woman in this same focus group captured a crucially important element of the institutional difference between formal and non-formal/informal education and how it can relate to matters of personal development and self-esteem when she said that 'in the Centre you don't have anything to fail, you don't have anything to be bad at'.

The topic of learning was also dealt with in the questionnaire. Respondents were asked 'Is there anything in particular you have learned by taking part in the youth group?'. Just under two thirds of the young people (63.9%) said that there was, with figures broadly similar for young men and women. When asked what it was that they had learned, more than half (52.3%) of those who had responded positively identified some type of practical skill, as Figure 4.5 shows, with responses falling into the category of 'personal development' and 'social skills' also scoring highly (29.4% and 21.2% respectively).

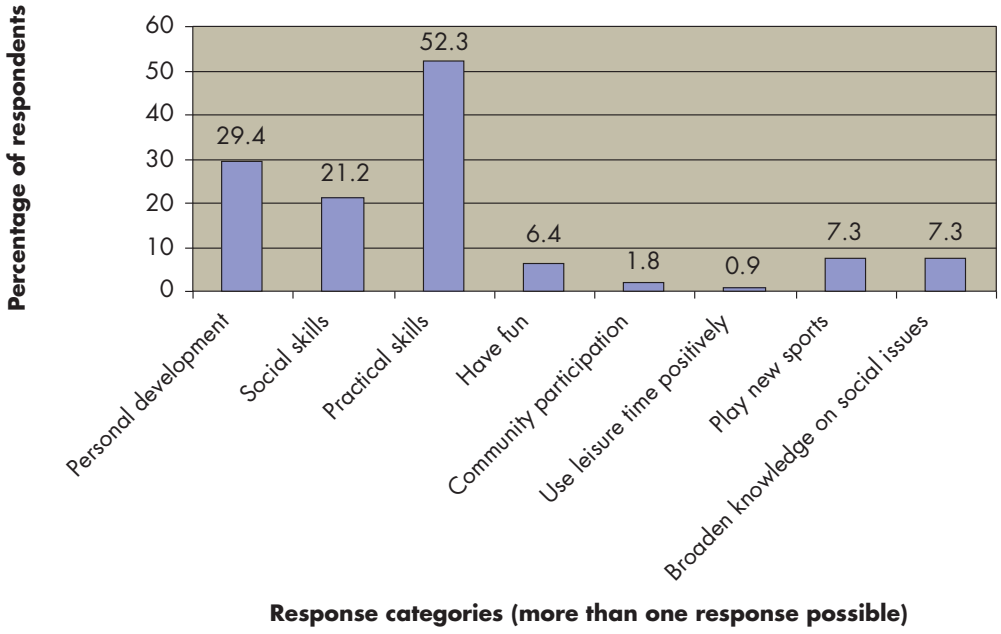


Figure 4.5: What respondents have learned from participation in the youth project/ group

Formal Learning

In addition to its non-formal and informal dimensions, focus group participants also gave many examples of the ways in which youth work contributes to their success in *formal* educational terms. Youth workers very commonly act in a support and advocacy capacity in relation to the formal system. In the following example, it is clear that the youth worker had acted on the basis of a conversation during a spontaneous 'drop in' by the young person: the worker subsequently followed up on the young person's school situation *as well as* getting him further involved in the youth project.

Maurice Did Peter [the youth worker] come to your house first, to encourage you to come here?

Patrick Yeah to encourage me.

Maurice How did he know about you or how did he make contact with you?

Patrick Because I came in just for a day and he asked was I in school, I said no, I was kicked out I think I was, and I didn't go for six months and then Peter just got me into school and then he got me into a load of clubs …

A friend of this young man had similarly benefited from the support of another one of the youth workers, who had advocated on her behalf when she was having difficulty getting on a particular college programme.

> **Emma** … They help you a lot. They got Patrick back into school, they got me a better course in college.

We have already seen in the section on youth workers' views that there are now also cases where youth work projects and premises may actually go so far as being the direct providers or facilitators of formal educational programmes.

> **Anna** So to sum up, what would you think is the biggest thing you got from being a member here? …
>
> **Colette** I'm doing me Leaving Cert here as well, so I wouldn't have got that. I'd have left it. I'm doing it with the project now … .
>
> **Von** Yeah, things like the FETAC and that like, I wouldn't have done anything like that, only for the youth project. Wouldn't have went to America.

Advice and Information

On a related topic, some focus group participants also drew attention to youth work's role in providing advice and information, including advice and information about career options. As in so many other instances it appeared that the positive relationships they experienced in youth work helped to facilitate this.

> **Barry** [Youth work] helps you grow up, helps you mature.
>
> **Niamh** Helps you find out what you want to do when you leave school as well.
>
> **Anna** And you wouldn't get that in school?
>
> **Niamh** I wouldn't.
>
> **Susan** What about career guidance?
>
> **Niamh** She can't stand me, she's glad to see the back of me she is.

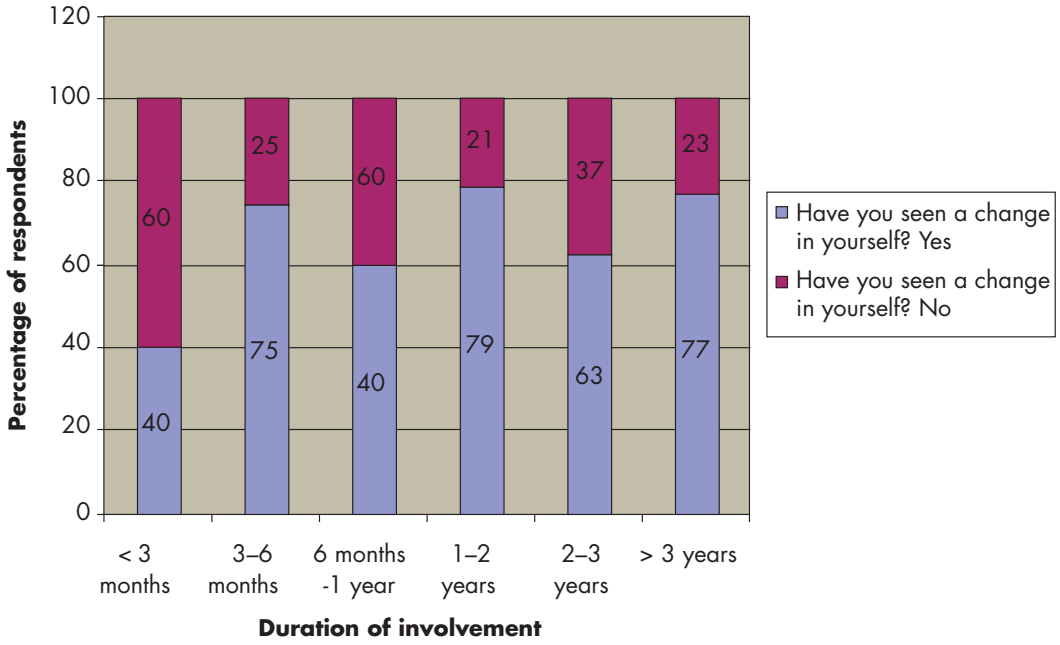
Information appeared to be available about a wide range of topics and issues. In the following focus group extract it is clear that the young man has no hesitation in identifying several relevant areas.

> **Maurice** Some of you said in your forms that youth workers were good because you could talk to them about things. Are there particular things that you find you can talk to youth workers about or get support from them? The law is one, that is one good example, are there others?
>
> **Kevin** Drugs, alcohol, sexual health. Responsibilities, relationships, loads.

The young people appeared to agree with the youth workers that the context in which information is provided, and the relationship between the parties involved, is as important as the information itself.

Positive Changes

The above are examples of ways in which young people think youth work has made a positive difference to their lives and specifically to their education, development and awareness. More broadly, in the questionnaire survey the young people were asked whether they could 'see any changes' in themselves 'as a result of being involved' in youth work. Overall, more than two thirds of the respondents (67.2%) said that they could, and generally speaking it appears that after a relatively short period of involvement the young people in this survey are likely to report that they can see changes. Figure 4.6 presents the responses to this question broken down by duration of involvement, and shows that while among those involved for less than three months only 40% reported seeing a change, for all other categories substantial majorities gave positive responses.



Note: categories are approximate rather than strictly mutually exclusive.

Figure 4.6: Perceived change by duration of involvement

Those young people who reported seeing a change in themselves were further asked what kind of change they had seen, and the most common category of response was of a type that might be classified as 'positive personal development', mentioned by almost 56% of respondents (see Figure 4.7). One young person noted that he was *'more open, not as aggressive, much more positive'* through his involvement in the youth group. Another, closely related perceived change was being 'more sociable' or having 'more social skills' (reported by 41%), with one young person remarking that *'I am much more comfortable around people I don't know because of the fact I had to interact with people I don't know'*. Other responses included being 'more educated and skilful' and 'being more active and healthy' as well as perceived 'positive behaviour change'. Only one respondent noted a negative personal change through their involvement in the club.

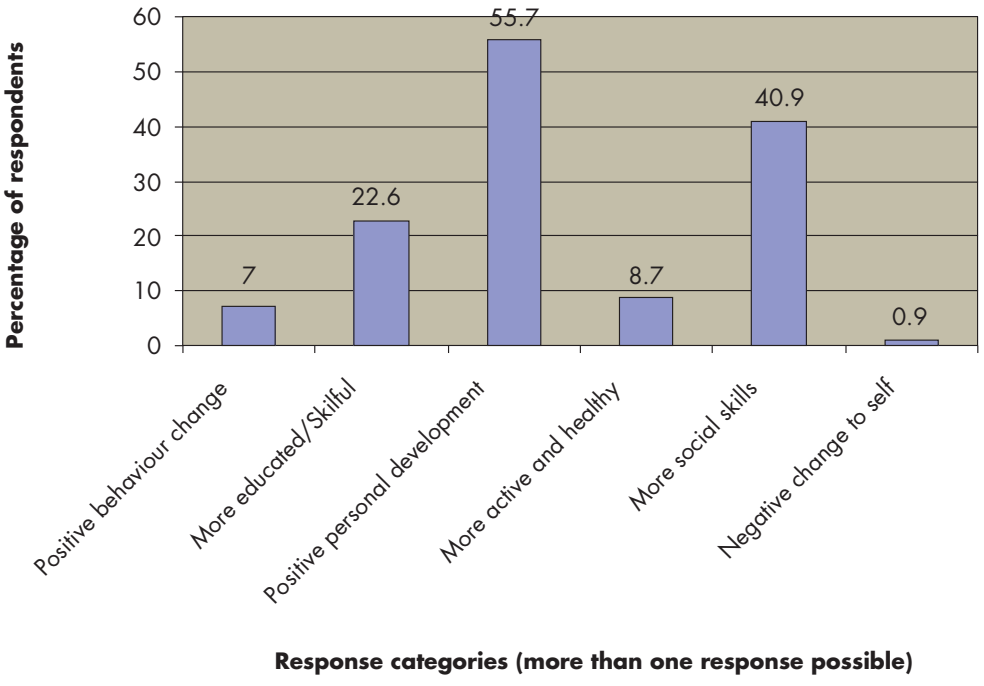
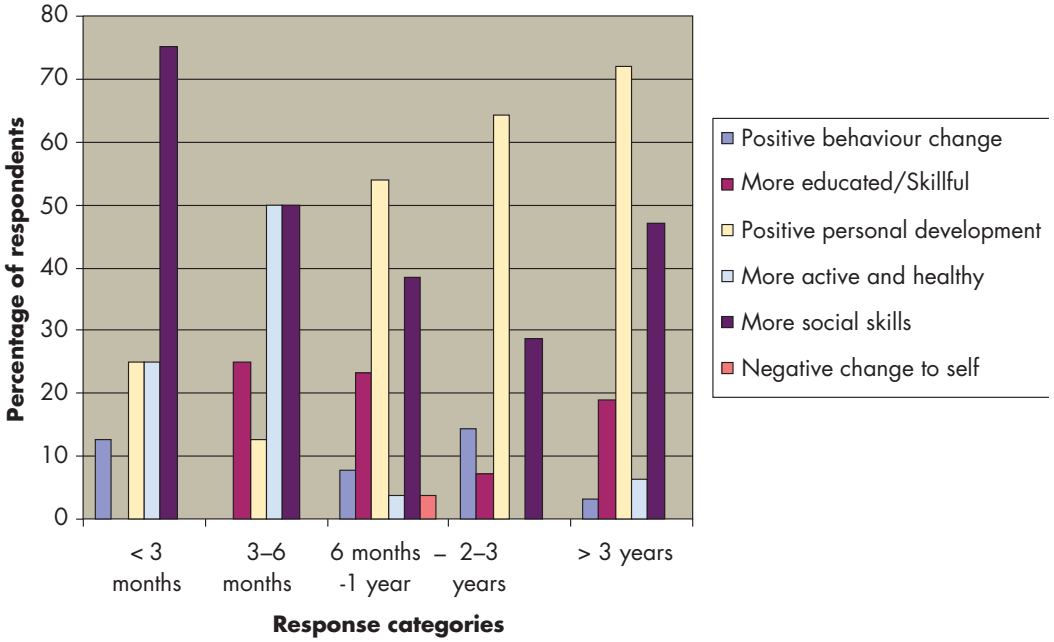


Figure 4.7: Type of change perceived

Finally it is instructive to explore the relationship between the type of change perceived and the duration of the young person's involvement in youth work. Figure 4.8 summarises the pattern. It is notable that the longer the young people in this survey have been involved, the less likely they are to mention greater sociability as a change they see in themselves, and the *more* likely they are to highlight positive personal development. The latter category replaces the former in frequency of mention as the duration of involvement increases.



Note: categories are approximate rather than strictly mutually exclusive.

Figure 4.8: Type of change by duration of involvement

Of course the questionnaire can only gauge the *perceptions* of respondents rather than actual changes over time, and it does not in any case claim to be representative of all young people involved in youth work, but it might be tentatively suggested on the basis of these findings that in the early stages of their involvement young people are most conscious of how youth work helps them to relate to *others* (overcoming shyness, becoming more outgoing and so on) whereas later they may come to take these social skills for granted and are more conscious of how youth work is enabling them to develop as individuals. But of course social skills and personal development are inextricably linked and not too much should be made of the distinction in any case. The following exchange from a focus group discussion illustrates this link, and bears out the point made earlier (and returned to later) about the relationship between youth work and social capital.

Aoife [You gain] self confidence.

Carol Self-esteem as well, because when I went to, when I wasn't involved, I knew people in the area and like I'd say hello and all. When I joined like I'd stop and I'd talk and I was more confident to go out. Say people that I would know to see and say hello to, I'd just walk past and say hello, now I'd stop and I'd talk and I'd be more friendly.

Aoife And more popular.

In another discussion the positive outcomes identified included learning about both 'rights' and 'responsibilities' and the insightful point was made that the ability to participate constructively in the focus group research was itself indicative of valuable learning.

Maurice What's the one thing, the one way in which you've got some benefit or advantage from being a member of the group, what's the most important thing?

Kevin I've matured.

Maurice You've got more maturity from it?

Kevin Yeah, I've learnt about rights and all, responsibilities.

Maurice Is this through discussion, talking to people?

Kevin Talking to the youth workers.

Niamh More confidence to talk to people and talk in front of people.

Kevin For instance now.

Participation

As was evident in the literature review and in the findings of the focus group discussions and questionnaire survey of youth workers, the active and critical *participation* of young people has been regarded for many years as a key element of youth work policy and practice. 'Giving young people a voice' emerged as the most commonly cited 'distinctive feature' of youth work in the adult survey. This study was also designed to elicit young people's own perspectives on the nature of their participation. For most of the focus group participants, it appeared that having a say in how the group was run, what activities were engaged in and the form that programmes would take, was almost taken for granted. As was the case for adults, for the young people this was frequently seen as a defining feature of youth work and part of what makes it different from formal education.

Paul Well, it's good that we can make decisions of what we want to do over the next few weeks, instead of them telling us what we're going to do and nobody wants it so we all decide and have a vote.

Kevin Well if they told us what to do, I reckon there wouldn't be as many people attending the group.

Niamh Nobody would want to go.

Kevin It [would be] like being in school.

The process of decision-making was commonly described in terms of *negotiation*. Although the youth workers had ultimate responsibility for how the groups were run and had to be able to stand over decisions that were taken, the way they exercised this responsibility was generally seen as fair and legitimate.

Anna Would you have much of a say in what happens here?

Val Yeah, if you're in a group they won't just say … they will say what do you want to do for the year.

Joe It's fifty/fifty, we meet them half way.

Anna How did that get worked out, did you have a negotiation with them, they say no you can't do it and you keep pushing to do it or what is the conversation like?

Colette It's not only their point of view, they come and ask you your point of view.

Val If you can't do it, they explain why you can't do it. They just don't say, you can't do it and that's the end of it, they say we can't do it for these reasons.

Maurice And you trust them if they tell you it can't be done for a particular reason?

Val Yeah.

In some cases the young people's involvement in decision-making was formalised through members' committees or similar fora. This introduces an added dimension and, at least potentially, provides opportunities for learning new skills relating to group dynamics, roles, responsibilities and authority.

Carol [J]ust recently we set up our new citizenship committee for this year, so there are ideas being thrown around there about what we want to do …

Maurice Does it all work very smoothly or do you have the odd argument as to what's going to happen?

Sue Ah yeah sure, we have an odd argument. There can be some people who disagree about things and there can be some people playing up at a meeting and you have to tell them to quieten down an odd time. It's not that bad though.

Anna How does that work, do people kind of respect the authority of the committee, because the committee are all young people?

Sue Yeah, I'd say generally we do respect the committee, because they're the ones that are running the meeting and coming out on Monday night and setting up the agenda. There can be a few people who do talk during meetings and we just have to tell them [to] be quiet.

Generally, the chance to be involved in making decisions was very highly valued by the young people in the focus groups – it was regarded as both challenging and enjoyable. As one young woman put it, 'you feel powerful when you can do that'. The questionnaire findings also suggest that young people do think they are involved in decision-making in youth work. When asked if they had a say in decision-making in their group or project, four out of five respondents (80.4%) said that they did, and when they were then asked about the nature of the decisions which they had a part in making, 'choosing activities' was the most common response (52.3%), with 'voicing your opinion' (in an unspecified way) and 'electing a committee/voting' the next two most common, at 25.8% and 19.7% respectively. Figure 4.9 summarises the results.

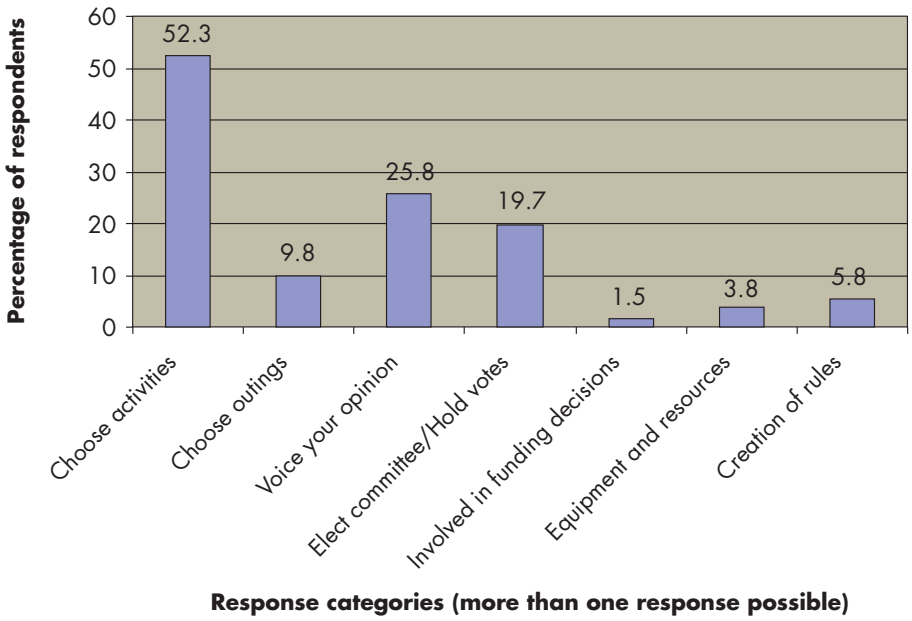


Figure 4.9: How young people feel they have a say in the decision-making process

Relationships and Respect

Active participation and involvement in decision-making requires that positive relationships exist between young people and adults, and this was a further area explored in the research project. A consistent theme emerging in the focus groups was the way in which *friendship* is a crucial part of the relationship between the youth worker and the young person, although the young people differed when it came to determining the extent to which youth workers were like their other friends. One view (from a young woman in her late teens) was that youth workers are friends like any other:

I personally don't see them as older people or leaders or authority, I see them as friends. So I come in and tell them all about me day, or what I did on Saturday night, and I know they don't judge, they don't, they can't judge you, they can give you advice or whatever, but they can never judge and you can see that as soon as you walk in and if you are having a conversation about anything like, you just see them more as friends, than teachers or leaders or parents. They don't stand over you and give out to you, they sit down, they're on your level, they talk to you, they don't give out, they don't dictate anything.

More commonly, however, the view was that youth workers were a *particular type* of friend, or that being a friend was just part of the relationship, and of just one the youth workers' responsibilities. As one young woman said: 'they are your friend to a certain extent, do you know what I mean, because you can have a conversation, but in school you can't do that with a teacher'. Sometimes the young people drew attention to the way the relationship developed over time – a point also stressed by the adult focus group participants – and to the 'balancing act' that is required on the worker's behalf.

> **Joe** [A]t some point you cross the line where they are youth leaders and then they become friends, and that's good … .
>
> **Jill** But you still have a kind of respect as well for them, because you know, they are our friends as well, they are only trying to do their job and we understand they wouldn't ever really give out to us, but when they tell you to stop doing something, you listen to them more.
>
> **Joe** It's not like a thing that they are angry, just disappointed. They make you feel horrible. You come in the next week and … .
>
> **Maurice** But they do have authority then?
>
> **Carol** Yeah they do.
>
> **Maurice** And you recognise that and respect that?
>
> **Joe** There's a line.

This latter point was echoed a number of times in the focus groups: youth workers have a distinctive type of authority (partly based on the friendship component of their relationship with young people) and/or a distinctive style of exercising it. The following comments were made by respondents in two different focus groups:

> *… [T]hey give you advice, I don't know, they show interest. They show interest in your life instead [of] like telling like that's wrong, they give you alternatives instead of going, no don't do that anymore, they say well maybe you could do this next time. It is just a different way, it's a different way it has been … I don't know, it's a hard question.*
>
> *I think they are just there to assist us if we need anything, but generally we kind of don't. They are there, watching over us, they're not like teachers or anything like that, they kind [of] have a more friendly kind of support.*

But as important as the youth workers' 'friendliness' in shaping their distinctive authority – and as is clear from some of the contributions quoted above – is the fact that they are generally perceived to treat young people with respect. Respect was something which most young people in this study seemed to think operated reciprocally in their youth group, and it was related to the generally positive attitude which youth workers have towards young people, as discussed earlier in this report.

> *Like you're treated with respect and if you mess you get a warning, in a lot of places you just get thrown out straight away and you get kicked out from there and you can get barred from here for like a week, and you miss your club and you come back the week after and you apologise and you're allowed back in.*

Youth Workers' Roles

The questionnaire survey asked young people an open-ended question about how they would describe the job of the youth worker. The responses are presented in Figure 4.10, broken down by gender. It is clear that the question was interpreted in at least two different ways by respondents, some thinking it was asking what the main function of the worker was (for example to supervise or to organise), others that it was seeking an *evaluation* of the job (for example that it is difficult or enjoyable). Nonetheless, the overall pattern is evident: 'helping' and 'caring' were the two most commonly cited aspects, being mentioned by more than a third of respondents (35.3%) and one in five (19.9%) respectively. These are the figures for the overall sample but it is interesting to note that – as Figure 4.10 makes clear – the proportions of young women mentioning these aspects was considerably higher than young men.

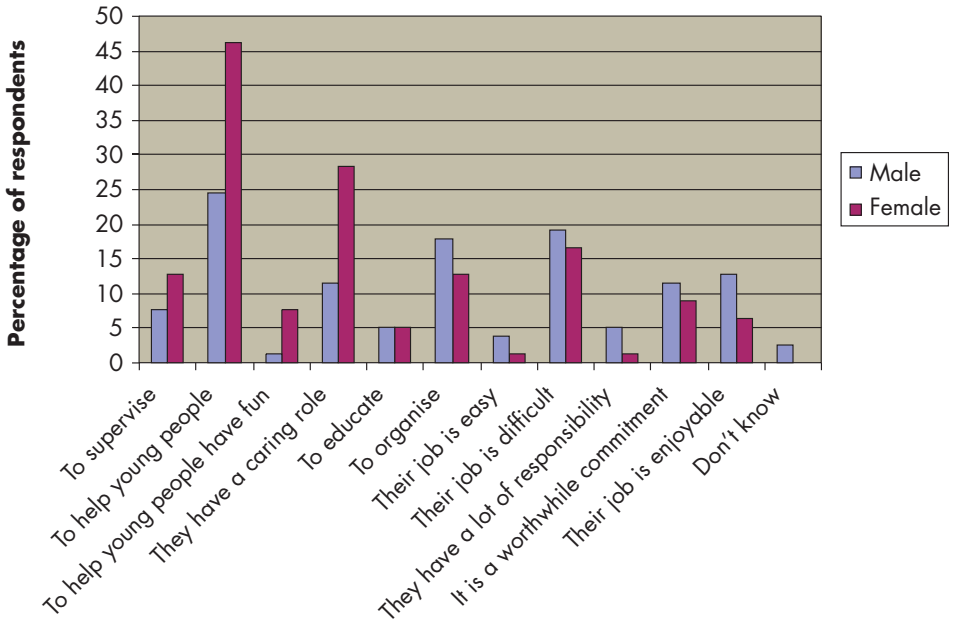


Figure 4.10: Description of the youth worker's job by gender

In the focus group discussions the role of youth workers was also raised, and the responses were multifaceted, reflecting perhaps the complex nature of youth work itself but also the fact that 'youth workers' can occupy a range of roles and statuses (for example full-time paid, part-time paid or volunteer, as well as different levels of seniority or responsibility in some cases). There also seemed to be some ambivalence about the status of youth work as a 'job' when compared with other jobs such as teaching. This is of course partly a reflection of the fact that in some cases the only youth workers the young people would have encountered are volunteer 'leaders'. The following is one such instance ('Pauline' is a volunteer).

Mary Yeah, the leaders don't give out to you, they might say something to you or whatever, but they're not like teachers. Teachers are there and have a job to do. The leaders are there and you have a bit of craic with them, you don't do that with a teacher.

Pauline Ok [but] we still have a commitment as well, but you need to follow through and get commitment from the club as well, I think it works both ways.

Even when the youth workers were paid, however, the young people did not always think of their work as a straightforward 'job'. There was frequently a sense that the focus group discussion was the first time the participants had consciously thought about this question.

Lorna I don't think of it as much as a job as such, they do put in long hours and they can't just … I don't think they would look at it as a job, like nine to five. They do enjoy it and I'm sure they get feedback from us as well.

Clare They do all the activities stuff with us.

Sometimes the distinction between paid worker and volunteer did not seem to have much significance for the respondents, or it had not previously occurred to them that there was a difference.

Maurice Does it matter if the youth worker is paid or not, do you think? Some youth workers are there voluntarily.

Kevin Yeah, they should, quite right they should because it is a job, it's looking after us. The teachers are getting paid, why aren't youth workers getting paid?

Maurice But … a lot of clubs or projects have volunteer youth workers as well. What I mean is, do you find there is a difference in the type of relationship you can have or the type of supports you can get from the paid workers or the volunteers, or are they more or less the same?

Niamh People that were volunteering to be in our youth project or whatever, yeah they were doing, either way they were helping us out, whether they were paid or not paid, they were still doing the same thing. They should be paid for it.

Some of the respondents explicitly said that they had not previously given much thought to these matters or generally to the roles and responsibilities of youth workers (as one young man put it, 'We never really thought about that'). Others had clearly already reflected on what being a youth worker involves, as the following example shows.

… and the job [is hard] you know, [they] set up youth clubs and do their best for you, if you ask them for something, [they] do their best for you to get it set for you. We just go in and it's all set up for us, before we go in they're working real hard to get set up and getting people in to teach us different stuff and different football coaches or basketball coaches and all coming in, they've to do all that and we've to just go in and enjoy it, they've to work really hard for it.

It is perhaps not surprising that the responses should be so mixed, given that doing youth work involves adopting a wide range of styles and approaches, some very structured and 'organised', others much more informal and 'spontaneous'. It will be recalled that one youth worker commented that 'sometimes it must look like I'm doing nothing'. The young people's responses confirmed that sometimes it may indeed look like that! Generally, however, the impression was that the respondents thought youth workers were careful, hard-working, diligent and attentive in their approach to their work.

Joe … Some days, it just looks very difficult, it looks kind of stressed. Other days it looks just relaxed and it looks like they're doing nothing … .

Val I think they do more than they actually have to do.

Joe Yeah, they do more than they should be doing, in a good way, they give more, they offer more things than they are supposed to maybe.

The Purpose of Youth Work

In the questionnaire survey the young people were asked the following open-ended question: 'What do you think is the main purpose of having a youth project/group like this in your area?'. Figure 4.11 presents the findings.

Three closely related categories of response were much more common than any others. The most commonly cited purpose was that of encouraging positive – as opposed to negative – use of leisure time, including 'keeping young people out of trouble' and 'off the streets' and away from drugs and alcohol: helping them 'to get away from drugs and the bad ways of life'. This response category was mentioned by more than one third of respondents (36.4%). Just a few less identified the purpose of providing a recreation space or facility for young people (32.4%). Almost one quarter (23.9%) mentioned the provision of a place for young people to socialise together. A general purpose of 'helping young people' was mentioned by 15.9% of respondents and smaller but not inconsiderable proportions mentioned encouraging young people's participation in the community (14.2%) and providing learning opportunities (10.2%).

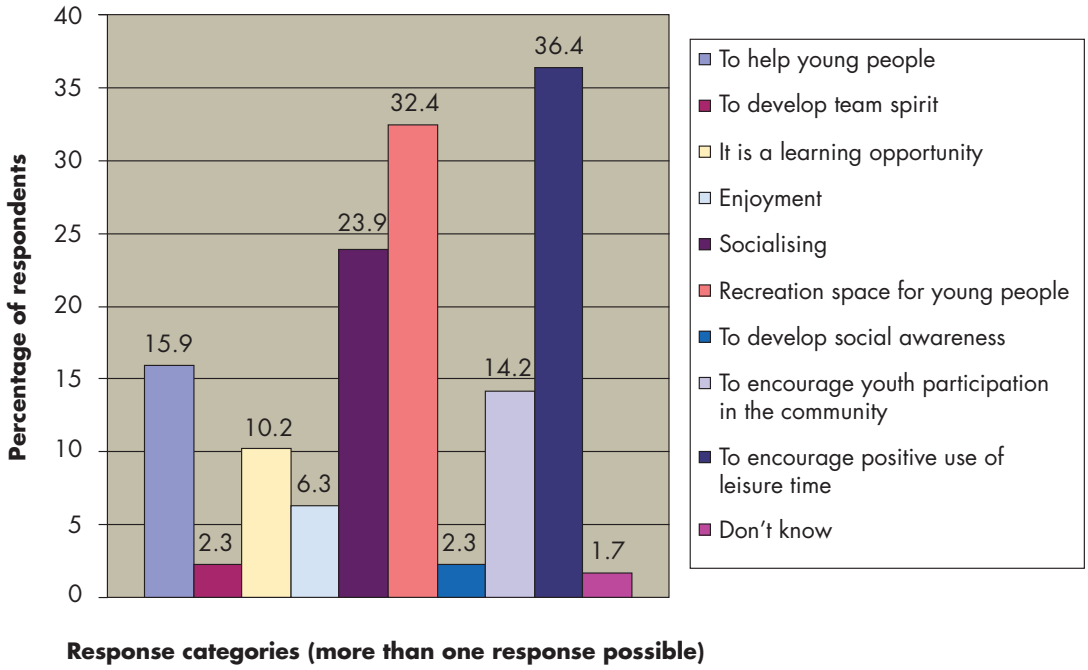


Figure 4.11: Purpose of youth project/group

The most commonly mentioned category captures what might be called the 'diversionary' perspective, and indeed the notion that youth work's main function is to 'keep young people off the streets' is as old as youth work itself. The aim of 'keeping young people off the streets and out of trouble' was in fact one of ten aims presented to youth workers in the adult questionnaire survey and in that context, as part of a varied list, it did secure a mean score equating to 'quite a lot of importance'. However, taken on its own it would probably be regarded by most contemporary youth work practitioners (and probably policy makers also) as somewhat crude and simplistic and as insufficiently attuned to the many positive and constructive as opposed to diversionary or remedial possibilities of youth work. It is significant therefore that from the point of view of the young people in this survey it still seems to carry such weight as a key youth work purpose, being the one they are most likely to mention spontaneously (whereas the adult responses to a similar open-ended question focused much more on developmental factors).

In a purely pragmatic sense both youth workers and young people often recognise that if it were not for youth work services there would be 'nothing else to do', as the following extract from a focus group illustrates. The first comment is from a volunteer leader.

Patricia [One purpose is that] with parents they know the children aren't on the street.

Anna So it's sense of somewhere safe for young people to go … If [the club] wasn't on a Friday night or a Monday night, where else would you go?

Fiona Like there is nowhere else for you to go.

Lisa I feel most people would be hanging around streets, doing nothing really.

Often the young people highlighted the direct 'diversionary' impact of the youth group on their own lives.

Sharon … I used to be a troublemaker, but when I started coming up here I stayed out of it.

Anna And you think just by coming here that's changed?

Sharon Yeah, it keeps me out of it.

Alcohol was often mentioned in the same context as hanging around the streets.

> **Carol** … If there wasn't a place to go, the activities weeks and things set up, you'd be doing the same thing over and over again and you just get sick of it … .
>
> **Clare** You'd turn to drink.
>
> **Donna** I stopped drinking when I came to the youth centre.

Sometimes the view that youth work helps to prevent, or divert young people from, anti-social behaviour was stated very bluntly.

> **Anna** Do you think that if two years ago or four years ago or whatever, if you hadn't joined the youth club, I know it's kind of a hard thing to ask …
>
> **Kevin** Ah, we'd run riot.
>
> **Anna** Do you reckon your life would be different?
>
> **Kevin** We'd run riot.
>
> **Paul** I'd say we would, you just don't know.
>
> **Kevin** If there were not youth clubs or youth workers around, there would be total chaos.

More positively however, it is also very evident from the other comments quoted throughout this section that the respondents do not see youth work as being *only* about keeping young people off the streets and that they attach considerable importance to the precise nature of the alternatives provided. The comments of one young man express very well the way in which youth work creates the space for different – more positive – types of relationship between young people and adults, based on different assumptions and 'mindsets'.

> *[The Centre] is a place to get away from the idea of getting into trouble. It's just a time … [In other places] if you're not doing anything you get kicked out by the guards, security guards or whatever, and here there is none of that.*

Universal or Targeted?

The participants in the focus group discussions were asked whether they thought youth work has a 'universal' value for all young people or has special benefits for particular types or categories of young people. The former view was by far the more widely held.

> **Clare** I think everyone should [have access to youth work].
>
> **Gemma** Everyone should try it.
>
> **Maurice** Some people think youth work is only for young people who don't get opportunities elsewhere.
>
> **Clare** Oh no, it's for everyone.
>
> **Gemma** I used to think that as well.

On the basis of their own experience the respondents also thought that youth work services should be expanded in the future.

> **Kevin** Well I hope it's around in years to come for younger people that are growing up now in the way it's helped me.
>
> **Aoife** And that they have more than we actually have now, because we obviously do have a lot that helps us out but it would be even better if say our kids … we want them to be occupied and to learn new things and to have somewhere to go, rather than sitting out on the streets and doing what … we've done.

Promoting Youth Work

Finally, the participants were asked for ideas as to how youth work might be better promoted and its benefits better communicated. Generally they thought it was not well promoted at present.

> **Sharon** I'd advertise it more, a lot of people don't know [about it].
>
> **Deirdre** There's just only one poster, they look at it and say, I'm not going in there, that's pure stupid.

The view was expressed that as things stand word-of-mouth contacts and family connections are relied on too much.

> **Karen** I think you'd need a bit more publicity for it, there is a lot of young people getting into a lot of crime and going on the wrong path, you'd want to encourage them and make it a bit more, I'm not saying it doesn't sound good, just a bit more fun, that this kind of thing is going on and they'd kind of think of it more.
>
> **Maurice** That's a good point, often young people who haven't participated don't know really what it's like.
>
> **Karen** Like if you haven't really had anyone previously, like older than you in your family, I wouldn't have heard of it.

When it comes to persuading people – including other young people but also funders and policy-makers – of the benefits of youth work, the most common view was that young people's participation and enjoyment speaks for itself and would be obvious to any observer who took the time to look.

> **Clare** Somebody should come to the youth centre and [we'd] put on a show for a week or something, see what we done … .
>
> **Anna** How do you think [people] would know if it was working?
>
> **Joe** People coming and they're staying there and they like it.

5. Youth Workers' and Young People's Perspectives Compared

Generally speaking the last two sections suggest that there is considerable correspondence between the views and perspectives of youth workers and young people on youth work. There is not of course uniformity of opinion even *within* either of these groups about most of the issues discussed (there being some noteworthy differences for example between volunteer and paid workers or between females and males on certain matters), but overall it is possible to discern something approaching consensus about the nature, purpose and outcomes of youth work.

The Distinctive Nature of Youth Work

Above all it struck the researchers that there is a strong sense of youth work being viewed as something different and distinctive from other types of provision and practice. This is perhaps not surprising given that the respondents in this research project were participating voluntarily and may therefore be more likely to include people (whatever their age or role) for whom youth work has proven to be a distinctively valuable experience. It is important to state it here nonetheless. Of course what is probably more important is identifying the factor or factors which *make* it different or distinctive, since youth work and youth workers are often accused (even by other youth workers!) of being unable to do so. In this respect too the present research found there to be a strong sense of a shared understanding. Section 3 summarised the responses of youth workers to an open-ended question about the 'distinctive nature of youth work'. There was no one dominant response, and perhaps there should or could not be, but what is striking is the close affinity between the five top categories mentioned. They form an interrelated cluster of dimensions or aspects – principles perhaps – all of which feature strongly in the literature on youth work as reviewed in the first section of this report. The five are:

- Providing a *voice* and a *role* for young people.
- The emphasis on *process*.
- Young people's *voluntary involvement*.
- Youth work is *needs-based*.
- The centrality of *relationships*.

All of the other contributions from the youth workers, in both the focus groups and questionnaires, are consistent with a view of youth work built around these key features. It should also be noted that the features identified correspond closely to the vision of youth work set out in the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Dept of Education and Science, 2003), all the more so if we take account of aspects not in the top five but also mentioned by considerable numbers of workers, such as inclusiveness, a positive attitude to young people and the nature of the activities themselves (see Figure 3.9).

This approach to youth work is also broadly congruent with the accounts given by the young people of why they got involved in youth work, why they stay involved, what they get out of it and what they think makes it different or distinctive, although young people's accounts naturally reflect their perspectives as participants and members rather than as providers or practitioners, and there are also some differences of expression or terminology. But overall what the young people describe as happening in youth work, from their point of view, is what the youth workers describe themselves as trying to make happen.

The Purpose of Youth Work

Throughout the young people's descriptions and responses there is a strong sense of being there and taking part because they want to (because it's fun, friendly, safe, comfortable); of being part of a network of positive relationships (with a strong *friendship* dimension in their relations with adults as well as other young people); of being cared for, cared about, supported and *respected* (a regularly occurring word) but also challenged and 'stretched'; of having a say in what happens and how it happens; of being able to point to significant positive changes in their lives through their involvement; of getting to contribute to the development of other people and of their communities and of feeling *empowered*. There is a strong sense therefore of personal development in a community context – which is exactly the key purpose of youth work as presented by workers.

It is notable however that when young people were *explicitly* asked what they think the purpose of youth work is (rather than why they like it, what they gain from it or why they would recommend it to others) they were most likely – both in the focus group discussions and in the questionnaire survey – to highlight spontaneously (in other words without prompting from the researchers) what we have termed the 'diversionary' dimension, which is very close to what might be seen as a rather traditional and 'conservative' approach to youth work, aimed primarily at 'keeping them off the streets'. As we have seen already this aim of youth work is still regarded as important by practitioners as well. 'Keeping young people off the streets and out of trouble' was one of the ten possible aims of youth work presented in a list of options in the adult questionnaires (Appendix 2) and it ranked strongly overall, particularly among volunteers (for whom it gained the third highest ranking out of ten, compared with sixth place among full-

time paid staff and joint seventh place among part-time paid staff). Overall its numerical score equates to a view that it retains 'quite a lot of importance' as a youth work aim.

However, when asked about youth work's purpose in an open ended question, youth workers were very unlikely to mention such 'diversionary' aims and much more likely, as we have already seen, to draw attention to personal development, relationship building, care and community involvement. The fact that young people, in a similar question, gave much more prominence to the diversionary dimension might be for a number of reasons. It may simply reflect 'where they are at' and their honest assessment of the impact of youth work in their own lives: many of them explicitly drew attention to the fact that youth work had given them an alternative to negative or anti-social behavior or encouraged them away from a lifestyle that was harmful to themselves and others, and there was a common view that youth work provided one of the few safe and accessible indoor spaces for young people to spend time with friends. It may also be that they pick up more of the language of 'keeping them off the streets' from the workers' own discourse than the workers are aware or may intend; and it certainly seems safe to say that they are reflecting what continues to be a dominant understanding of youth work externally in the public eye – and perhaps to some extent in the 'policy eye' too. The introduction of Garda Diversion Projects and the involvement of youth work organisations in running these projects may in fact have contributed to a resurgence of such a view among both young people and the broader public, although this is a speculation of the researchers and not something which this research project was designed to explore, or could either confirm or refute.

Equality and Diversity

In the light of recent policy in youth work (including the *National Youth Work Development Plan*) and other related developments in the last few years, one area in relation to which the youth workers if not necessarily the young people might have been expected to have more to say, and perhaps more to report in terms of practice, is the issue of equality and diversity. This is not to question the workers' commitment to equality principles or their valuing of diversity in itself. When these subjects were raised in the focus group discussions the workers expressed strong views in support of equality and inclusiveness. Furthermore, one of the ten statements of youth work's aims in the questionnaire for workers was 'To encourage young people to challenge social injustice and inequalities' and it received mean scores of just under four (out of five) among all categories of worker – volunteer, part-time paid and full-time paid – being actually highest by a small margin among volunteers. A score of four means that it is viewed as having 'quite a lot of importance' (see Appendix 2). It may well be that if the statement had been phrased more directly (from the worker's point of view) as 'To challenge social injustice and inequalities' it would have scored even higher. However, in the open-ended question about the purpose of youth work, no worker spontaneously couched his or her answer in equality terms at all. Moreover, while the views of the workers in the focus groups were strongly in favour of equality and inclusiveness and of recognising and valuing diversity, they also acknowledged in most cases that practice in this area (or *group* of areas since equality issues could include all the nine grounds in the equality legislation and perhaps several others) is not yet as fully or highly developed as it could or should be. Specific practical difficulties were cited in relation to trying to develop initiatives in some areas including intercultural work and work that is inclusive of young lesbians and gay men. In all cases the sense is that workers are committed to developing practice in these (and other) fields and are in some cases already actively doing so but that they themselves see room for progress.

Benefits and Outcomes

On the key research question of the benefits and outcomes of youth work the correspondence between the views (and aspirations and intentions) of the youth workers and the perceptions and experiences of the young people was very strong. As will be clear from the respective sections of this report, both gave very complementary accounts (and, in the case of the young people, *complimentary* accounts also) of youth work as a process of non-formal and informal education with a wide range of positive outcomes at the level of the individual and beyond. These include:

- enhanced personal attributes and qualities such as confidence, self-esteem, awareness (personal and social), amicability and sociability;
- opportunities for association with others in a positive context, strengthening bonds with existing friends and making new ones, often from diverse backgrounds;
- new and more diverse experiences and opportunities (which are more likely with longer periods of involvement) which in turn enhance personal development;
- enhanced positive and pro-social behaviour and diminishing negative and anti-social behaviour;
- practical skills (for example making decisions, planning and organising, budgeting, cooking, teamwork, group work, communications, arts and creativity; and numerous sports, games and physical activities);
- information, advice and advocacy in relation to (for example) health, relationships, sexuality, the law, careers and formal education;

- practical support in young people's engagement with formal education and in some cases direct provision of (and support for) alternative routes to qualifications;
- support for young people's families by youth workers, integration of family members within the work of the youth group/project, and more positive approaches to parenting (and to young people in general) by adults involved in youth work;
- improved communications and relationships between young people and adults within communities; opportunities for practical intergenerational cooperation at local level;
- improvement in local conditions and amenities, developing local leadership (among both young people and adults), cooperation and coordination with other local services which may avoid duplication and facilitate sharing of learning, resources and approaches.

The youth workers and young people also had very similar views on a number of dimensions or features of youth work which underpin the benefits and outcomes identified. Two of these have already been mentioned at the start of this section. These are:

- Young people's participation in youth work is voluntary.
- Positive relationships are at the heart of youth work – both its process and its 'products' or outcomes.

The importance of the former (which is part of the legislative definition of youth work in Ireland) was explicitly affirmed by both adults and young people in this study. The latter point (regarding relationships) was stated explicitly and emphatically (and often) by youth workers; while among young people it was communicated less directly but still unmistakably in their comments about respect and friendship and the sheer enjoyment of spending time with people – both other young people and adults – whom you like and who like you, learning more effectively as a result.

There also appeared to be broad agreement among youth workers and young people about two other points.

- Youth work is (at least potentially) of 'universal' benefit to young people.

It should not be viewed as being associated exclusively or primarily with certain categories or groups. The value of having a 'social mix' in the composition of youth groups was identified by adults and young people alike.

- Youth work takes time.

It is only after a considerable amount of time, effort and energy has been invested by youth workers (and of course by the young people) that the full potential of youth work can be realised (although, as indicated in the literature review, research shows that it can start to have a significant positive impact on young people and communities even after a few months). This is also a point that was made very explicitly and frequently by the workers. In the case of the young people it was made more obliquely or indirectly, as for example when the point was made in the focus group discussions that the youth worker becomes 'more like your friend' after you have known them for a while; or when the questionnaire findings showed that longer involvement seems to be associated with perceived positive changes. It is also relevant in this context to note again that the projects and groups featured in this report are all long established and have a record of many years of service at local level – a crucial factor underpinning the trust and respect which they are afforded among local adults and other services and agencies as well as young people.

It must be stressed that the above points represent the benefits, outcomes and features of youth work as described and discussed by youth workers and young people *in the five case study sites* participating in this study. While the sites are attached to a number of different organisations, are regionally diverse and also differ from each other in a number of other significant respects, it is not being claimed that they are systematically 'representative' of youth work in Ireland. The commissioning organisations identified projects and groups which they already hold (and are held by others) in high regard and therefore the accounts of youth work which we have heard about and have attempted to communicate in this report are accounts of good practice rather than necessarily of typical practice. However it is equally important not to assume that practice elsewhere *falls short* of these standards unless that practice is also investigated.

6. Conclusion

An earlier chapter in this report reviewed the research literature on youth work and suggested that there is a broad consensus, in Ireland and elsewhere, regarding some of its key features.

- It is a process of non-formal and informal education.
- It relies on young people's voluntary participation and commitment.
- It is concerned with both the personal and social development of young people.
- It can involve a wide range of activities and programmes, but in the case of any or all of these, from a youth work point of view, the 'process' is as important as the 'product'.
- It involves young people as partners, as active and critical participants, and gives them an individual and collective voice in their communities and in society as a whole.
- It rests on positive and mutually respectful relationships between adults and young people.
- It has a commitment to uphold core values such as equity, diversity and interdependence; inclusiveness; respect; partnership; empowerment; safeguarding young people.
- It is socially inclusive, in that all young people can participate in and benefit from it; and it takes special care to support those who have experienced social exclusion.
- It provides a means of strengthening intergenerational solidarity and building social capital.

The literature review also suggested that such underpinning values, principles and processes can be regarded as the key elements of the youth and community work 'curriculum': its core statement of purpose and direction, and one which rather than being narrowly prescribed can find expression in a range of developmental activities and programmes.

The findings from the focus groups and questionnaires documented in the subsequent chapters confirm that (at least within the case study sites participating in this research) this view of youth work is shared by Irish youth workers today, and suggest moreover that this view is closely in tune with how young people themselves perceive and experience youth work, even if they sometimes use a different vocabulary to express their views. The findings also make it clear that from the point of view both of youth workers and of young people, participation in youth work has a wide range of significant positive outcomes or benefits, including (as already presented in Section 5):

- enhanced personal attributes and qualities such as confidence, self-esteem, awareness (personal and social), amicability and sociability;
- opportunities for association with others in a positive context, strengthening bonds with existing friends and making new ones, often from diverse backgrounds;
- new and more diverse experiences and opportunities (which are more likely with longer periods of involvement) which in turn enhance personal development;
- enhanced positive and pro-social behaviour and diminishing negative and anti-social behaviour;
- practical skills (for example making decisions, planning and organising, budgeting, cooking, teamwork, group work, communications, arts and creativity; and numerous sports, games and physical activities);
- information, advice and advocacy in relation to (for example) health, relationships, sexuality, the law, careers and formal education;
- practical support in young people's engagement with formal education and in some cases direct provision of (and support for) alternative routes to qualifications;
- support for young people's families by youth workers, integration of family members within the work of the youth group/project, and more positive approaches to parenting (and to young people in general) by adults involved in youth work;
- improved communications and relationships between young people and adults within communities; opportunities for practical intergenerational cooperation at local level;
- improvement in local conditions and amenities, developing local leadership (among both young people and adults), cooperation and coordination with other local services which may avoid duplication and facilitate sharing of learning, resources and approaches.

As the list above makes clear, the most obvious benefits of youth work are for individual young people (including 'concrete' benefits such as information, practical skills, enhanced educational or employment opportunities; and less tangible ones such as confidence, self-esteem, tolerance and sociability). But there are also benefits for the adults involved, both paid staff and volunteers – much the same range of benefits as for young people. There are benefits at the level of neighbourhoods and communities as well – more positive relationships between old and young, reduced tension, better amenities or an enhanced physical environment, more coordinated and effective service provision. Furthermore, because youth work clubs and projects at local level are very often affiliated to regional or national and even international networks, and because the young people and adults who participate in a youth group carry the benefits of their involvement with them into many other areas of social action and interaction, there are broader societal benefits as well.

For this reason is worth returning to another aspect of youth work introduced at the end of the literature review: the concept of social capital, which has come to be influential in social policy and public discourse in recent years. Although he was not the originator of the term, the writer most commonly associated with it nowadays is Robert Putnam, for whom it refers to 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000: 19). Putnam also distinguishes between 'bonding social capital', which strengthens relationships within a given group or category, and 'bridging social capital' which strengthens relationships between different groups (for example ethnic groups, classes, or most relevant here, age groups). Numerous other sources give definitions similar to Putnam's: for example the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development defines social capital as 'the networks, norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation *within* or *among* groups' (OECD, 2001, emphasis added).

Many criticisms have been made of the concept of social capital or of its uses and abuses but these need not concern us here (see Devlin, 2008; Farrell, 2007). The main point in the present context is that if it is accepted that stronger bonds of 'understanding, reciprocity and trustworthiness' are worth nurturing and sustaining, within society as a whole and between the major sub-groups which it comprises, then youth work can be seen as having a vital role to play. Putnam suggests that for the biggest social problems 'bridging social capital' is the most urgently needed but the most difficult to create (Putnam, 2000: 363). Among the biggest social problems facing Ireland in the future is the key one of demographic change, a greatly increased dependency ratio and the prospect of significant intergenerational tensions over resources. This point was made in the literature review where reference was made to the *National Youth Work Development Plan* which explicitly highlights the increasing importance of youth work in the context of such demographic change (Department of Education and Science, 2003: 2). Since the Development Plan was published the country has entered an economic crisis – then entirely unforeseen – which makes the task of anticipating and countering social tensions such as this all the more urgent.

In terms of positive intergenerational relationships (an example of 'bridging social capital') this report suggests that youth work has a vital and distinctive role to play – one that may in fact have few parallels – given the voluntary nature of young people's involvement and the fact that they speak so positively about their relationships with adults and the mutual respect which they perceive to characterise those relationships. Their views are borne out by the contributions of the adult respondents, paid and volunteer. Taken together with the other forms of 'bridging' documented in this report (for example in terms of socio-economic diversity or 'social mix'), these findings suggest that all those concerned with youth work policy and practice should renew their focus on the social as well as the personal outcomes of youth work, and on the ways in which the two are inextricably linked, all the more so at a time of unprecedented social change.

References

Bloor, M, Frankland, J., Thomas, M. and Robson, K. (2001) *Focus Groups in Social Research*. London: Sage.

Bryman, A. (2001) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burrell, G. and Morgan, G. (1979) *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis*. London: Heinemann.

Canavan, J. (1998) *The North Mayo Schools Project*. Dublin: Foróige.

Communities Scotland (2006) *Delivering Change: Understanding the Outcomes of Community Learning and Development*. Edinburgh: Communities Scotland.

Crimmens, D., Factor, F., Jeffs, T., Pitts, J. Pugh, C., Spence, J. and Turner, P. (2004) *Reaching Socially Excluded Young People: A National Study of Street-Based Youth Work*. Leicester: National Youth Agency for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Curriculum Development Unit (2003) *Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice*. Antrim: Curriculum Development Unit.

De Vaus, D. (2002) *Surveys in Social Research* (5th edition). London: Routledge.

Department of Education (1980) *Development of Youth Work Services in Ireland* (O'Sullivan Report). Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2003) *National Youth Work Development Plan 2003–2007*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Devlin, M. (2008) Review of *Youth and Social Capital*, edited by Helena Helve and John Bynner. *Youth Studies Ireland*, 3 (1): 80-82.

European Commission (2009) *An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering*. Brussels: European Commission.

European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) (2008) *Glossary*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe/European Commission. http://www.youthpartnership.net/youth-partnership/glossary.html

Farrell, C. (2007) 'Thinking Critically about Social Capital', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 16 (2): 27–49.

Government of Ireland (1985) *In Partnership with Youth: the National Youth Policy*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (1995) *Charting Our Education Future: White Paper on Education*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Hurley, L. and Treacy, D. (1993) *Models of Youth Work: A Sociological Framework*. Dublin: Irish Youth Work Press.

Lauritzen P. (2006) 'Youth Work', Internal Working Paper. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Lozano, M.A. and Etxebarria, I. (2007) 'Tolerance of Diversity in Adolescents and its Relationship with Self-esteem, Empathy and the Concept of Human Being', *Infancia Y Aprendizaje*, 30 (1): 109-129.

Merton, B., Payne, M., and Smith, D.,(2004) *An Evaluation of the Impact of Youth Work in England*. Research report 606. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills.

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis* (2nd edition). California: Sage.

National Youth Council of Ireland (1994) *Towards the Development of a Comprehensive Youth Service*. Dublin: NYCI.

National Youth Policy Committee (1984) *Final Report* (Costello Report). Dublin: Stationery Office.

OECD (2001) *The Well Being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Ord, J. (2007) *Youth Work Process, Product and Practice: Creating an Authentic Curriculum in Work with Young People*. Lyme Regis: Russell House

Patton, Michael Quinn (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd edition). London: Sage.

Putnam, R. (1995) 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 28: 664:683.

Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Scottish Government (2008a) *Identifying and Quantifying the Outcomes of Community Learning and Development: Developing and Testing of a Research Instrument*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. www.scotland.gov.uk/learningconnections

Scottish Government (2008b) *Building Connections, Getting Involved: Measuring Social Capital Outcomes of Community Learning and Development*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. www.scotland.gov.uk/learningconnections

Sotelo, M.J. (2000) 'Individual Differences in Political Tolerance among Adolescents', *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 28 (2): 185–192.

Spence, J. (2007) 'What Do Youth Workers Do?: Communicating Youth Work', *Youth Studies Ireland*, 2 (2): 3–18.

Spence, J. and Devanney, C. (2006) *Voices of Practice: A Research Report by Durham University and Weston Spirit*. Leicester: National Youth Agency.

Youth Council for Northern Ireland (1998) *Benefits of the Youth Service: A Study of the Experiences of 14-18 Year Old Members of Registered Youth Groups in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Youth Council for Northern Ireland.

Youth Service Liaison Forum (2005) *Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Department of Education for Northern Ireland.

Appendix 1

Methodology

This research set out to explore the nature, purpose and outcomes of youth work in Ireland today. It was decided at the outset by the researchers and the Interagency Group that the research objectives could best be achieved by a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, involving semi-structured interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire survey. It was also agreed that the research would be of most use to the broader youth work sector if it engaged in a close examination of projects or groups that were well established and known to have a track record of effective and successful practice, rather than a study of what is necessarily typical or 'representative' of current youth work in Ireland. This suggested a case study approach, aimed at providing 'well grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes occurring in local contexts' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 15). Five case study sites were identified, reflecting the composition of the Interagency Group and also including a range of types of provision and context (community-based project, local youth service, volunteer-led youth group, urban and rural settings). In social research terms this is an example of 'purposive sampling', a type of 'non-probability' sampling in which cases are selected deliberately on the basis of certain known attributes rather than on a randomized basis ('probability sampling') (De Vaus, 2002). Section 1 of this report has already listed the five case study sites, the youth groups/projects and the organizations with which they are associated:

- Blanchardstown, County Dublin (Blanchardstown Youth Service, Foróige);
- Ennis, County Clare (Clare Youth Services, Youth Work Ireland);
- Loughglynn, County Roscommon (Loughglynn Foróige Club);
- Rialto, Dublin 8 (Rialto Youth Project, CDYSB)
- Ronanstown, County Dublin (Ronanstown Youth Service, CYC).

Within each of the case study sites, and as indicated above, a number of methods were used. Firstly, semi-structured interviews with key informants (managers and/or senior practitioners) were used to contextualise the research, gather general background information and explore informants' perceptions of the nature of their work, its relationship with other types of work with young people and the basis on which they make judgments about its success or effectiveness. There were nine interviewees in total across the five case study sites: two individual interviews, two groups of two and one group of three.

Secondly, focus groups were held with youth workers and with young people. Focus groups are favoured in social research when a relatively 'natural' setting is considered advisable and where it is expected that the group process might itself help to generate relevant data and insights, although careful moderation is required to ensure that all group members are facilitated in contributing their views (Bloor et al., 2001; Bryman, 2001). In the case of adults, as many workers as were available (paid and volunteer) were invited to participate; in the case of young people the youth worker(s) provided information about the research project and sought volunteers, offering further encouragement in some cases to try to ensure a balance of age or gender. Specific ages are not indicated in the body of this report but the young people were asked to state their age at the start of the focus groups and participants tended to cluster around the mid-teens. In total there were 33 adult focus group participants and 41 young people.

While focus group research has many advantages it also has limitations. In order to gather more comprehensive data at the level of individual young people and youth workers (demographic information, part-time/full-time/volunteer status of workers, duration of young people's involvement and perceived benefits, strength of agreement or disagreement with specific attitudes or opinions, and so on) and tentatively explore the relationship between certain variables (for example duration of involvement and perceived benefits) it was decided to conduct a questionnaire survey *within* each case study site, going beyond the focus group membership. Appendices 2 and 3 provide copies of the questionnaires. These were distributed by the key informants among all young people and adults in each site and responses were invited and encouraged, but participation was entirely voluntary. In some cases existing sessions or meetings were used to facilitate completion. In total there were 64 completed responses from adults and 172 from young people. Since the questionnaires were circulated within five case study sites that had been 'purposively' sampled and furthermore since the distribution and collection of questionnaires within each site took a form which social researchers would call 'convenience sampling' (De Vaus, 2002) it is important to reiterate the point that the questionnaire findings (like the research findings more broadly) make no claim to being representative of the Irish youth work sector in general. They do however provide insights into the attitudes and experiences of selected groups of young people and youth workers and certainly suggest lines of enquiry for further research, both qualitative and quantitative.

The research methods generated both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were subjected both to 'inductive analysis' which sought out 'indigenous' categories within the responses (Patton, 2002) and 'deductive analysis' which related the views of respondents to

categories and themes suggested by the literature review and by discussion between the researchers and the Interagency Group. In communicating the attitudes and experiences of respondents in this report a strong emphasis is placed on verbatim quotation - 'Description and quotation provide the foundation of qualitative reporting' (Patton, 2002: 503) - but within an interpretative framework drawing on contemporary youth work literature, theory and practice.

In the questionnaire survey most questions were open-ended and therefore also resulted in qualitative data (see Appendices 2 and 3). In most cases the researchers conducted a thematic analysis (as just described) and classified the responses so that they could be treated as quantitative data for the purposes of generating simple descriptive statistics. A small number of questions were quantitative by design. These included the questions seeking demographic information, status of workers (part-time paid/full-time paid/volunteer), frequency of young people's attendance and duration of their involvement. They also included - in the questionnaire for youth workers - a 'Likert' question with a list of ten statements of possible aims for youth work. The full question is included in Appendix 2 and the results are referred to in Sections 3 and 5 of this report, where the findings for the full list of ten items are collapsed into five broader categories. The following is a list of the five categories and the two statements from the original list which relate to each category.

Traditional *'character-building'* aims:

(i) To teach young people to respect authority.

(e) To keep young people off the streets and out of trouble.

Aims focused on the *care and welfare* of young people:

(d) To meet young people's basic need for shelter and nourishment.

(h) To provide individual care and support for troubled young people.

Personal development aims:

(b) To help young people to become more confident, assertive and independent.

(g) To develop young people's talents, abilities and interpersonal skills.

Social education aims:

(a) To enable young people to become more active and critical participants in their communities and in society

(c) To raise young people's social and political awareness and empower them to make things happen.

Aims concerned with promoting *social change*:

(f) To encourage young people to challenge social injustice and inequalities.

(j) To work with the younger generation to promote social change.

Input and analysis of the questionnaire data was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software.

Finally, all respondents to this research project took part on the basis of informed consent (in the case of the young people all were existing members/participants in the youth groups in question) and all were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in the reporting of the findings. Excerpts from interviews and focus groups are not attributed to individual case study sites and all names are pseudonymous.

Appendix 2

Questionnaire for Youth Workers and Leaders

Note: This questionnaire is anonymous and confidential and the comments in it will not be attributed to any one person. Thank you for taking the time to complete it.

Q 1. Please complete the following 3 statements in your own words:

1(a) In my own opinion, the *key purpose* of my work with young people is...

_____

_____

_____

_____

1(b) If I had to choose, the *one thing* that I would most like young people to gain from my involvement with them is …

_____

_____

_____

_____

1(c) The *one activity* which I find most effective in helping to fulfil the purpose of my work with young people is …

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 2. The following is a list of statements of possible aims for youth work. How much importance would you attach to each of these aims in your own work? (Please *circle the number* which applies in each case.)

1 = none at all 2 = hardly any 3 = some 4 = quite a lot 5 = a great deal 6 = don't know/not sure

(a) To enable young people to become more active and critical participants in their communities and in society.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(b) To help young people to become more confident, assertive and independent.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(c) To raise young people's social and political awareness and empower them to make things happen.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(d) To meet young people's basic need for shelter and nourishment.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(e) To keep young people off the streets and out of trouble.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(f) To encourage young people to challenge social injustice and inequalities.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(g) To develop young people's talents, abilities and interpersonal skills.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(h) To provide individual care and support for troubled young people.	1	2	3	4	5	6

(i)	To teach young people to respect authority.	1	2	3	4	5	6
(j)	To work with the younger generation to promote social change.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Q 3. What are the positive outcomes for young people of being involved in your youth project/service? (Please mention what you think are the two or three most significant outcomes.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 4. What is/are the main challenge(s) or difficulty(ies) that you face in your work with young people? (Please mention one or more)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 5. What is/are the aspect(s) of your work that you find most rewarding? (Please mention one or more)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 6. If you consider the type of work you are involved in with young people and then consider the other services, projects or agencies young people might have contact with (e.g. schools, sports groups, health services, justice services, commercial leisure etc), what would you say makes the work of your project/group distinctive or different? (Please mention one or more things.)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 7. Finally, please provide the following information.

(a) Are you (please tick) male ☐ or female ☐ ?

(b) Is your age group (please tick):

less than 20 ☐ 20–29 ☐ 30–39 ☐ 40–49 ☐

50–59 ☐ 60–69 ☐ 70+ ☐ ?

(c) Which of the following best describes the nature of your involvement in youth work? (please tick one only)

Volunteer ☐ Part-time paid ☐ Full-time paid ☐ ?

Once again, many thanks for your time and help with this research project.

Appendix 3

Questionnaire for Young People

Note: The findings of this questionnaire will only be used in a general way and comments will not be attributed to any named individual. Thank you for taking the time to complete it.

Q 1. What age are you? _____ years

Q 2. Are you (please tick a box) male ☐ or female ☐ ?

Q 3. Roughly long have you been involved in this youth project/group (please tick one only)?

Less than 3 months ☐ 3–6 months ☐ 6 months – 1 year ☐

1–2 years ☐ 2–3 years ☐ More than 3 years ☐

Q 4. How often do you come to the youth project/group?

(tick whichever comes closest)

Most days ☐ 2 or 3 times a week ☐

Once a week ☐ Once every couple of weeks ☐ About once a month ☐ Less than once a month ☐

Q 5. What do you most enjoy about coming to the project/group?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 6. Have you taken part in activities in the project/group which you had not done before or would not have been able to do otherwise?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, please give an example(s). (If no, move on to next question)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 7. Do you see any changes in yourself as a result of being involved in club/project?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, can you say what change(s) you have seen? (If no, move on to next question)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 8. Is there anything in particular you have learned while taking part?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, can you give an example or two? (If no, move on to next question)

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 9. What do you think is the main purpose of having a youth project/group like this in your area?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 10. What do young people who are not in the project/club think of it?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 11. Do young people have a say in decision-making in the project?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, please give an example(s) of how they have a say. (If no, move on to next question)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 12. How do you think the youth project/group is different from school or a training project (e.g. Youthreach)?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 13. How would you describe the job of the youth worker/youth leader in the project/group?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 14. If you wanted to persuade somebody else your age to join the youth project/group, what would you say to them?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 15. If you wanted the Government to provide more youth projects like this and give more funding to them, what would you say about the benefits of projects like this?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Many thanks again for your time and help!

Youth Work Ireland

catholic youth care

NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

Irish YOUTH Foundation
Achievement Starts with Opportunity

city of dublin youth service board
CDYSB
comhairle le leas óige

OGRA CHORCAI Ltd.

empowering youth
enriching communities
foróige