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Contents

Articles

Youth Mentoring in Ireland: Weighing Up the Benefits and Challenges	3
<i>Bernadine Brady and Pat Dolan</i>	
Worldviews Apart? Perceptions of Place among Rural, Farm and Urban Young People in Ireland	17
<i>Brian McGrath and Saoirse NicGabhainn</i>	
Young Rent Supplement Claimants in the Private Rented Sector: An Analysis of Socio-Economic Characteristics and Duration of Claims	32
<i>Dermot Coates and Michelle Norris</i>	
Coming of Age at Last?	
Youth Work, the Good Relations Legislation and the Shared Future Policy in Northern Ireland	45
<i>Derick Wilson</i>	

Research Digest

Young People's Views about Recreation and Leisure: Findings from a National Study	60
<i>Áine de Róiste and Joan Dinneen</i>	

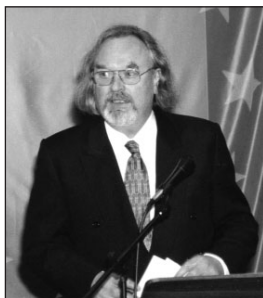
Notes on Practice

Involving Young People in Conference Planning: Some Lessons from Practice	78
<i>Celia Keenaghan and Mary Roche</i>	

Reviews

Faith Based Youth Work in Northern Ireland	88
Youth Justice in Ireland: Tough Lives, Rough Justice	91
Youth Work: Voices of Practice	94

Peter Lauritzen 1942–2007



It was with great sadness that we heard of the passing away of Peter Lauritzen, Head of the Youth Department in the Council of Europe's Directorate of Youth and Sport, on 29th May 2007.

Peter was a formidable figure in the European youth sector over several decades. He joined the Council of Europe in 1972 as the first Tutor of the then newly established European Youth Centre in Strasbourg. In 1985 he became Deputy to the Director of the Centre. From 1995 to 1999, he was Executive Director of the second European Youth Centre in Budapest, which became, under his leadership, the first permanent service of the Council of Europe in a country of Central and Eastern Europe. He became Head of the Youth Department and Deputy Director of Youth and Sport in 1999.

Throughout his career Peter worked tirelessly to promote and strengthen youth policy, youth research, youth work and youth participation in Europe. He combined a razor sharp intellect with a warm and gregarious personality. Typically, he accepted the invitation in 2006 to become an editorial associate of *Youth Studies Ireland* even though he was very ill. He expressed regret that he would not be able to do much for us. On the contrary, he did us a great honour.

The next issue of the journal will carry an appreciation by Gavan Titley of Peter Lauritzen's contribution to European youth studies.

Youth Mentoring in Ireland

Weighing up the Benefits and Challenges

Bernadine Brady and Pat Dolan

Abstract

Internationally, mentoring for young people has become increasingly attractive to policy makers as a micro-level response to the needs of young people deemed to be 'at risk' or in need of support. The Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) youth mentoring programme was introduced to Ireland in 2002 and, based on its success and popularity to date, is due to expand considerably over the coming years. This paper outlines key findings from the international body of empirical knowledge in relation to mentoring and from research into the Irish experience of BBBS. It is suggested that implementation of an internationally recognised programme in an Irish context can bring many benefits, but also presents a core set of challenges to social policy in respect of young people who are potentially 'at risk'.

Keywords

Youth mentoring; social support; prevention.

Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid by academics, policy makers and youth workers to the potential of mentoring to support young people in their development. Mentoring relationships can be categorised as either 'natural' or 'formal'. Natural mentoring is a relationship between a young person and a non-parental adult (such as teacher, neighbour or sports coach) that develops spontaneously and fulfils functions such as guidance, encouragement and emotional support (Baker and Maguire, 2005). Formal mentoring is traditionally understood as one to one mentoring between an adult and child or young person that is organised through a designated mentoring programme.¹ Whether natural or formal, Freedman (1992) suggests that definitions of mentoring have a consensus in relation to three core elements: the mentor is someone with greater experience or wisdom than the mentee, the mentor offers guidance or instruction that is intended to facilitate the growth and development of the mentee and there is an emotional bond between mentor and mentee, a hallmark of which is a sense of real friendship and trust (DuBois and Karcher, 2005).

While adult mentoring programmes have been in operation in Ireland for many years², formal youth mentoring programmes are a relatively new development. For example, the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP), an American mentoring model introduced to Ireland in response to the 2001 Children Act, uses a wraparound

approach, whereby a paid mentor or advocate is allocated to a young person deemed to be 'high risk' (Fleischer et al., 2006). Whereas YAP is targeted at young people in need of intense support, Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) is positioned as a preventative community-based mentoring programme. It matches an adult volunteer with a young person deemed to be in need of support and friendship and they meet once a week for a minimum of one year, during which time their 'match' is supervised by a professional project worker. The model of youth mentoring used in the Big Brothers Big Sisters Programme differs to YAP in that mentors are unpaid volunteers, the programme is less time-intensive and the participants are young people who are experiencing risk and adversity but not to a degree that would render them unsuitable for volunteer intervention.³

In Ireland, the BBBS programme has been piloted in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon by Foróige, a national youth work organisation, since 2002 (with the support of the regional statutory health service executive, HSE West). BBBS Ireland is one of the affiliated organisations of BBBS international, which in turn is linked to BBBS America, the best-known mentoring programme in the USA. In the USA, the organisation has been in operation for over a century and currently serves over 225,000 young people in 5,000 communities, through a network of 470 agencies.⁴ In the USA, BBBS is a stand alone programme, but in the Irish context it is offered through existing youth services, such as Neighbourhood Youth Projects. In 2005, the Child & Family Research Centre (a joint initiative of HSE West and NUI Galway) undertook an evaluation of the Irish BBBS programme (Brady et al, 2005). As the BBBS Ireland programme is due for national expansion, it is timely to consider some of the lessons from research in relation to youth mentoring, with a particular emphasis on the BBBS programme. This paper outlines the rationale for youth mentoring, empirical evidence in relation to outcomes and factors associated with effective mentoring programmes and relationships. Key findings from a retrospective study into the implementation of the BBBS programme in Ireland are highlighted, and – based on the Irish and international research outlined – the benefits and challenges associated with the development of youth mentoring in Ireland are identified.

Why Youth Mentoring?

In practice, mentoring involves a mentor (adult) offering emotional and tangible advice and support to a mentee (child) through friendship and regular shared leisure time. Overtly, the relationship is about spending time together and having fun but at a deeper level it is about offering a supportive relationship to a young person in need. Mentoring is based on the idea that a created relationship between an older and younger person will act to prevent future difficulties or be a support to a young person facing adversity in their lives. Having a caring adult friend can help to build positive assets for young people to enable them to have:

- A commitment to learning
- A positive sense of self and the future
- Values of caring, social justice, honesty and responsibility; and
- Social competencies of making friends, planning, making decisions and resisting negative behaviour (BBBS, 2001: 2).

Rather than focusing on ‘deficits’ or what the young person lacks, the programme adopts a positive youth development approach that addresses the young person’s full range of needs and the competencies required to help them to become productive and healthy adults.

The rationale for youth mentoring can be considered from a number of perspectives. Firstly, demographic and societal changes are seen to have impacted negatively on relationships and support between adults and young people in communities. Irish society, like many others, has experienced a major change in the structure of the family over the past decade, with an increase in lone parent households, separation and divorce. Advocates of mentoring argue that young people are making their transitions to adulthood in very different contexts from that of previous generations and that opportunities for informal interaction between caring adults and youth have diminished. Secondly, theories such as resilience, social capital and social support offer a theoretical basis for such an intervention. Through ‘strengths based working with children’, these theories have been the foundation for policies aimed at reducing risk for youth, emphasising positive adaptation and areas of competence. Instead of focusing on problems, youth programmes seek to identify ‘developmental assets’ which are competencies and resources within young people’s lives that enhance their chances of positive development. Among the 40 assets conducive to adolescents’ healthy development identified by the Search Institute (2006) are ‘support from three or more other adults’ and ‘adult role models’.⁵ Rutter (1995) argues that a long-term relationship with mentors can provide a steeling mechanism, which helps young people to overcome adversity.

Thirdly, mentoring increasingly fits with international policy directions, which favour micro-level interventions (one-to-one work) in the context of an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), to tackle the needs of youth deemed to be ‘at risk’. In Ireland, while youth mentoring is not currently a central policy provision, the principles and approach it espouses are reflective of trends and thrusts in policy and legislation over the past two decades that emphasise common themes of prevention, family, community, interagency co-operation and children’s rights. For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child highlights the importance of the ‘four Ps’ of prevention, protection, provision and participation when working with vulnerable children. Other key developments include the Child Care Act (1991), the Children Act (2001), the National Children’s Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000), the Best Health for Children Reports (2002) and the Youth Work Act (2001), all of which emphasise the need for preventive programmes to enhance the personal and social development of young people in disadvantaged communities and families.

Is Mentoring an Effective Intervention?

Public/Private Ventures, an independent social research agency, conducted a large-scale randomised control trial evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters Programmes across eight sites in the USA to assess whether the mentoring programme made a tangible difference to the young people’s lives. The results of the evaluation were largely in favour of the programme’s methods, finding that: participants were less likely to start using drugs or alcohol; were less likely to hit someone; had improved school attendance and performance; had improved attitudes towards completing

schoolwork; and had improved peer and family relationships (Tierney et al., 1995). Young people in relationships that lasted for a year or more reported the largest number of improvements, with fewer effects emerging among those in relationships that lasted for six to twelve months. The study concluded that the organised structure and support of the programme was key to the programme's effectiveness. Intensive supervision and support of the mentors by paid staff, a requisite of the BBBS approach, was especially critical to successful outcomes (Furano, 1993). The meta-analysis by DuBois et al. (2002) of over 55 studies of mentoring programmes found that there is a small, but significant, positive effect for mentees in the areas of enhanced psychological, social, academic, and job/employment functioning, as well as reductions in problem behaviours.

The results of evaluations of one-to-one mentoring provide evidence, therefore, that involvement in programmatically created relationships with unrelated adults can yield a range of tangible benefits for young people. But not every mentoring programme will produce these results. Good relationships supported by adequate infrastructure are necessary in order to achieve success (Sipe, 2002). In terms of the characteristics of effective mentoring programmes, DuBois et al. (2002) found that larger effect sizes emerged when programmes were characterised by practices that increased relationship quality and longevity, including ongoing training for mentors, structured activities for mentors and youth, expectations for frequency of contact, mechanisms for support and involvement from parents and monitoring of overall programme implementation. Frequency of contact between mentors and mentees greatly influences the extent to which processes of change have an opportunity to occur. Greater amounts of time spent together have been associated with higher levels of emotional and instrumental support in mentoring relationships (Herrera et al, 2000) and increased likelihood of the young person nominating the mentor as a significant adult in his or her life. Important programme components are screening of volunteers to ensure they keep their commitment and understand the need to earn the young person's trust, and orientation and training of volunteers so they understand their role and what is to be expected. Rhodes (2002) states that, since greater numbers of these practices predicted more positive outcomes for youth in mentoring programmes, one-to-one programmes that have met these criteria can assume positive outcomes. Matches that take into account the young person's and mentor's preferences are more likely to result in relationships that are satisfying to both members of the pair. Young people who report greater similarity with their mentors report greater liking and satisfaction with their mentors.

A body of research evidence also draws our attention to the fact that some styles of mentoring may be more effective than others. For example, when Slicker and Palmer (1993) evaluated the impact of a school-based mentoring programme on 86 at-risk students, the initial results showed no difference between the treatment and control groups. However, when the differences between those students who were effectively mentored versus those who were ineffectively mentored were evaluated, they found that effectively mentored students had a lower dropout rate than ineffectively mentored students. DuBois and Neville (1997) hold that greater understanding of relationship characteristics and their implications for mentoring effectiveness could aid in the development of more successful programmes. To aid this process, Morrow and Styles

(1995) identified two broad categories of relationship, which they labelled prescriptive and developmental. *Developmental* mentors devote themselves to developing a strong connection to the young person, centering their involvement on developing a reliable, trusting relationship. They place a strong emphasis on maintaining the relationship and ensuring it is enjoyable. Only when the relationship is strongly established, do they start to address other goals, such as strengthening the young person's good habits. They include the mentee in the decision-making process about activities and are willing to change their plans according to the young person's preferences. Young people in developmental relationships report feeling a considerable sense of support from their adult friend – believing their friend would be there for them in times of need. 'Just listening' and 'being able to talk about anything' were perceived by young people as helpful in resolving or coping with difficulties. Providing opportunities for fun was one of the 'mainstays of the relationship'. These volunteers are more likely to make the relationship last long enough to be helpful to the young person. *Prescriptive* relationships are those in which the goals of the volunteer are primary, with the adult setting the pace and ground rules for the relationship. The researchers found that mentors in prescriptive relationships had unrealistic ideas regarding how the goals could be achieved. They believed that their efforts could transform young person's values, habits and skills within a year or two. Others required the mentee to take equal responsibility for the relationship and for providing feedback about its meaning. In this way, according to Morrow and Styles, they set the basic ground rules of the relationship beyond the capacity of most early adolescents. Both the mentor and the mentee were frustrated in these relationships. These mentors did partake in some fun activities but were more likely to push for 'good for you' activities and offer fun as a reward for 'good behaviour' (Morrow and Styles, 1995: 5).

BBBS in Ireland: The Experience to Date

As mentioned at the outset, an evaluation was undertaken of the BBBS programme in Ireland in 2005. This section describes the methodology of the study and briefly reviews some of the research findings.

Methodology

The research objectives were to provide a descriptive account of the history and operation of the BBBS programme, to locate the programme in its wider service context, to establish how it has been implemented to date and to find out the views of stakeholders involved with the programme including young people, mentors, project workers and programme staff. An assessment of outcomes will be made in the next phase of the research, which will involve an in-depth longitudinal study of young people participating in the programme.

The research focused on all community matches (n=61) made over the period from the programmes' establishment in 2002 up to the end of 2004. To access mentees, the research team worked through the BBBS project workers, who sent them a letter explaining the study and seeking consent (from them and their parent/guardian) for their participation in the research. Six young people/parents denied consent and a further five could not be contacted. The research team examined 50 files containing detailed case notes kept by project workers, from which a profile of mentees and an

assessment of match progress could be made. Mentees were also invited to complete questionnaires designed by Public Private Ventures, the American agency which evaluated the BBBS America programme. Accessing mentees to take part was difficult in some cases for reasons such as they had moved away or they did not want to take part. A total of 26 mentees completed questionnaires, representing 43 per cent of all participants. Aggregate data in relation to the programme was also gathered through a questionnaire about the programme which was completed by the project workers in each county. Letters were also sent to all mentors informing them of the study and seeking their participation. A total of 29 mentors (48 per cent of population) completed questionnaires, 13 of whom also attended one of three focus group sessions. Interviews were held with programme management and frontline staff, including co-directors, childcare managers and project workers, while two focus group sessions were held with project workers.⁶

Structures and Implementation

Foróige and the HSE West developed an interest in youth mentoring as a result of an identified need for a means of supporting young people on a one-to-one basis. The BBBS programme was chosen because it is a model that has proven effective and popular on an international basis, its procedures ensure that risk to the child is well managed and it involves volunteers, which is in keeping with the Foróige commitment to volunteering and civic contribution. In contrast to the US experience, where mentoring programmes are 'stand-alone', the Irish BBBS programme is delivered mainly through Neighbourhood Youth Projects (NYPs) in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. The evaluation found that the strategy of basing the programme in local Neighbourhood Youth Projects was a good one as it ensured that appropriate young people could be selected to participate, the service was non-stigmatising and offered as part of a menu of options. Project workers were trained and experienced youth workers, ideally placed to manage such an intervention. Furthermore, the regional spread of NYPs meant that BBBS achieved a wide geographical range and became embedded in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Furthermore, essential inter-agency relationships and networks were in place through which referrals could be made. A BBBS programme manual was developed, which clearly set out the standards and procedures governing the programme in Ireland. While the standards and procedures are very detailed and time consuming, they have the support of staff who feel that they are essential to uphold the quality and safety of the programme. Evidence suggests that the intensive intake and application process is followed in all cases and has proven successful in identifying suitable and unsuitable mentors and mentees for the programme.

Maintaining a supply of volunteers is a time intensive task, due to the need for widespread publicity campaigns, posterage, answering queries, assessing applications, training and other matters. In a context of limited resources, staff found it difficult to keep up to date with the assessment of volunteer applications. Yet, on the demand side, pressure for places on the programme is strong and staff believe that many more young people could benefit if the capacity was there. Lack of capacity in terms of time and dedicated full-time workers has slowed up the process and resulted in waiting lists for both mentors and mentees.

Profile of Referrals and Participants

From its establishment in 2002 up to the end of December 2004, 61 matches were made by the BBBS programme. Two thirds of participants were referred by NYP staff, while social workers, teachers, residential care staff, parents and a variety of other professionals also made referrals. Analysis of the files undertaken as part of the research indicated that young people participating in the programme were 'at risk' of or experiencing adversity and were thus in line with the target group that the programme aims to reach. Participants were faced with a range of issues and difficulties both individual (e.g. poor self-esteem, victim of bullying) and family-related (e.g. parental mental illness, alcoholism, domestic violence). The following pen pictures give some indication of why young people were referred to BBBS:

Boy (12) lives with his parents and sister. Both parents attend psychiatric services. His Dad has a history of alcohol abuse and was abusive at home. The boy has difficulty making friends and wants to be at home with his Mum all the time. The referrer feels he would benefit from new relationships and experiences.

Girl (15) lives with her father and three siblings. Her mother died a few years ago and the girl takes on a lot of adult responsibilities in the home. Her referrer feels she would benefit from having a female friend to talk to and offer her an opportunity to get out of the house.

Although there was a greater demand for places for boys than girls, four out of five participants were female due to a difficulty in recruiting male volunteers compared to female volunteers.⁷ The majority of the young people participating fell into the 11–14 age range on intake, with 12 and 13 years the most common ages for young people on the programme.

Benefits to Young People

A survey of 28 young people participating in the programme showed that the majority felt emotionally engaged, satisfied with the match and believed that the relationship was youth-centred. An assessment of the match files found evidence that a strong relationship developed in 52 per cent of cases, while a reasonably strong relationship developed in 28 per cent of cases. The conclusion reached was that approximately four out of five matches made develop into good relationships. Approximately one out of five matches did not become well established, having encountered some difficulty as a result of poor bonding, personal difficulties on either side, one party moving away or other problems. In a small number of cases it was because the young person did not engage or the relationship did not 'click', which underlines the need for careful matching. Close scrutiny of the mentees' survey offers insights into how they perceived their relationship with their mentor – for example, none of the respondents agreed that their mentor made fun of them in ways they did not like, but 23 per cent said that it was true or sort of true that they could not trust their mentor with secrets for fear that they would tell their parent or guardian. These areas highlight the importance of the development of trust between the mentor and mentee. Open-ended questions answered by the young people highlighted their broad support for the programme, as the following quotes exemplify:

'We got to do a variety of different things, we got to do things I wouldn't do otherwise, we had loads of fun, (mentor) is great craic, we got to meet loads of different people.'
(Girl, 12, Mayo)

'It's a brilliant idea, I could talk to him about anything that I wouldn't be able to say to others.'
(Boy, 16, Galway)

'I like having a mentor because its interesting to meet different people and my mentor is very nice. She always takes an interest in what I want to do and she takes an interest in my life. She is very cool.'
(Girl, 14, Mayo)

'It should continue, it's really good, especially for children who are sad. It's really good for them.'
(Girl, 14, Galway)

'Its good for a person who has no brothers/sister or doesn't see his/her brothers/sister very much.'
(Boy, 16, Mayo)

Almost three quarters of mentors felt that the young person had benefited, while just over a quarter were unsure. Gains in confidence, communication skills and a more positive outlook were witnessed by some mentors in relation to their mentees. Having someone to confide in and help him or her to deal with problems was also felt to be beneficial for the young person. The following are examples of mentors' views:

'I think my little [i.e. mentee] has more confidence and a more positive outlook on life than previously. I also think the other members of her family have benefited by seeing her having a positive relationship.'

'He has now very little attention-seeking behaviour (used to be different). He "behaves" in groups different now than 1 year ago.'

'I see myself as a good friend, support and advice giver to my little sister. I am a person who she can discover or experience a different perspective with. I see myself as someone who can be there when she needs me and learn new ways of doing things.'

Those who were unsure if the young person had benefited cited the lack of feedback from the mentee or the difficulty in establishing if he or she had benefited as a reason.

'As he is very quiet, you don't get much feedback. At least he learned how to swim and we went to the pool most of the time.'

'I really don't know – she always pretended that everything was nice and that life was great when I know it is far from perfect. But we did have fun and she always met me and seemed interested in the match.'

Foróige project workers believe that the programme is very beneficial to the young people. They have witnessed positive changes in ‘little brothers and sisters’ and believe that the majority of matches result in positive outcomes. Furthermore, BBBS is perceived as ‘cool’ by young people, an important factor in youth services.

Evaluation Conclusions

There is a high level of demand and support for the Big Brothers Big Sisters programme in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon from young people, parents, volunteers and professionals, who have welcomed what they believe to be a positive, preventative intervention programme. Through providing one-to-one support to a young person, it clearly fills a gap in service provision and yet is complementary to existing youth provision. The model has proven to be cost-effective, through building on volunteer inputs and working through NYP structures. The programme manual provided welcome clarity and guidance for project workers. However, while what has been achieved represents good value for money, the evaluation found that outcomes from the programme could be improved if additional resources were available. It is in the area of practices to increase relationship quality and longevity that the programme has most room for improvement – for example, through the provision of greater support to mentors in the form of training, group activities and facilitating mutual support between mentors. While BBBS Ireland is working very well, there is a need to focus clearly on making sure that every match is as good as it possibly can be in order to maximise outcomes for young people.

Weighing up the Benefits and Challenges of Mentoring

Like most other interventions to improve outcomes for children, mentoring programmes such as BBBS have both distinct benefits and clear challenges, illustrated in Figure 1 as a weighing scale, balanced in favour of the benefits of the programme.

Figure 1: *Weighing up the benefits and challenges of Big Brothers Big Sisters from a policy and practice perspective*



Benefits

Social support literature emphasises the importance of informal support networks (comprising parents, siblings, friends and extended family) for young people, as they tend to be favoured by young people as a first source of support in times of need or crisis (Cutrona and Cole, 2000; Tracy et al, 1994). At a most basic level, it could be argued that friendships and trusting relationships prevent most of us from needing professional services. Therefore, as policy, anything that can create such a bank of

support should be tried (if pragmatic) ahead of more 'heavy duty' intervention. Mentoring is undertaken outside of 'nine to five, Monday to Friday' and therefore has the capacity to provide support to young people when needed and at times that many social services are unavailable. Moreover, informal relationships are a non-stigmatising way of working with young people, who may value the fact that the mentor is not paid to help him or her but does so out of what is perceived as genuine interest and caring (Ghate and Hazel, 2002).

As outlined above, BBBS was subject to a large-scale randomised control trial evaluation, which found improvements for the intervention group relative to the control group on a range of outcomes (Tierney et al, 1995). While there is consensus in the research community that additional research is needed into youth mentoring and that many questions remain unasked and unanswered (Rhodes, 2002), available evidence to date justifies the confidence that mentoring advocates have in the model. But from a policy perspective, in order to measure the impact of BBBS more robustly, further research is needed. The decision of Foróige, the host agency of BBBS Ireland, to complete a longitudinal experimental design evaluation is therefore a welcome one.

The Irish experience of BBBS suggests that it is a model that has great popular appeal among young people, parents, youth workers and referrers from a range of agencies. All stakeholders spoke very highly of the model due to its simplicity, high standards and the opportunities it offers both young people and volunteers. From a policy perspective, therefore, the model is attractive on the basis that it is proven, popular, relatively inexpensive and facilitates the emergence of flexible and informal support to vulnerable young people.

Challenges

Some particular issues and challenges associated with the implementation of mentoring are worthy of consideration. Despite comprehensive screening of volunteers, there is the obvious risk of introducing a child to the company of an unsafe adult. However, it should be noted that BBBS has stringent protocols and safeguards, which are well implemented. There is also a risk that if the match between mentor and young person does not work, the effects on the child may be negative. A US BBBS evaluation found that young people in relationships that terminated within six months reported disimprovement in several areas, including increases in alcohol use (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Another consideration is that parents who are under stress and lacking confidence in how they deal with their offspring may feel undermined by their child's mentor who they might perceive as 'doing things' with and for the young person that they cannot offer. The approach taken by the programme is to involve the parent in discussing and reviewing the match, but a balance has to be struck between ensuring the parent is informed and included and protecting the bond of friendship between the mentor and mentee.

In terms of targeting the service, it is essential that policy makers and programme planners remain cognisant that the BBBS model of mentoring is more effective at preventing problem behaviours among young people who are 'at risk' for developmental problems or personal factors than turning around those who are already manifesting such problems. In designing services, it is essential to be realistic about what a mentor can do and what a young person can take in the relationship.

Largest effect sizes are evident among youth experiencing environmental risk and disadvantage, alone or in combination with factors constituting individual-level risk (DuBois et al., 2002). There is no evidence of a favourable effect for young people identified as 'at risk' solely on the basis of individual-level characteristics (e.g. academic failure). Furthermore, enhanced benefits are apparent in the context of low levels of perceived family support, indicating a need for more refined measures of risk associated with the existing support networks of youth than, for example, just targeting single parent families as has been practice in some programmes in the USA (Rhodes, 2005). Thus, service creation needs to be aware of not just need and social geography but also of issues such as maturation and maltreatment.

Experience of the Irish programme suggests that maintaining a flow of volunteers and young people is crucial to the health of the programme. The larger the programme, the bigger the pool of young people and adults from which appropriate matches can be made. For smaller programmes, options regarding matches are narrowed and there is a risk that matches will be made on the basis of necessity rather than compatibility. In all areas, there were difficulties in achieving a gender balance among matches due to the shortage of male volunteers. Resources influence the degree to which the programme can achieve a healthy supply and demand. Therefore, while the cost per match is low, adequate investment must be made to ensure that programmes are resourced to operate on a scale that facilitates optimal matching.

According to Sipe (2002), one of the strongest conclusions that can be drawn from the research on mentoring is the importance of providing mentors with support in their efforts to build trust and develop a positive relationship with young people. The Irish study showed that volunteers can be insecure about their ability in the face of perceived apathy from the young person, illustrating the need for ongoing support and reassurance from practitioners, many of whom struggle with the same issues. Ongoing availability of staff support is necessary to sustain high levels of mentor efficacy, while opportunities for mentors and youth to participate in agency-sponsored activities are also beneficial in helping bonds to develop (Parra et al, 2002). The findings that children may actually experience negative outcomes from short-lived matches indicate that vulnerable children would be better left alone than placed in relationships that cannot be sustained (Rhodes, 2002). Keller (2005) proposes that the qualities that constitute a positive relationship – such as closeness, duration, mutuality, trust – are enhanced by the effort of the caseworker and parent to support the relationship. For these reasons it is incumbent on programme staff and management to ensure that every match is the best it can be.

Conclusion

Based on the emerging body of evidence in relation to mentoring, practitioners and policy makers should give it due consideration as a work model above other, sometimes safer but less effective, traditional professional service interventions. However, there is a need to develop mentoring to a realistic scale (in terms of resources and size), to respond to the demands of care-giving for mentors and to be sensitive to the sometimes tenuous nature of accessing support for vulnerable young people. Specifically, in the context of developing the programme further in Ireland, consideration will also be needed in relation to specific cultural nuances. For example, Ireland is a relatively

small country and the proximity of extended family living nearby who could also be enlisted as supporters and possibly as mentors, needs some consideration. Furthermore, as Foróige offer the programme as an 'add-on' to youth work, BBBS is not strictly a stand alone intervention. A rigorous evaluation possibly through the use of a randomised control trial methodology of any increase in effect size of the benefits which accrue from the mentoring relationship, would now be both timely and helpful. Finally, there is an increasing interest in enhancing volunteerism in Ireland (Task Force on Active Citizenship, 2007). Identifying the exact benefits which 'Bigs' get from providing friendships to young people in need would be most helpful in furthering volunteering both in policy and practice terms.

Notes

- 1 Formal mentoring can also include new forms such as group mentoring, team mentoring, school-based and cross-age peer mentoring.
- 2 For example, Homestart (McAuley, 1999) which focuses on parent-to-parent support mentoring, builds on early projects such as the Community Mothers Programme (Mullin et al., 1990)
- 3 Big Brothers Big Sisters also runs a school-based mentoring programme which matches an older student with an incoming first year student in secondary schools. This article refers only to the community-based programme which matches an adult volunteer with a young person.
- 4 <http://www.bbbsa.org>
- 5 Colley (2003) questions the assumption that the benefits of mentoring can be replicated in planned and institutional contexts on the basis that it is impossible to conclude whether the mentoring relationships created are a cause or an effect of resilience. They may be neither, but 'just a researcher-constructed correlation' (p.524). Less resilient young people may have difficulty bonding with adults, in which case mentoring may reinforce their sense of isolation.
- 6 The fieldwork for the research was greatly supported by the co-operation and commitment of many people, particularly the BBBS Project Leaders and Project Workers.
- 7 It should be noted that the Irish programme followed the USA BBBS norm of having same sex matches only, in part as a child protection safeguard.

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Worldviews Apart?

Perceptions of Place among Rural, Farm and Urban Young People in Ireland

Brian McGrath and Saoirse NicGabhainn

Abstract

In this paper, we report findings from a national survey of 8,316 Irish young people in 2002, which reveals the ways in which socio-spatial context impacts on young people's perceptions of the places in which they live and their views about the nature of certain 'social capital' aspects of their local communities, such as safety, friendliness, potential support from others, opportunities for recreation, and physical environment. It is clear from the evidence presented that perceptions of place are coloured by key contexts such as age, gender and social background. Our evidence also points to the striking significance that socio-spatial location implies for young people's perceptions of their communities. Differences are apparent between rural and urban young people, particularly the strength of positive perceptions among rural youth, while simultaneously reflecting the influence of gender, age and occupational status of parents. Within the rural environment, farm young people also show distinct patterns in the kinds of perceptions they are likely to hold. Our findings raise several conceptual considerations and implications for further inquiry.

Keywords

Young people; community; social capital; gender; rural; urban; farm.

Introduction

As cultural geographers and sociologists of childhood and youth make clear, place exerts a distinct influence upon social relations, necessitating considerable negotiation of young people's spaces, time and status (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2002). It is also clear that young people have an astute awareness of the communities within which they live, despite their lack of voice at a political level. As community and family life alters significantly, the implications are profound for the way in which young people experience and regard the places where they live. In recent years, there has been a growing body of international literature dealing with the impact that living in rural and urban environments has on young people's everyday encounters, social relations and identities (e.g. Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Morrow, 2000; Valentine and Holloway, 2001; Matthews et al, 2000; Panelli et al, 2002; Nairn et al, 2003; Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003; Karsten, 2005). Not surprisingly, place and community matter to young people in distinctive ways, not least of which include the possibilities provided

for friendship relations, freedom, escape, exploration, adventure and general well-being (O'Brien et al, 2000; Morrow, 2000; Panelli et al, 2002; Pooley et al, 2002; Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2005).

However, our knowledge of the extent to which young people's perceptions of where they live are distinctly different or congruent within and between these environments is less than systematic. More specifically, knowledge of the extent to which rural and urban socio-spatial aspects, over and above such critical factors as a young person's age, gender or socio-economic status, show distinct effects is generally limited. Within the present paper, the following research questions explore the complexity surrounding the degree of difference and similarity among young people on this issue:

1. How do age, gender, socioeconomic status, rural/urban location and farm upbringing exert independent effects on young people's sense of where they live?
2. Is there a distinct statistically significant difference between growing up in a rural or urban socio-spatial context in terms of young people's perceptions of place?
3. Within a rural environment, does living in a farm household influence or alter these issues in significant ways?

The research findings are based on a survey of 8,316 young people aged 10 to 17 years who participated in the Irish component of the 2002 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study. We explore young people's perceptions of where they live, using some 'social capital' type measures, such as: safety; friendliness; potential support from others; opportunities for recreation; and physical environment. Before attending to the substantive elements of our paper and by way of context, we present a short overview that illustrates the significance of place, community and social capital in young people's lives.

Young People, Community and Social Capital

Young people actively cultivate local spheres beyond the home; places that are safe to occupy in the context of their fears about risks and vulnerabilities (Harden, 2000). Harden (2000) and Speak (2000) show that young people are concerned by the same kinds of issues as their parents, such as 'stranger danger', crime and vandalism, and are attuned to the concept of participation. Research by Pooley et al. (2002) shows that when talking about 'sense of community', young people emphasise their relationships with family, friends and neighbours as the best aspects, while in the research by Nairn et al. (2003) aspects of the natural and built environments are important community features for both urban and rural young people. Although a much debated notion, 'community' appears primarily as a 'relational' notion for young people in the work by Pooley et al., with the emphasis on people and relationships in the first instance, while for the respondents in the study by Nairn et al. 'inclusion' meant occupying spaces of comfort and familiarity with other young people. Pooley et al. (2002) show how young people who were recent incomers to a community sensed a degree of loneliness since they had not been able to establish the kinds of close relationships that would tie them into their communities. The authors also suggest that a young person's age has a bearing on the relationship to neighbourhood or local public space, with younger adolescents tending to report higher levels of support, activity, and friendships in their

neighbourhood than older ones (Pooley et al., 2002: 10). In sum, being part of a safe environment, caring people, cleanliness, proximity to amenities, and low crime levels are all valued as positive elements by young people.

Recent work has focused on how 'social capital' within communities can be key to the creation of well-being and health among young people (Jack, 2000). Although a contested notion (see Shortall, 2004; Leonard, 2004), social capital is seen to be a vital component of contemporary community life in terms of its use and exchange value (Leonard, 2004). Social capital can be viewed as both the value of an individual's social relationships, which can provide benefits, and as a quality of groups, networks, institutions, communities, and societies (Perkins et al., 2002: 36). Trust, safety, support networks and information are all viewed as constitutive ingredients and in this paper we don't make any assumptions about its exchange value but accept the experience of social capital as important to the general well-being and welfare of young people (Ferguson, 2006). Studies of child neglect, for instance, suggest that it is quite often the poor social capital base of neighbourhoods that constitute a vital ingredient in accounting for its incidence (Jack and Jordan, 2001).

Young people's experience or perception of social capital, however, is a complex consideration when we have regard to the changing patterns of contemporary lifestyles and livelihoods. One general feature identified in the literature is that young people's use of time and space has become increasingly structured in accordance with adult life and subject to heightened surveillance (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; O'Brien et al., 2000; Childress, 2004; Karsten, 2005). Risks associated with place, such as traffic concerns or strangers inhabiting public space have altered the nature of parent-child relations in terms of time-space usage (Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Harden, 2000; Mayall, 2002; Maguire and Shirlow, 2004). The result is that young people's play and recreation is controlled and regulated by adults as opposed to being spontaneous (Karsten, 2005: 287) and public space has generally narrowed in accessibility (Childress, 2004). Such aspects have led to an increase in the institutionalisation of leisure and play (e.g. swimming clubs, theatre groups) for young people, who have become what Karsten (2005) describes as the 'backseat generation', especially those from middle class backgrounds (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Lareau, 2000). While O'Brien et al. (2000) question the assumption that 'chaperoned lifestyles' are somehow negative for friendships and peer relations, some authors (Adler and Adler, 1994) claim, however, that the growth in institutionalised play has negative implications for the development of young people's self-reliance, co-operation, problem solving and interpersonal skills. Nevertheless, a recent phenomenon noted by childhood geographers and sociologists, such as Valentine and McKendrick (1997) and Karsten (2005), is that outdoor play has declined and tends to be undertaken increasingly within the confines of the home or in close proximity, such as private gardens. Valentine and McKendrick (1997) note that those in more working class or mixed class areas tend to use public space more than middle class young people (see also Lareau, 2000).

Against this backdrop, it is often parents who are the ones to perceive the countryside as a better place to grow up in, with more opportunities for children's play. The extent to which growing up in the countryside provides the recipe for an idyllic lifestyle – through its sense of community, naturalism, tranquility – has been the subject

of some recent examination within rural studies (e.g. Matthews et al., 2000; Nairn et al., 2003; Wiborg, 2004; Rye, 2006). While living in rural society generates multiple understandings (Wiborg 2004), whether one views the rural as 'idyllic' or 'dull' (which are not mutually exclusive characterisations) depends in large part on one's stock of economic and cultural capital resources, gender, education and incomer/native status (Rye, 2006). The 'dullness' of rural places, however, tends to be especially connected with the lack of youth provision, which appears as an almost universal theme in young people's accounts of rural life; a finding that is well-documented in the international literature (Matthews et al., 2000; Tucker and Matthews, 2001; McGrath, 2002; Panelli et al., 2002; Auclair and Vanoni, 2004; De Róiste and Dineen, 2005; Rye, 2006). In the absence of suitable outlets for the development of young people's lifestyle, the dominance of pub culture, especially among males, appears in several accounts of rural life (e.g. Campbell, 2001). Such cultural practices can begin the process of disaffection with rural life quite early on and can be especially problematic for young women (Haugen and Villa, 2005). Almost two thirds of young girls in the study by Geraghty et al. (1997) felt it was harder to be a young woman than a man in a rural area. This echoes Rye's findings (2006: 419) that 'for rural girls the countryside seems to be less idyllic and duller than for their male counterparts' (see also Tucker and Matthews, 2001).

In summary, a wide range of studies show that age, gender, socioeconomic status and the socio-spatial contexts of rural and urban residence exert types of influence on young people's encounters and perceptions of where they live. However, our knowledge of the interactive effects of these on young people's perceptions of place is less than systematic. In other words, how pronounced are the effects of these variables in shaping young people's perceptions of the 'social capital' aspects of the spaces they inhabit? The departure point for the present study is therefore to address this complexity in the Irish context.

The Research

The findings presented are based on the Health Behaviour in School-Children (HBSC) survey undertaken in 2002, which surveyed 8,316 pupils in the Republic of Ireland. HBSC is a cross-national study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation European office. Data are collected every four years within participating countries, from young people aged 11, 13 and 15 years covering late childhood, early and mid-adolescence. Multidisciplinary teams from 41 countries collaborate in the design of the survey, which involves the administration of self-completion questionnaires to students in classrooms, and must conform to the international protocol in relation to sampling and data collection (see Currie et al., 2004). The Irish data reported here were collected from a sample designed to be representative of the distribution of young people in the target ages throughout the country. Primary and post-primary schools were randomly selected from lists provided by the national Department of Education and Science. Classrooms within schools were subsequently randomly selected for participation.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on young people's response to a series of closed statements about their local area. The first statement asked young people to respond to the following: 'Generally speaking, I feel safe in the area where I live ...', with four response categories of 'always', 'most of the time', 'sometimes' 'rarely or never'. A second statement asked 'Do you think the area in which you live is a good

place to live?', with a five point response set from 'Yes, it's really good' to 'No, it's not at all good'. A third statement asked young people 'How well off is the area in which you live?' and provided five responses, from 'not at all well off' to 'very well off'. A further five statements were rated on a five-point scale, from 'I strongly agree' to 'I strongly disagree'. The statements were: 'People say hello and often stop to talk to each other on the street'; 'It is safe for children to play outside during the day'; 'There are good places to spend your free time (e.g. leisure centre, parks, shops)'; 'I could ask for help or a favour from neighbours'; and 'Most people around here would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance'. Young people were also asked to choose from a three point scale of 'lots', 'some' or 'none' as to whether the following aspects existed in their area: 'Groups of young people who cause trouble'; 'Litter, broken glass or rubbish lying around'; 'Run-down houses or buildings'.

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). For the current analyses, the response options for variables were dichotomised (e.g. 'agree strongly/agree' versus 'disagree strongly/disagree'), as indicated in Table 1. A series of chi square analyses were employed to test for the significance of differences in reported perceptions between urban and rural young people and – within the rural group – between those who come from farm and non-farm households. To avoid masking any possible effect of gender, these analyses are conducted separately for males and females. Table 2 presents the results of a series of logistic regression analyses, where the perceptions of place/social capital measures are employed as dependent variables. Gender, age group, parental occupational group, urban/rural status and farm/non-farm household were employed as predictors simultaneously in the regression models tested. The values presented are the odds ratios and the associated 95% confidence intervals for each predictor (explained further below).

Finally, some conceptual considerations need to be pointed out. First of all, deciding what counts as 'rural' and 'urban' is a notoriously difficult and contentious issue within the social sciences (e.g. Mormont, 1990; Halfacree, 1993; Rye, 2006). Such categories tend towards dualistic and dichotomous views of the world, which we accept are problematic. Nevertheless, we argue that such concepts are significant in the structuring of everyday life. We have classified 'urban' from respondents' description of where they live as 'city or town' while 'rural' indicates 'village or country'. This of course does not capture fully the socially constructed meaning of 'rural' and 'urban' in the sense that places can share elements of both in their symbolic and material composition; for example suburban areas or satellite towns can retain a 'rural' feel while having material elements that we associate with more urbanised environments (see Corcoran, 2005). It is also important to bear in mind the unique residential settlement pattern of the Irish countryside which sets it apart from other European countries. The Irish countryside is characterised by low density, widely dispersed residential hinterlands, served by many small centres, villages and small towns (Jackson and Haase, 1996). Towns in an Irish context can thereby show considerable variation in terms of continuity of a 'rural' legacy. Nevertheless, if we look at the New Zealand study by Nairn et al. (2003) in which young people understood 'rural' predominantly to refer to areas with a history of farming, small population size and limited social and economic infrastructure, then it would appear that our categorisation of 'village and

the countryside' is aligned to a considerable degree with what young people themselves imagine to be rural. In our analysis, we also generalise in our treatment of the 'farm' category, where the main parental occupation is described by the young person as simply 'farming'. Such characterisation does not distinguish in terms of farming system, size or type which is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Findings

Our first analysis (Table 1) reveals significant sets of differences between rural and urban young people's assessments of where they live, which also tend to be distinctly gendered. It is also evident that the differences are significant statistically ($p < 0.001$). When presented with a host of social capital measures, responses reveal striking differences in attitudes about the nature of trust, safety, friendliness and support. It is clear that rural youth have more positive views about the nature of social interactions with others in their communities, which is especially the case for rural boys. Boys living in rural communities tend to feel distinctly safer than their urban counterparts, with 67 per cent of boys in rural communities compared to 44.3 per cent in urban locations suggesting they always, or most of the time, feel safe. Other social capital type measures, such as being able to ask for help from neighbours, the presence of everyday greetings and being able to trust others not to take advantage, are higher among rural young people. There is a notable difference among rural and urban boys in terms of the perception of being able to ask for help from their neighbours (78.2 per cent rural agreeing compared with 66.7 per cent urban).

Table 1: *Place and community perceptions according to gender and socio-spatial context of urban, rural and farm environments*

Statement	Urban Males	Rural Males	Urban Girls	Rural Girls	Farm rural boys	Non-farm rural boys	Farm rural girls	Non-farm rural girls
I feel safe in local area ('always/mostly')	44.2	67.0***	43.8	57.2***	71.6	54.3	60.7	48.3**
Local area is a good place to live ('really good')	35.1	52.0***	37.7	45.6***	58.8	42.0**	47.2	40.6**
People say hello ¹	71.3	81.5***	75.7	83.0***	85.7	75.9**	86.0	78.0*
Safe to play outside ¹	81.1	87.7***	81.5	82.1**	85.9	84.2	83.0	82.0
Good places to go ¹	53.6	42.6***	50.1	31.1**	46.7	47.1	28.6	42.9
Can ask for help ¹	66.7	78.2***	74.4	77.5**	79.6	72.1	78.0	75.6
Most people would take advantage ²	56.9	63.1***	61.2	67.5***	62.6	60.5	70.8	64.5
Local area is well-off ('very' or 'quite')	44.5	46.7	46.3	42.2	43.7	45.8	43.0	45.5
No groups of youth causing trouble	26.2	51.8***	32.1	52.0***	57.0	36.8***	58.4	39.6**
No litter, broken glass, rubbish visible	32.7	49.8***	36.9	49.2***	53.5	40.8*	52.9	41.4*
No run-down houses	74.7	69.9**	80.0	72.4***	67.1	73.1	71.1	77.2

1 response of 'strongly agree or agree'

2 response of 'strongly disagree or disagree'

* significant difference, $p < 0.05$;

** significant difference, $p < 0.01$;

*** significant difference, $p < 0.001$ (Chi squared test)

Differences between rural and urban girls are noticeable on the social capital measures, albeit not as distinctly as the differences between their male counterparts. Where a distinct difference emerges between rural and urban girls, however, is in the extent to which they agree that there are 'good' places for them to frequent, such as parks, leisure centres and shops (31.1 per cent of rural girls agreeing compared with 50.1 per cent of urban girls). The finding here confirms the extent to which growing up in the countryside can be a difficult experience especially for girls, who perceive fewer opportunities open to them.

When we compare the experiences of being brought up on a farm, again a set of significant differences emerge, albeit a smaller set than between rural and urban environments. Of particular note is the higher proportion of farm girls who feel safe (60.7 per cent compared with 48.3 per cent non-farm rural girls) and the sense, among farm boys, of rural areas being 'really good' places to live (58.8 per cent compared with 42 per cent other rural males).

Finally, differences are quite striking between rural and urban young people in terms of their encounters with the physical environment. The experience of the rural cohort is that young people generally perceive less evidence of physical decay and neglect and are less likely to indicate the presence of other youth deemed to be troublesome (almost twice as many rural boys as urban felt there were no groups of young people causing trouble where they lived). Compared with non-farm rural boys, a significantly higher percentage of those brought up on a farm believed there were 'no groups of young people causing trouble' (57 per cent compared with 36.8 per cent).

Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis investigates the extent to which living in a rural, urban or farm environment has an effect on perceptions of place, over and above other important factors such as age, gender and occupational background. The 'regression' model allows us to test the power of individual variables while simultaneously taking into consideration the remaining variables in the analysis. The results are presented in the form of odds ratios where a 'reference' category has an odds ratio of one (in our analysis the reference categories are: 'male' in the gender variable; 'under fourteen years' in the age variable and so on). For each statement in Table 2, if an odds ratio result is indicated as greater than one, then young people who are not in the reference category (in this case, 'female', '14 or older' and so on) are more likely to express a particular response (listed in the left hand column of the table) than young people in the reference category. Likewise, a value less than one indicates lower likelihood vis-à-vis the reference group. For example, a response of 0.8 to the 'safe to play outside' question within the gender variable (where the reference group is male) means there is less likelihood or odds of females agreeing positively with this statement. We also provide the range of values within which we can be 95 per cent confident that the true value of the odds ratios fall (the confidence interval).

Table 2: *Logistic Regression Odds Ratios (95% confidence intervals) for community perceptions: selected variables*

	Gender (reference: male)	Age (reference: under 14 years)	SES (reference: white collar)	Urban/rural (reference: urban)	Farm/non-farm (reference non- farm)
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
<i>Place-Social Capital Perceptions</i>					
I feel safe in local area ('always/mostly')	0.8(0.7–0.9)***	0.8(0.7–0.9)**	0.9(0.8–1.0)ns	1.9(1.7–2.2)***	1.3(1.1–1.6)**
Local area is a good place to live ('really good')	0.9(0.8–1.0)ns	0.5(0.4–0.6)***	0.8(0.7–0.9)**	1.6(1.4–1.8)***	1.1(0.9–1.3)
People say hello ¹	1.1(0.9–1.3)ns	0.8(0.7–0.9)**	1.2(1.0–1.4)**	1.6(1.4–1.9)***	1.5(1.2–2.0)**
Safe to play outside ¹	0.8(0.7–0.9)*	0.9(0.8–1.1)ns	0.8(0.7–0.9)**	1.2(1.1–1.5)**	0.9(0.7–1.1)ns
Good places to go ¹	0.7(0.7–0.8)***	0.5(0.4–0.5)***	1.0(0.9–1.1)ns	0.5(0.4–0.5)***	1.0(0.8–1.2)ns
Can ask for help ¹	1.1(1.0–1.3)ns	0.8(0.7–0.9)**	1.0(0.9–1.1)ns	1.4(1.2–1.6)***	1.0(0.8–1.3)ns
Most people would take advantage ²	1.2(1.1–1.4)**	0.9(0.8–1.0)ns	0.7(0.6–0.8)***	1.3(1.2–1.5)***	0.8(0.7–1.0)ns
Local area is well-off ('very' or 'quite')	1.0 (0.9–1.1) ns	0.8 (0.7–0.8)***	0.6 (0.5–0.6)***	0.9 (0.8–1.1) ns	0.7 (0.5–0.8)***
No groups of youth causing trouble	1.1 (1.0–1.3) ns	0.6 (0.6–0.7)***	0.9 (0.8–1.1) ns	2.3 (2.1–2.7)***	1.4 (1.2–1.7)***
No litter, broken glass, rubbish visible	1.0 (0.9–1.1) ns	0.8 (0.7–0.9)***	0.9 (0.8–1.0)*	1.8 (1.6–2.0)***	1.1 (0.9–1.3) ns
No run-down houses	1.3 (1.1–1.4)**	0.6 (0.5–0.7)***	0.8 (0.7–0.9)**	0.7 (0.6–0.8)***	0.7 (0.6–0.9)**

1 response of 'strongly agree or agree'

2 response of 'strongly disagree or disagree'

* significant difference, $p < 0.05$;

** significant difference, $p < 0.01$;

*** significant difference, $p < 0.001$

The effects of age and gender, over and above socio-spatial residence and occupational background, are evident in some respects. Older adolescents have a greater likelihood to report negative aspects of place and to be more critical of the lack of opportunities and some social capital measures (viz. safety, friendliness, being able to ask for help). Girls are less likely to take a cynical view that others are prepared to take advantage if the opportunity presented itself but have a reduced odds ratio of seeing their areas as safe or to find good places to go.¹ Unlike older adolescents, girls are less likely to perceive there to be elements of physical neglect in their communities, such as run-down houses or buildings.

The effect of socioeconomic status seems slightly more ambivalent, with 'blue' collar young people more inclined to see people as friendly, but also less likely to deny that others would take advantage if the opportunity arose.² Such backgrounds make young people more likely to see or perceive negative aspects, such as lack of safe play areas and more aspects of physical neglect. They generally don't regard their environments as 'really' good places to live (reduced odds by a half compared with 'white collar' youth).

What is less ambivalent is the effect of living in a rural environment on young people's experience of social capital. Across all measures, with one exception (view of area as well-off), significant differences are encountered among those living in the countryside and villages. Growing up in these locations raises the odds significantly – almost double in

some cases – of feeling safer, having people to ask for support, encountering friendly neighbours and perceiving less physical neglect and decay (although rural youth in general are more inclined to notice dilapidated houses or buildings than their urban counterparts). Within the rural environment itself, we find that it is farm young people who tend to perceive more dimensions we associate with social capital, namely feelings of safety and friendliness. Farm youth, however, have reduced odds that they will view their areas as well-off and are more inclined to notice run down houses and buildings.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study has sought to provide a systematic understanding of how young people differ in their experience of place and their communities. Some of the findings help to confirm existing evidence, while others elicit new insights and areas for further investigation. Overall, significant variations are apparent in this regard, which identify not only the distinct importance of age, gender and socioeconomic background but also the socio-spatial contexts of rural, farm and urban environments. While we know more about the extent to which the former variables have influenced young people's relationships and interactions, the lack of comparative data about the latter contexts has heretofore limited our understanding of their substantive influence. The evidence suggests that the impact of such factors on young people is quite nuanced. Incorporating these in a multivariate regression analysis allows us to compare and disentangle the significance of these key contexts on the lives of young people and serves to strengthen our understanding of what influences their most immediate worldviews.

In terms of young people's experience of the communities and environments in which they live, gender, occupational background and age clearly continue to predict differences in perceptions among adolescents, but particularly age. The multivariate analysis shows more evidence of age differences in how places are perceived, while controlling for all other factors. Older adolescents (over fourteen years) are less inclined to see their areas as good places to live or to perceive the place as friendly, safe and helpful. They are also less inclined to suggest that there are no issues of physical neglect or problems. Our evidence regarding age would seem to affirm the point made by Pooley et al (2002) and referred to earlier, that one's sense of place changes over the adolescent period. This is difficult to explain in any straightforward way. What we see though is a hardening of attitudes among teenagers and perhaps alterations in expectations about what they want and what's on offer as they make the transition to early adulthood and begin to extend their social boundaries. As the study by O'Connor et al.(2002) of young people's narratives suggests, the 'local' area may be more central in the world views of younger adolescents and children. It might also reflect the perception (whether or not it is objectively the case) that communities seem to cater more for younger adolescents in opportunities and outlets for recreation. It may reflect more restrictions on older adolescents' social boundaries. Further research is needed to provide deeper insight into these particular findings.

Gender and parental occupational background also account for key differences in how place is perceived, although fewer than those relating to age. Girls show less sense of safety and trust in the spaces available to them and are more inclined to feel that there are fewer opportunities for recreation. This is no doubt a reflection of a complex mixture of differing expectations, worries and perhaps restrictions on girls by parents

and other adults (see Tucker and Matthews, 2001). It may indeed echo the work of O'Brien et al. (2000) which illustrated how girls were typically more likely to be restricted in the use of public spaces and to express heightened risk anxieties about places they could go. Young people from 'blue collar' backgrounds appear to be more negative about the physical aspects of their neighbourhoods, which probably reflects the fact that their communities are less well-off and perhaps also the restricted opportunities to engage in activities outside their areas. The possibility that most people would take advantage of them if the opportunity arose is also less likely to be refuted by such young people. Nevertheless, the upside, according to these young people, appears to be that people are more inclined to regularly say hello and talk to one another. A point worthy of further inquiry is whether this reflects a tendency towards a 'chaperoned lifestyle' among more middle class youth who engage recreationally, like their parents, outside their neighbourhoods.

The multivariate analysis reveals the strong independent effect that socio-spatial environment plays on the world view of young people. Consistent across almost all community and social capital measures is the strength of rural young people's positive perceptions, even after we have controlled for and taken into consideration gender, age and occupational status of parents. This paper does not suggest a dualistic reading of a rural/urban divide, where 'rural' denotes idyllic life and 'urban' translates as 'alienating', since there is no unitary experience of social life in these terms (Nairn et al, 2003). But, when we take account of gender, age and occupational status of parents, the evidence suggests that growing up in a rural environment retains a powerful effect and increases one's chances of perceiving and feeling positive forms of social capital, namely trust, safety, friendliness and the availability of support networks. Although providing a signpost towards 'social capital', these are, of course, only perceptions and do not, in any clear objective sense, tell us that social capital exists in more abundance in rural areas. These perceptions that seem to conform to the literature of a putative 'rural idyll' come from young people themselves, although we don't know whether in reality they transpire to be somewhat 'mythical' (Tucker and Matthews, 2001). We find clear evidence surrounding the possible 'dullness' of rural life as young people suggest a lack of 'good' spaces to interact in rural areas. This would conform to Rye's (2006) conclusion that a strong rural idyll within young people's discourses can co-exist with a sense of rural bleakness. Although our analysis presents them separately, the age and rural factors resonate with research reported elsewhere showing that young people's feelings of 'nothing to do' in rural areas tends to increase steadily over the teenage years (Matthews et al., 2000). De Róiste and Dineen's (2005) evidence suggests that older adolescents (seventeen and eighteen year olds) in rural areas are those most likely to encounter transport constraints as they seek to widen their social boundaries at this age. By the time many reach the age of sixteen, youth clubs no longer appear attractive spaces to occupy for teenagers (Geraghty et al., 1997).

Harden (2000) argues that trust is often seen as a dangerous characteristic among young people because of their vulnerability but that being in places where others are known to young people provides a form of protection and risk management. Growing up in a rural area contributes towards a distinct sense of safety, which is statistically higher than in an urban environment. Furthermore, being from a farm family increases one's chance of feeling safe within the community, albeit there remain gender

patterns to this. Farm boys and girls both perceive a sense of friendliness, which alongside the safety variable, might intimate that within the rural environment it is young people from such backgrounds who tend to perceive social life in more cohesive terms. Research from the United States shows certain distinct characteristics among farm families, notably, strength of generational continuity (presence in the community), extended family, interdependence and efforts among farming parents to get involved in community life (Elder and Conger, 2000). If similar cultural properties apply here, this might help to explain why farm children attach a greater sense of cohesion to their localities. Generational continuity as a feature of farm life in Ireland suggests that farm families are particularly embedded in the social and cultural spheres of rural communities, which may have implications for children's sense of social capital. Again, further research would greatly illuminate the differences that have emerged within our investigations of farm and non-farm young people.

Growing up on a farm is also associated with a raised perception among young people of the existence of run-down houses and buildings, and an increased likelihood of regarding the locality in which they live as not particularly well-off. There may be some resonance here with the suggestion by Perkins et al. that 'those most aware and critical of local problems are often the most satisfied with their community as a place to live' (2002: 42). It could also point to young people's awareness of the hidden dimensions of poverty in rural areas, especially in the context of evidence that many farm families encounter serious deprivation and income poverty (Commings, 2004). With regard to urban-rural differences, the irony is that while rural young people feel a general sense of cohesion within their local environments, as noted earlier rural places seem to be most limited in terms of offering recreational or institutional spaces (Matthews et al., 2000).

It is clear from the evidence presented here that perceptions of place are coloured by key contexts such as age, gender and social backgrounds. Our evidence, however, points also to the striking significance that socio-spatial context plays in young people's perceptions of their communities and the opportunities immediate in their lives. There is a distinct socio-spatial patterning evident even after we account for young people's age, gender and occupational backgrounds of parents. While we conclude that the socio-spatial context of young people's lives exerts significant influences on patterns of perception, we concur with the point expressed by Nairn et al. (2003) that there is, of course, no unitary essence to being a young person in the countryside or in more urban places. In fact, our evidence suggests the need to further deconstruct notions such as the 'rural' to illustrate how differences emerge within socio-spatial contexts. Here, we have demonstrated that within rural life itself, there are key distinctions to be drawn between the views of the immediate world inhering within farm and non-farm ways of life.

In the context of immense changes affecting families and communities in contemporary Ireland, it is important we begin to further explore the impact that socio-spatial context plays in young people's perceptions but not in isolation from other key determinants. From what young people reveal about their perceptions, our aim has been to provide more insight into the nuanced patterns which differentiate their outlook about the nature of social life around them. While the present paper is based on quantitative findings that reveal statistically robust patterns among Irish

young people's perceptions, more qualitative sources of data are needed to complement this approach. Qualitative research can further this work by providing more insights into the varying and complex ways in which place is understood, regarded and utilised by young people.

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Notes

- 1 The less cynical view is based on a response of 'strongly disagree/agree' to the statement that 'most people would take advantage if they had the chance'.
- 2 'Blue collar' refers to occupations categorised as skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual work. 'White collar' occupations refer to professional and managerial positions.

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Young Rent Supplement Claimants in the Private Rented Sector

An Analysis of Socio-Economic Characteristics and Duration of Claims¹

Dermot Coates and Michelle Norris

Abstract

Rent supplement is the main support available for private renting households in Ireland. It provides a cash allowance which covers most of the rent of private renters dependent on social welfare benefits or on a government return to employment or education scheme. This article draws on administrative data on rent supplement claimants to examine the operation of rent supplement as a key support to young persons in low-income, private renting households. It presents an analysis of the socio-economic characteristics of younger claimants and the duration of their claims. The impact of recent changes to the rules governing the eligibility for rent supplement and the effect of these changes upon younger claimants are also addressed.

Keywords

Housing allowances; housing policy; young persons; private rented sector.

Introduction

Rent supplement is the main financial support available to low-income private renting tenants in the Republic of Ireland. This scheme provides a cash allowance which covers most of the rent of households dependant on social welfare benefits or on various return to work schemes (McCashin, 2004). The level of this allowance is capped with reference to prescribed maximum rent levels and also, depending on the region of the country where claimants reside, their family structure and type of accommodation.

Use of rent supplement has grown steadily since its establishment in 1976. However claimant numbers have expanded particularly rapidly since the early 1990s. Between 1994 and 2004 the number of households in receipt of this support grew from 28,800 to 58,000 or by 100 per cent (Department of Social and Family Affairs, various years). Concern on the part of government regarding this development led to the initiation of two major reviews of rent supplement in 1995 and 1999 and a range of other reforms in the years since then (Review Group on the Role of Supplementary Welfare Allowance in Relation to Housing, 1995; Inter-departmental Committee on Issues Relating to the Possible Transfer of Rent and Mortgage Assistance Supplementation from Health Boards to Local Authorities, 1999).

Kemp (2000) reveals similar concerns among governments in many western European countries regarding growing claims of comparable 'housing allowance' schemes. Significantly in several countries these concerns have inspired measures to limit young people's access to benefits of this type. Thus in 1996 the United Kingdom government restricted the access of under 25 year olds to the key housing allowance in that country – housing benefit. This reform was intended to encourage young claimants to live in shared accommodation (Kemp and Rugg, 1998). Similarly, in 2004 the Irish government debarred households that had not been renting for more than six months from receipt of rent supplement. Focus Ireland (2003) points out that this measure, which was rescinded a year later, had very negative consequences for younger applicants and in particular those wishing to leave the family home for the first time.

This article, which is based on an analysis of administrative data on claimants of rent supplement in 2004 and 2005, examines young people's use of this benefit in more detail and sets out an analysis of the socio-economic characteristics of these claimants and the duration of their claims. It also attempts to interpret the data in the light of the policy context. For the purposes of this article young persons are defined as those aged 29 years or less.

Source of Data

The analysis is based upon administrative data drawn from the database of claimants held by the Department of Social and Family Affairs (which has responsibility for policy in this area) on 31 June 2004 and 2005 and 31 December 2004. This database collates information provided by rent supplement claimants for the purposes of assessing their application for assistance. For this purpose, the personal characteristics of each applicant are recorded in addition to their source of income. Claimants must also notify the relevant authorities of any changes in circumstances on an ongoing basis. The analysis of these data, which was conducted as part of research commissioned by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Social and Family Affairs (see Coates and Norris, 2006) excludes a small proportion of claimants (3 per cent) who are on certain return to work schemes or did not have leave to remain in the country at the time when the research was conducted.

It is important to acknowledge that these data have shortcomings. Most significantly data were only available for the short period under review, thus it was not possible to carry out detailed time series analysis of trends in rent supplement claims by age. These data were collected solely for the purpose of assessing eligibility for rent supplement and therefore do not include some types of information pertinent to the analysis of the reasons for growth in claimant numbers such as the structure of claimant household. Furthermore, not all of the data collected by the relevant officials on rent supplement claimants is entered into the database on which this article is based. For this reason information on the type of dwelling occupied and the level of income of claimant households was not available to the authors. In addition, because access to rent supplement is dependent on level and source of income claimants obviously have an inherent interest in ensuring the information they provide matches the qualification criteria. On the other hand, the use of administrative data in research bestows significant benefits in that they provide a uniquely comprehensive and

contemporaneous view of the relevant claimant population which is not available from any other published source (Central Statistics Office, 2003). For this reason, data of this type are generally favoured in the international research literature on social security benefits (see for example Nordvik and Åhrén, 2005; Shroder, 2002).

Policy Background

As was mentioned above, a government review published in 1995 raised concerns about the marked increase in the number of rent supplement claims and associated cost inflation during the early 1990s (Review Group on the Role of Supplementary Welfare Allowance in Relation to Housing, 1995). It attributed the former development to range of factors including:

1. the demand led nature of the scheme
2. increased awareness leading to increased take up
3. social security benefit access rules which discourage young people from remaining in the family home and therefore encourage rent supplement take up
4. the rising number of one parent families and single person households
5. falling social housing output; high levels of unemployment
6. rising long term unemployment, and
7. increasing immigration.

A second statutory review conducted in 1999 concluded that the first four of these factors remain significant drivers of the continued growth in rent supplement claims during the late 1990s, but proffered a different analysis of the influence of the latter three (Inter-Departmental Committee on Issues Relating to the Possible Transfer of Administration of Rent and Mortgage Supplementation from the Health Boards to the Local Authorities, 1999). This report argues that social housing output does influence rent supplement claims, but not significantly, because trends in the latter did not mirror trends in the former during the 1990s. It acknowledges that as rates of immigration increased during the late 1990s, the impact of this factor on rent supplement claims grew. However it suggests that continued growth in rent supplement claims is difficult to explain in view of the sharp fall in the rate of unemployment in Ireland (from 12.4 per cent in 1995 to 5.6 per cent in 1999) as a result of the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom (Central Statistics Office, various years).

Numbers and Characteristics of Young Supplement Claimants in 2004 and 2005

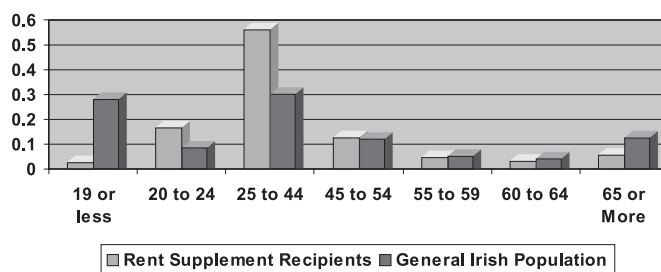
This section examines the numbers and socio-demographic characteristics of younger rent supplement claimants and their claim duration in 2004 and 2005.

Numbers of Young Rent Supplement Claimants

More than 20,000 (or 37 per cent) of all rent supplement claimants in June 2005 were aged 29 years or less. In June 2004 this age group accounted for 38.7 per cent of all rent supplement claimants, which indicates that the number of younger claimants fell by 279 over this period, although overall claim numbers rose by 1476. However, at the same time, recipients of rent supplement are significantly younger than the general Irish population. As Figure 1 reveals, the age structure of rent supplement claimants

does not follow the distribution of the general Irish population. In 2005 63.6 per cent of all rent supplement claimants were aged between 20 and 49 years whereas in 2002 34.8 per cent of the population of the country were aged between 20 and 44 years (Central Statistics Office 2003b). However, that younger persons are proportionately over-represented in the rent supplement claimant population is not wholly unexpected; rather this is at least partially explained by a similar phenomenon in the private rented sector generally whereby most people renting do so temporarily as an early stage in a housing career that will ultimately lead into owner-occupation (Malpass, 2005). However the age structure of the overall private rented sector does not seem to be fully taken into consideration by official policy documents in this area, which tend to conclude simply that it is problematic that young, low income, welfare-dependents rely on rent supplement.

Figure 1: *Ages of rent supplement claimants (2005) compared to the general Irish population (2002)*



Source: Database of rent supplement claimants and Central Statistics Office (2003).
There was no rent supplement claimant aged less than 16 years in 2005.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Young Rent Supplement Claimants

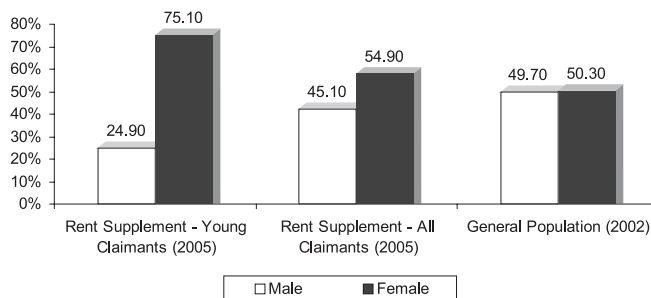
Table 1 details the socio-demographic characteristics of rent supplement claimants in June 2005. It reveals that at this date 57.6 per cent of all rent supplement claimants were female and 42.4 per cent male. In contrast, according to Census 2002 women made up 50.8 per cent of the general Irish population (Central Statistics Office, 2003a). The higher proportion of women among rent supplement claimants reflects the fact that women are more likely to claim all social welfare benefits – in 2003, 54.9 per cent of all benefit claimants were female (Department of Social and Family Affairs, various years). However Table 1 reveals that younger rent supplement claimants are more likely to be female than are their older counterparts. Women make up 75 per cent of claimants aged 29 years or under. Put differently, 48 per cent of female claimants are aged less than 30 years, as compared to only 22 per cent of males, while 12.4 per cent of women and 25.7 per cent of men are aged over 50.

Table 1: *Age, personal characteristics and source of income of rent supplement claimants, June 2005.*

		Aged 19 or less		Aged 20 to 29		All claimants	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
		1,247	100	18,827	100	54,123	100
Gender	Male	220	17.6	4,794	25.5	22,922	42.4
	Female	1,027	82.4	14,033	74.5	31,210	57.6
Marital Status	Cohabiting	38	3.0	633	3.4	1,513	2.8
	Deserted	0	0.0	31	0.2	1,686	3.1
	Divorced	2	0.2	334	1.8	3,861	7.1
	Married	33	2.6	1,549	8.2	8,436	15.6
	Separated	4	0.3	271	1.4	2,743	5.1
	Single	1,164	93.3	15,920	84.6	34,295	63.4
	Widowed	1	0.0	24	0.1	1,179	2.2
	Unknown	5	0.4	65	0.3	410	0.7
Source of income	Old Age Payments	0	0	0	0.0	1,961	3.6
	One Parent Family Payment	466	37.4	7,568	40.2	13,621	25.2
	Child Related Payments	15	1.2	229	1.2	314	0.6
	Illness, Disability and Caring Payments	60	4.8	1,773	9.4	10,311	19.1
	Unemployment Supports	314	25.2	4,600	24.4	14,306	26.4
	Employment Supports	49	3.9	935	5.0	2,607	5.0
	Supplementary Welfare Allowance	287	23.0	2,770	14.7	8,379	15.5
	Miscellaneous Payments	55	4.4	895	4.8	2,277	4.1
Nationality	Ireland	1,057	84.8	12,063	64.1	33,145	61.2
	United Kingdom	23	1.8	690	3.7	3,186	5.9
	Other EU Countries	13	1.0	491	2.6	1,506	2.8
	Rest of Europe	18	1.4	735	3.9	2,214	4.1
	USA	0	0.0	18	0.0	116	2.1
	Africa	104	8.3	1,306	6.9	5,074	9.4
	Other countries	19	1.5	223	1.2	919	1.7
	Not recorded	13	1.0	3,301	17.5	7,963	14.7

Source: Data generated from the database of rent supplement claimants.

Figure 2: Gender of rent supplement claimants (2005) compared to the general Irish population (2002)



Source: Database of rent supplement claimants and Central Statistics Office (2003).

Table 1 also provides information on the marital status of the different age groups in the rent supplement claimant population. It reveals that the vast majority of claimants aged 29 years and under are single and not co-habiting with a partner. The proportion of single claimants falls steadily as the average age of claimant rises, although claimants aged over 65 years do not conform to this pattern. The proportion who are married rises between the ages of 20 and 39 but falls again among claimants aged between 40 and 64, while the proportion of separated, divorced and widowed claimants rises. However, it is important to note that non-Irish nationals have a greater likelihood than their Irish counterparts to be married.

Details of the nationality of rent supplement claimants in 2005 are also provided in Table 1. According to the database on which this analysis is based, 61.2 per cent of all rent supplement claimants are Irish nationals. In addition, analysis of the surnames of the 14.7 per cent of claimants whose nationality was not recorded indicates that a substantial proportion is typical of Irish nationals (for instance, O'Toole, McCarthy etc). However, even in the very unlikely event that all of this group are Irish, this means that a maximum of 75.9 per cent of rent supplement claimants were Irish nationals in 2005, whereas the 2002 census reveals that 92.7 of the entire population of the State were Irish nationals (Central Statistics Office, 2003c). This implies that non-Irish nationals are proportionately over-represented among the entire claimant cohort. However, amongst rent supplement claimants aged under 30, Irish nationals accounted for up to 81.9 per cent of rent supplement claimants, indicating that non-nationals represent a relatively smaller proportion of the younger claimants.

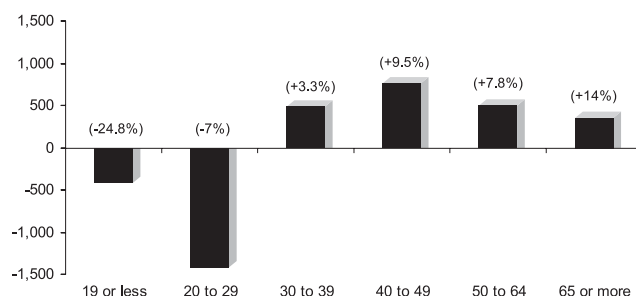
Table 1 also details the sources of income of those rent supplement claimants aged 29 years or less and provides a comparison with the overall claimant population across each type of payment. This table reveals that the predominant source of income of claimants does vary according to age and in particular, that younger claimants are significantly more likely to be in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment than other claimants. Forty per cent of all claimants in this age group receive such payment, reflecting the high number of young female claimants (who account for more than 60 per cent of all such claims). Younger claimants are also more likely to be in receipt of the Basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance and Maternity Benefit and account for almost 80 and 40 per cent of these claims respectively. It is also likely that a significant

number of young persons in receipt of rent supplement will have some degree of earned income although it is not possible to quantify the extent of this phenomenon because the database of claimants upon which this article is based does not record sufficient information.

Changes in the Young Rent Supplement Claimant Numbers 2004–2005

Figure 3 assesses changes in the age of rent supplement claimants between December 2003 and June 2005. The most striking change in this regard is that the proportion of younger claimants fell substantially, by 24.8 per cent in the 19 or less age group and by seven per cent in the 20–29 age group, whereas the numbers of claimants aged over 29 years expanded. At the same time, it is important to stress that, because the 19 and younger age group makes up such a small proportion of rent supplement claimants, the large percentage reduction in the claimants in this category was a relatively modest fall in absolute terms (412 claimants). Because a much larger number of claimants were aged between 20 and 29, their more modest proportional decrease of seven per cent translated into a greater absolute reduction in claimant numbers (1,420 claimants).

Figure 3: *Percentage and absolute change in rent supplement claimants by age, December 2003 – June 2005*



Note: These data exclude claimants who do not have leave to remain in the country or are participants in certain back to work schemes.

Duration of Claims

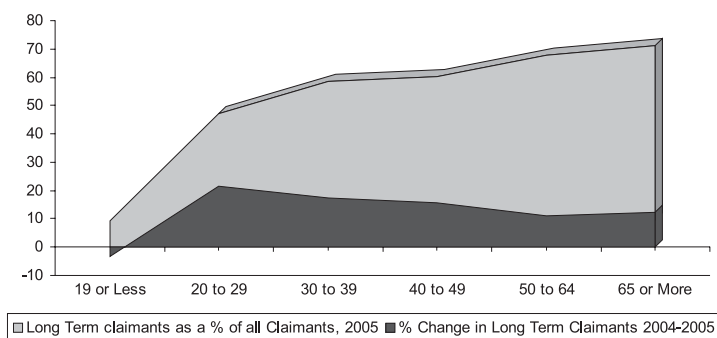
Analysis of the administrative data on rent supplement claims reveals that the decline in the annualised rate of increase in claimant numbers between December 2003 and June 2005 has been accompanied by a rise in the proportion of claims of eighteen months or more continuous duration (hereafter: long term claims) and a consequential reduction in the proportion of claims of less than eighteen months duration (hereafter: short term claims). The proportion of long term claims rose from 49 per cent of the total in June 2004 to 56 per cent of the total in June 2005. Put differently, these data indicate that the number of long-term rent supplement claims grew by 16.8 per cent over a period when the total number of claimants rose by just 2.8 per cent (Coates and Norris, 2006).

Figure 4 assesses the contribution that younger rent supplement claimants made to this trend. It indicates what proportion of claimants in each age group were long-term claimants in June 2005 (the lighter shaded area) as well as the percentage change in long-term claims for each age group since June 2004 (the darker shaded area).

From the perspective of the discussion at hand the most significant trends revealed in this graph are as follows:

- Among claimants aged 19 years or less, the proportion claiming long-term fell by 3.3 per cent between June 2004 and June 2005. This trend is obviously related to the concurrent fall in the total numbers of rent supplement claimants in this age group, highlighted above.
- The proportion of claimants that are long-term increases steadily as the age of the claimant rises. In June 2005, 44.9 per cent of claimants aged 29 years or less had been claiming for eighteen months or more, compared to 71.3 per cent of those aged 65 or more.
- The proportion of long-term claimants in all age groups other than the youngest increased during the twelve months under examination, although the 29 or less age group saw the greatest increase in this regard, from 36.5 per cent in 2004 to 44.9 per cent in 2005.

Figure 4: *Percentage Change in Long Term Rent Supplement Claimants, June 2004 – June 2005 and Long Term Claimants as a % of all Claimants, June 2005*



Source: Database of rent supplement claimants

Given the recent nature of the expansion in long-term claims among those aged 20 to 29 it is unclear whether the trend will continue and feed through the system over time. In any case, it is clear that at present the proportion of long-term claimants remains significantly lower among the younger age groups than the average for all claimants (which, as already stated, was 56% in June 2005). Table 2 and Figure 5 throw further light on this matter by providing information about the duration and turnover of claims among younger claimants between June 2004 and June 2005. Figure 5 examines the underlying change in the number of young rent supplement claimants by disaggregating the change into new claims ('entry') and terminated claims ('exit').

The 'entry' rate into the system – 77 per cent – is high given that the equivalent rate for all claims over the same period was just 33 per cent. This reflects the greater propensity of younger claimants to experience a need for this support for the first time. The explanation for the higher 'exit' rate – 78 per cent compared to 30 per cent for all claims – is less clear. The lower stability of this sub-section of the claimant population over time could point to a greater flexibility in responding to job opportunities and/or

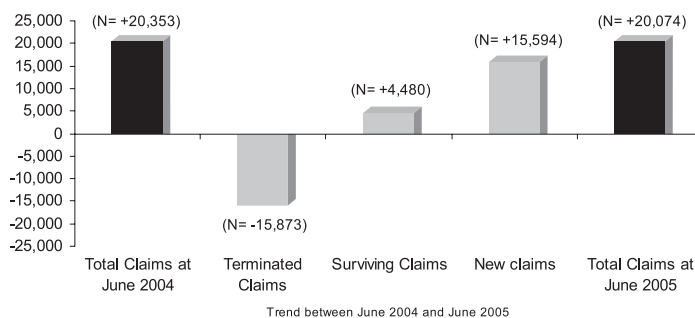
a greater likelihood of being allocated social housing given that this is generally more suited to households with dependent children rather than older, single persons. However, the latter is unlikely to be a significant factor given the consistency low level of output under social housing.

Table 2: *Estimated duration of rent supplement claims amongst persons aged 29 or less, June 2004 – June 2005*

Duration of Claim	June 2004		June 2005		Change June 2004 – June 2005	
	N	%	N	%	N +/-	% +/-
Less than 6 Months	5,562	27.3	5,314	26.5	-249	-4.5
6 to 12 Months	4,773	23.5	3,619	18.0	-1,153	-24.2
12 to 18 Months	2,581	12.7	2,122	10.6	-459	-17.8
<i>Total less than 18 months</i>	<i>12,916</i>	<i>63.5</i>	<i>11,055</i>	<i>55.1</i>	<i>-1,861</i>	<i>-14.4</i>
18 to 24 Months	3,269	16.1	3,818	19.0	549	16.8
2 to 3 Years	2,357	11.6	3,561	17.7	1,204	51.1
3 to 4 Years	877	4.3	939	4.7	62	7.1
4 to 5 Years	497	2.4	343	1.7	-153	-30.9
5 Years or More	438	2.2	357	1.8	-80	-18.3
<i>Total 18 months or more</i>	<i>7,437</i>	<i>36.5</i>	<i>9,019</i>	<i>44.9</i>	<i>1,582</i>	<i>21.3</i>
Grand Total	20,353	100	20,074	100	-279	-1.4

Note: Data in the subheadings are estimated on the basis of data in the total and grand total categories.

Figure 5: *Trends in new, terminated and surviving rent supplement claims amongst persons aged 29 years or less, June 2004 – June 2005.*



From the available evidence it appears clear that younger claimants have a propensity towards shorter claim duration than older claimants. As Table 2 shows, almost 27 per cent of claims among the under 30s were open for less than six months compared with less than 20 per cent of the overall cohort. By the same token, almost 40 per cent of all claims were open for two years or more compared with only 25 per cent of the cases of younger claimants.

Concluding Comments

This article has sought to present an overview of the socio-economic characteristics of younger claimants (i.e. aged under 30 years) of the rent supplement scheme. Amongst the principal findings are that the age structure of the rent supplement population is significantly younger than the general Irish population and that young claimants are more likely to be female than their older counterparts. It is also the case that younger claimants are significantly more likely to be Irish and to be single than is the case for the entire claimant population. It is these findings, amongst others, that will have a bearing on the ongoing debate with regard to the appropriateness of using a housing benefit system to meet the accommodation needs of younger persons and the efficacy of any reforms that seek to control the volume of claims and cost inflation.

In recent years, there have been a number of reforms to the housing benefit systems in both Ireland and the UK that have had implications for younger claimants and it is those changes that have framed the policy context of any discussion regarding young persons and housing. In 1996, the UK Government introduced a reform that served to restrict access to housing benefit for people aged less than 25 years and living in private rented accommodation. Under this restriction, the maximum rent available to such claimants under their Housing Benefit entitlement was the Single Room Rent (SRR); as a consequence of this measure, the allowable rent was calculated with reference to the mid-point of rents for one-bedroom accommodation in a locality in order to encourage young persons to live in shared accommodation.

Research into the implications of these changes (Kemp and Rugg, 1998) found that although a majority of young people lived in shared accommodation, this was due to a preference for companionship or to economise on the costs of renting and not as a consequence of the introduction of the SRR. Rather, it was found that young persons had a preference for a particular type of sharing, such as renting a flat (e.g. sharing with friends) as opposed to sharing a larger dwelling. Furthermore, it was found that many young people felt that private landlords discriminated against them and that the reduced housing benefit they received compared to a single person aged 25 and over was a contributory factor in their unpopularity as tenants.

In Ireland, the concept of recipients of rent supplement living in shared accommodation is not new. Rather, it has always been an option for these tenants although prior to 2003 it was not a prescribed category for the purpose of setting rent limits by the Department of Social and Family Affairs (but each of the Community Welfare Officers who administer the benefit countrywide could exercise discretion in order to set a limit). Currently, there are no data available to ascertain the number of rent supplement claimants availing of this option. Consequently, it is not possible to comment upon the take-up of this option amongst younger claimants although, from the perspective of the Department, it would represent a significant potential saving as

the allowable rent can range from 20 to 40 per cent less expensive than for a person living alone.

Under Budget 2004, the Government introduced a number of reforms that had the effect of restricting eligibility by disbarring the following persons from qualifying for assistance with their rent:

- People who have not been renting for six months or had their housing needs assessed by a local authority
- People whose spouse works for more than 30 hours a week, and
- People who refuse two offers of social housing.

According to the Department, these changes were 'aimed at re-focusing the scheme towards its original objective of meeting short-term income maintenance needs' (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2003: 2).

Nevertheless, the cumulative impact of these changes was to reduce both the amount of support available to an eligible person and the number of persons eligible for assistance (Focus Ireland, 2003) and as a result they provided a strong disincentive to household formation – a change with particular consequences for younger applicants and especially those wishing to leave the family home for the first time. As it happened, over the following 12 months, some of these changes were alleviated or rescinded – as in the case of the requirement for a prior renting history – and the most recent reform proposals are likely to have a more beneficial outcome for rent supplement recipients. These include the raising of the local rent limits and the earned income disregards.

However, the principal characteristics of young persons in receipt of rent supplement would suggest that the introduction of restrictions on their take-up of rent supplement will not prove effective in terms of controlling overall costs. Given the characteristics of younger claimants (for example the fact that many of them are single) it is perhaps unsurprising that they display quite a low level of consistent dependency upon rent supplement. Rather, younger claimants tend to have predominantly short-term claims whereas the opposite is true as claimants become older. Consequently, younger claimants exhibit a far higher rate of claim turnover than is found amongst older claimants with almost four out of every five cases closing in a given year compared to just one in three across all rent supplement claims. As such, it is unlikely that young persons per se are contributing to the general rise in claim volumes that has occurred over the past decade (although the limited nature of the data available to the authors – just two points in time – make it difficult to give a definitive assessment of this; it is an issue which requires more detailed research). It is only a very specific group within the young claimant population that exhibits a tendency towards long-term claims – single parents awaiting a more appropriate housing option. This then raises questions about recent attempts to reduce the number of young persons in receipt of rent supplement. It would appear from these findings that such attempts are unlikely to be successful unless they target vulnerable young households with children – hardly a desirable social policy option.

In concluding, it is important to highlight the tensions and inconsistencies which characterise many policies affecting young people. This tendency is clearly evident in the operation of housing policy – including in the administration of rent supplement – and arguably adds to the difficulties facing young persons endeavouring to commence their housing career. For young people, the housing system – and in particular the

private rented sector – plays an essential role in facilitating (or obstructing) the transition to adulthood. Whilst public policy encourages young people to be mobile so as to participate fully in the labour market, many official documents have identified young, low-income tenants who have sought independent accommodation as a problem – a source of rising claimant numbers and costs. At the same time, local authorities do not offer housing to young single adults without children, and (parts of) the benefits system do not treat young people as independent adults if they are living in the parental household. As well as raising specific questions about housing policy, these inconsistencies provide a good example of the need for a more coherent approach to youth policy in general, better tailored to the lives and circumstances of young people as they negotiate the transition into adulthood.

Notes

- 1 The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders or board of management of the Centre for Housing Research.

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Coming of Age at Last?

Youth Work, the Good Relations Legislation and the Shared Future Policy in Northern Ireland

Derick Wilson

Abstract

Positive youth work practices that seek to develop trust and community understanding have been a reality in Northern Ireland since, at least, 1965. Although such work assists young people to develop self-confidence and prepares them for life in a more open and intercultural society, it has, until more recent times, tended to be peripheral in public policy terms across government departments, with some notable exceptions from Departments such as 'Education' and 'Education and Learning' and the Central Community Relations Unit (Eyben et al, 1997). The legal duty to promote Good Relations, the Shared Future policy initiative and the associated race relations plans have created a legal floor and policy platform on which to advance a more intercultural and interdependent society. They also provide an opportunity for innovative youth work practices to be acknowledged for their actual and potential contribution to the wider civic good. The Youth Service must examine the social purpose, reach and depth of its provision against the principles underpinning Good Relations policies – equity, diversity and interdependence. It must ensure that the individual, group and community work methods it employs are focused on personal development and on changing how society as a whole values and supports its young people. This article outlines the new legislative and policy context and explores the implications – actual and potential – for youth work practitioners and providers.

Keywords

Youth work; equity; diversity; interdependence; reconciliation; Good Relations.

Introduction

When so many young people experience failure or secure limited success educationally (Kenway et al., 2006), when there is evidence from psychiatry that young men who act violently often experienced humiliation and disrespect as children¹ and when we live in a society where so many young people experience bullying (Burns, 2007), it is vital for youth work practice to promote ease with difference.

The legislation on 'Good Relations' offers an opportunity for the benefits of youth work practice that promotes ease with difference to be acknowledged, promoted and multiplied. It is part of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which has its roots in the Good Friday Agreement of the same year. Section 75(1) of the Act requires public authorities

to promote equality of opportunity between people of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status, sexual orientation and gender; and also between those with or without disabilities and with or without dependants. Section 75(2) lays a duty on public bodies and those they commission or aid to promote good relations between 'persons of different religious belief, political opinion and racial group'. Section 75 also needs to be seen in the context of race relations legislation (Race Relations Order, NI, 2003) and a range of other recent equality measures (see www.equalityni.org). In a sense, it is the beginning of linking past priorities on community understanding and community relations around religion and politics with the emerging need also to promote ease with difference on race, intercultural issues and the broader equality grounds. It is given additional weight because of the growth of hate crime legislation.²

The policy set out in *A Shared Future* (OFMDFM, 2005) is concerned with how all government departments address the structural and relational dimensions of building a shared society. This is now centrally monitored by, and accountable to, a senior civil service review group chaired by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

There has been a consistent strand of community relations work in Northern Ireland since the mid 1960s (Wilson, 1989; Wilson & Tyrell, 1985) carried out by specific groups of youth workers and a raft of voluntary, community and statutory agencies. In an early community relations youth work action research project, Jenvey (1973) documented the experiences of four Belfast-based detached youth workers and youth tutors working with young people who were 'called stupid' by many of the significant adults they encountered in school, in their communities and even in their families. These workers sought to establish relationships in which the young people came to see themselves and others different to them in a more positive light. They developed extensive opportunities for these young people to engage with others from different traditions and abilities and promoted long-term community service activities for them. Such practices were the primary starting points of innovative youth work in the area of what is now termed Good Relations. Unfortunately, however, the policy community did not embrace the findings of Jenvey's report.

In policy terms, the Youth Service has often been seen as peripheral, in spite of many quality pieces of developmental work that have modelled innovative approaches to building personal confidence and that have contributed to wider reconciliation practice (see Wilson, 1994). Research by Eyben et al. (1997) highlighted the marginal position of such programmes in terms of how public policy is developed. Their report stressed the need for this practice to be central in the thinking and organisational cultures of youth and community organisations. It proposed three interconnecting principles – equity, diversity and interdependence – as essential concepts on which to base all policy and practice concerned with building trust and improving relationships between people from the historically opposed political and religious identities in Northern Ireland. It was argued that these principles were essential for building any emerging intercultural society.

The report by Eyben et al. was a new stimulus for a 'commitment led' base of workers and agencies to reinvigorate this practice, supported by the 'Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence' project – JEDI for short – which was established by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (see www.jedini.co.uk). Although a number of other

publicly minded organisations took the ‘commitment led’ approach which was argued for in the report, the Youth Service agencies have marked themselves out as the single constituency that has maintained this strand of work for nearly ten years. Some other sectors only moved when the legal levers of Good Relations had to be responded to.

The *Shared Future* policy in 2005 signalled a new landscape around the promotion of trust and shared resources. This policy statement rooted the three interweaving principles which had been set out by this author and colleagues in 1997 (Eyben et al., 1997) into paragraph 1 of the document (OFMDFM, 2005: 7).³ This policy was a significant change in community relations approaches; it was to apply across all government departments and those they supported. This development now brings the trust-building agenda and Good Relations practice into mainstream public policy.

A Shared Future presents structural challenges to government departments concerning how their policies promote sharing over and against separation. They must advance the concept of shared and integrated community services and remind people that they are interdependent. They must promote and support relational work between children, young people and adults from diverse communities, schools and youth provision. They must stimulate and encourage intercultural understanding.

As a result of the legal requirement on public bodies to improve Good Relations between people of diverse religious beliefs, political opinions and racial backgrounds and the policy drive of *A Shared Future*, there is now an opportunity for the strand of innovative youth work practices about trust building – evident since at least 1965 (Wilson, 1994) – to become central to our institutions and our society. It is now possible to link a relational understanding that underpins good youth work practice with the institutional challenge to public and civic organisations to promote Good Relations and become active contributors to our shared future.

The main learning from this is that a ‘commitment led’ approach raises institutional and organisational practice way above the floor level that a ‘compliance level’ approach starts and finishes at. ‘Commitment led’ work begins to address the challenge of meeting across lines of difference as people inter-depending with one another. Compliance approaches, from experience, tend not to move into this relational domain (Eyben et al., 2003: 40–43).

Research Informing Professional Youth Work Practice – Promoting A Shared Future

In political science terms Northern Ireland is an ethnic frontier area. Ethnic frontier areas (Wright, 1987) are places where there have been, and are, groups firmly opposed to one another and there is no shared identity among all the people. An ethnic frontier is a particular form of colonial settlement where the contesting traditions are in relative balance with one another and each is unable to finally dominate the other. Some areas of stable societies begin to approximate to the dynamics of an ethnic frontier, where identity groups share one space and citizens experience differential access to the state and to the criminal justice system. In such dynamics lessons learned in Northern Ireland have much to offer other societies about building an intercultural society.

In an ethnic frontier, when fears are high, opportunities for innovative organisational work are often limited; conversely, when fears are low, there is more space to be innovative.

By and large national communities that coexist on the same soil develop in rivalry and antagonism with each other. It is more common for them to eventually separate from each other than to become reconciled ... and the features of their histories that are most important to them are therefore the things that have clearest bearing on their antagonism (Wright, 1988: 68–9).

Youth workers promoting Good Relations have to be prepared to push forward new practices when they can, knowing that some progress might fall back. Extended research with youth workers, young adults, adults and informal educators in 330 groups and involving weekly and intense residential meetings over a period of three years informed the learning outlined below. Except where otherwise indicated, quotes and excerpts are from Wilson (1994).

Mixed meetings in the midst of a conflict can be emotional spaces

Many meetings between people from different traditions in an ethnic frontier are filled with an emotional content that few people feel confident to acknowledge and address. It is important that the youth worker has explored these dynamics and can draw on her or his experiences to assist others to move through and beyond such fears together. The achievement of situations where young people can feel comfortable with people 'you have been told are different to you and even threatening' enables youth workers to grow young people's confidence and ease in the midst of difference.

X was in a position where transport for a group had not turned up on time and 'a young person from a Catholic group visiting my club was going to get beaten up by local youths outside the club. I was being ridiculed for safeguarding a child from "the other tradition" as I stood with that child. I challenged the youths to take me on if they wished, maybe being the size and weight I am put them off.' (Voluntary youth club worker in a loyalist area)

Y was working on a voluntary basis in a church club within a peace line area. 'Openly working across the traditions against opposition from within my own community is not easy and yet I believe it just has to be done. It is still possible for me to maintain open friendships with people from the other tradition. I suppose coming from here people know of my own involvement in the schemes for the local kids, they trust me.' (Voluntary youth club worker in a republican area)

Separation, avoidance and politeness frustrate just and open relationships

In the Northern Ireland conflict, individuals have found it more comfortable to seek out those they think they are like and move apart from those they see as different. Separation is preferred by some, and avoidance and politeness are practised by many. The spaces for real meetings and engagements across lines of difference between individuals and groups of people committed to building personal understanding and promoting organisational links have been, at times, hostage to wider fears.

'In our town Catholics and Protestants are not afraid of each other, but there is a certain 'standing off' from each other. Protestants are very much the majority. There are Catholics in the town who are civil servants and a lot of police officers too. All the locals agree that, if there is any trouble, it is caused by outsiders coming into the town. Any feelings of ambiguity on this, or any people who support political violence, keep quiet.' (Suburban town young person)

It is hoped that with worker ease, institutional support and a shared political agreement a more open environment will be created where such experiences are diluted and even curtailed.

Male-female relationships and the separation of differences

A recurring theme requiring further work is the link between males and females and their involvement with different types of violence (Hanson, 2005: 43–58). The 'Young Men and Violence' research by Harland through the Centre for Young Men's Studies and the work of Beattie (2004) are exploring dimensions of this theme. Men are culturally associated with violence (Girard, 1977: 125–6) and have little opportunity to meet in a new manner across lines of opposed identity.

'When boys from the other side come into "our" territory, they are evicted because they threaten more. As the places are exclusively one tradition, there is no equilibrium. Yet because local boys can bring in girls from the other estate, there is tension between the local boys and local girls. There are no possibilities for politeness here; there is no ritual way to be in the midst of each other. Strict separation, between the men anyway, by ghetto boundaries, is what operates.'

'In our town centre, if you're young and male, you know not to walk on the side of the street that does not belong to your tradition. There are shops we identify as being "one side" or "the other" and you stick to them. A boy got his head split when he walked on the wrong side, a gang of boys smashed a hardware shop window, took out a large shaft from it, and proceeded to lay into him with it. Any outsiders on the wrong side get beaten up.'

(Rural town teenagers)

Organisations and staff can model inclusive ways of working

Youth work that enables people to be at ease with difference is becoming a central challenge in democratic societies. Community-based youth workers, as well as their line managers, who are prepared to acknowledge how partisan dynamics are experienced in their own lives can be such models. Such workers recognise the pulls these different dynamics evoke. They establish ways through which they can continue to work to the wider vision of a more open and shared society, personally as well as institutionally.

Recently, an initiative by the Belfast Education and Library Board youth work training panel gave staff from across the city an opportunity to examine the extent to which staff may have implicitly diluted a citizenship based approach by becoming more locked into area based approaches that tacitly reinforce partisan approaches.

The staff concerned established a priority for themselves that they work towards an interdependent vision of the city for all young people and an interdependent team approach between the staff. This is an example of the societal need to promote openness to difference and interdependence (BELB Youth Service, 2006).

Meeting together creates points of change and contrast

Good Relations practice that offers experiences of meeting over time can, at least, provide a contrast and question mark to all the discussions and behaviours that a partisan society secures. Such a practice enables young people and youth workers to develop a critical and reflective distance from the many subtle partisan dynamics that surround them. Reflective meeting spaces can be points of contrast through which people question old established patterns of separation. Such spaces, where previously threatening differences can be explored, make Good Relations more possible between people from different religious upbringings, political opinions and racialised experiences (Eyben et al., 2002).

Among many innovative programmes that are contrasts and question marks to practices that do not deal with contention and difference, the 'Youth in Community' Programme of the Corrymeela Community has taken the challenge of the Equality and Good Relations legislation into the development of a most innovative programme with young adults whose collective experience crosses all the grounds of the legislation relevant to this age group.⁴ Especially for the themes of inclusion and acceptance of difference, this programme pushes the boundaries of quality youth work practice to promote change and points to what can be attempted by youth workers concerned with building a practice that enables young people become more at ease with differences.

The need for a values framework in working for a shared and interdependent future

Youth work is a values-led, informal, educational practice based on the central understanding that relationships matter. It draws on the broader community work values of according dignity and respecting individual rights and is commonly agreed to be centred on four areas: the worth and value of the individual, justice, claim to freedom and the essentiality of community. However in contested societies, people learn that these professional values cannot be taken for granted and have to be explicitly re-visited.⁵ This is because cultural pressures to conform can result in giving preferential treatment to people from one's own tradition, justice can be understood as promoting one group's dominance, freedom might be seen as the freedom to mistreat or ignore others and community might become a narrow form of local essentialism over all others. To assist youth workers to embrace the Shared Future principles of promoting equity, valuing diversity and securing interdependent relationships and structures for a shared society, there is a need to establish a values framework encompassing these important standards within public service and voluntary and community organisations.

Lorenz (1994) draws attention to how some social workers in 1930s Germany 'did their job' but did not work to a value base and so equipped those in power with an ability to take away many 'different' people to the camps and the gas chambers: people with disabilities, Romanies, gay and lesbian people and members of the large Jewish

population. The work of the well-known social group work writer and practitioner Gisela Konopka (1963) was part of the challenge to that lack of a value base.

In a contested society, the narrower values of each cultural group can be more dominant than the interdependent set of societal values. Many people learn forms of 'cultural common sense' that leave them unprepared for open meetings with those different to them. Such 'cultural common sense' can be summarised as 'seek separation when you can, avoid others different to you if possible and if you have to meet, be polite' (Wilson, 1994). Similarly, when stable societies, often based on an assumed homogeneity, become more diverse it is not inevitable that people will respond to the change in an open and inclusive manner. In these societies, identity communities can become culturally attractive and each can argue for group rights to be accorded (Fukuyama, 2007).

Learning from recent work the author has been involved in with youth workers from across Belfast, and similar work with the existing JEDI group established by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (bringing together senior practitioners from 12 agencies) has resonated strongly with earlier findings (Wilson, 1994). These more recent insights have been validated in discussions with youth workers in Birmingham and Bradford (Khan (ed.), forthcoming). Some of the key points are presented below.

Sustaining and supporting reflective youth work practice

Meeting others from a different tradition or culture involves a journey of emotion, rationality and politics, especially in a contested society. Emotionally, people have to acknowledge their histories and fears as well as the stories they have been told about the other. Rationally, they are forced to recognise that excluding groups of people because of identity, religion, social background, gender and all other equality grounds is no longer sustainable behaviour. Politically, they are required to renegotiate power relationships and to build a new society where the old, bi-polar identities have to acknowledge the new diversity and interdependence agenda that is evident, even in a contested space.

To work in situations where people too readily, and often with their 'own cultural good reasons', gather around essentially partisan identities, the youth worker who is prepared to work for the wider citizenship agenda and to remain at a thoughtful and critical distance from the different local identities makes a reflective contribution. Youth work volunteers and staff need learning spaces in which they, their agency supervisors and, ideally, their management board come together to examine the extent to which they are working on a Good Relations approach.

Many youth workers have experience of friendships across lines of supposed hostility. People use these friendships as proof that they are not among the bigoted when, in fact, they are evidence of an underlying sense of their fundamental improbability and fragility. Northern Ireland remains a country of ...

... innocent people, in which those who would damage community relations are always others and never us – yet somehow we end up where we are ... On the old and well-tried principles of safety first, people profess their commitment to a common future, but first construct their defence (Eyben et al., 2002).

In a contested society, the desire for Good Relations between people associated with opposed traditions is the shadow side of the communal reality that people are brought

up with, namely that the other is to be feared and can never be trusted. Wishing for Good Relations is, in fact, a desire to be 'on the other side' of vigilance, to be in a place where the intentions and connections of the other have ceased to threaten or injure.

Breaking out of old patterns and building contrasting experiences

Good Relations work in a conflicted society has to be about the experience of change being possible as a human reality as well as about changes in policy that, overall, drive institutions forward on the journey towards a shared future. Supporting an abstract objective like 'change' is one thing, creating mechanisms that allow people 'to change' is quite another. Now that the legal and policy parameters have been secured, it is time for youth workers to develop and multiply their models of residential and community-based youth work practices around relationships that cross lines of difference, around relationships in which people experience change.

Individual adults who have lived through a conflict can easily feel overwhelmed because the source of their fear is not an individual who can be removed, as in a crime, but a whole group of people and the ideology and structure which unites and supports them. Good personal relationships therefore always take place in the shadow of this fear, which can never be fully forgotten. Good Relations work is about the development of a body of knowledge, experience and practice through which difficult issues of violence and fear can be faced and transformed. Real learning and progress in Good Relations practice will be measured by the extent to which people can face and withstand the pressures of examining and exploring issues associated with violence and fear. There will be a real change when youth workers, together, build a lasting hopefulness in children and young people and secure an adult society that welcomes and embraces difference.

Valuing interdependence, interculturalism and reconciliation

Youth workers at all levels within agencies need spaces in which to learn to be at ease and interdependent with those they perceive to be different. The intercultural challenge is that people make relationships freely and responsibly across lines of difference and that people are open to others, regardless of their identity. To hear others' experiences, to build understanding, to develop shared respect and shared values are and will remain key experiences essential to creating and sustaining fair and open societies, societies that continually work at reconciling differentials of power and background and addressing inequalities of access and opportunity. Youth work has a part to play in this process.

All societies, whether contested or stable, need some level of reconciliation practice as they become more diverse. Good Relations practice challenges understandings that favour particular religious, political and racial identities over the desire to meet together and live in one space interdependently. To experience others as human beings, equal before the law, is at the centre of this practice and indeed of the word reconciliation, whose Greek root, *allos*, means 'the other' (McDonagh, 1985: 565). Reconciliation, the overcoming of hostile otherness, is a task that carries with it both relational and structural dimensions (see Stevens, 2004; Volf, 2002). Reconciliation requires that the other is taken seriously and accorded respect and dignity, and so it not only carries within itself hints of improved relationships but also notions of rights and safeguards requiring that each other has their place.

A quality youth work practice that works to a wider value of interdependence and that seeks to promote Good Relations, where each person gives the other his or her place, and each secures the boundaries that ensure respect and dignity for all, is a major contribution to community understanding in any society. *A Shared Future* now gives the space for youth work policy makers, agencies and practitioners who have been committed to promoting ease and trust across lines of difference to impact more centrally on formal and informal education policy, economic and social development and on 'community well being', a function that new local councils will have in law when the Review of Public Administration in Northern Ireland is actioned.

It is conceivable that the Youth Service, collectively working on a shared future and Good Relations agenda, can build a constituency of young people from diverse backgrounds and cultures at ease with themselves, open to others and intolerant of all that works against their shared future together. These same policy and legal platforms would support organisations re-visiting their organisational values in order that they underpin *A Shared Future* by incorporating the themes of justice, difference and interdependence into their cultures and into the innovative forms of practice they support. Professional staff and volunteers could then work to make the Good Relations and intercultural agenda the explicit focus of their work, again knowing that this work is central, not peripheral.

The principles of equity, diversity and interdependence

Equity, diversity and interdependence are three interconnected principles that can be used to illuminate and reinforce the day to day practice of youth workers, managers and board members or others involved in governance.

- Firstly the principles can underpin a vision for the practice of youth work.
- Secondly the principles can ensure that the boards of management are focused on resourcing work that meets the needs of young people.
- Thirdly the principles can enhance the group work and other programmes of a youth work organisation committed to building a shared society and encourage young people to be more at ease with differences.

The comments offered below are dealt with in more detail in materials prepared by the author. The JEDI Programme of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland will be publishing these and other materials later in 2007.

A vision for youth work practice drawing on equity, diversity and interdependence

Equity, diversity and interdependence are principles that ensure people are treated fairly, acknowledged as being different and encouraged to live together across differences of tradition, background, class and experience.

Equity involves 'treating people fairly and justly' (Eyben et al., 2002). In professional practice, this involves standing, in a preferential manner, with those who have little and with those who are being bullied, victimised or scapegoated. This principle is at the centre of any well-considered and ethically guided professional youth work practice. Diversity is primarily about recognising each person as an equal and different citizen. This principle is at the centre of formal and informal educational

practice and youth work. Social inclusion is important in groups and organisations. In group work experiences, people from different backgrounds and viewpoints should be acknowledged and not demonised. Interdependence refers to individual, societal and global interdependent relationships. It acknowledges that people are not islands but rather are formed in relationships with all those around them.

Youth workers in a contested society – in the midst of people with often opposed emotions and identities – have to remain open to everyone. Thoughtful youth workers, working to an intercultural vision, can use these principles as checks on whether their practice is promoting this wider vision. Board members, managers and policy makers associated with professional youth work have to ensure that the vision and structures associated with their agencies are explicitly and implicitly committed to building an interdependent society (interdependence). Agencies, having taken public money, have to be committed to promoting greater social justice, especially for young people who are disadvantaged (equity). Their management systems need to support fieldwork staff, continually challenging them to remain open to wider professional values and the concept of a more open civil society where all are equal and different citizens (diversity).

Table 1 lists some questions which can be applied in order to reflect critically on the application of the three principles to organisations.

Table 1: *The application of equity, diversity and interdependence to organisational vision*

Equity (fairness plus justice)	Diversity (being different and having a place)	Interdependence (being valued as a person and valuing others with you)
<p>Does the worker, manager or board member</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● deal with all, justly and fairly? ● advocate for resources for those in need? ● enable those with additional educational needs to have their place? ● have a preference in supporting young people from economically deprived and or vulnerable backgrounds? 	<p>Does the worker, manager or board member</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● recognise that each individual is important? ● model ease with sensitive themes such as race, politics, religion, sexual orientation, disability? ● welcome differences of condition, ability, tradition and culture? ● ensure that each person is treated as an equal citizen? ● ensure that minorities are accepted as they are? 	<p>Does the worker, manager or board member</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● build the quality experience of being together in a group? ● support open meetings between members from different traditions that can dissolve fears? ● support work that challenges pre-judgement and stereotyping of people? ● value experiences that enrich individual members in a group?

A focus on equity, diversity and interdependence at the level of governance

A youth organisation could review its goals against the extent to which they address inequality (equity), challenge narrow practices that exclude (diversity) and consider how they could secure a shared society (interdependence). In this flow interdependence is the end point to which everything else works. Diversity helps to identify the areas of difference that the programmes need to address. Equity explicitly relates to 'social justice' and adds rigour and direction to concentrate on policy issues which prioritise groups, areas or interests that are excluded (Murtagh, 2006).

Embedding equity, diversity and interdependence in the experiences and practices of the boards of management of organisations is very important, given their particular responsibilities and authority. Some desired outcomes which would demonstrate the application of the three principles at this level are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: *Equity, diversity and interdependence: themes for board members*

A continual focus of the board of management	
Equity	<p>Programme resources for people or groups from areas of need are in place</p> <p>The board takes its advocacy work seriously on behalf of young people who are unsupported or who have limited access to resources</p>
Diversity	<p>There is evidence that the board has challenged all to be more open</p> <p>The board has secured resources to grow the organisation's diversity work</p> <p>A measure of diversity is evidenced or being worked towards in staff, board and members</p>
Inter-dependence	<p>How to promote a shared and interdependent society is a central plank of the work at management/board level</p> <p>The theme of interdependence is evidenced in minutes and activities and articulated in engagements and submissions with policymakers</p>

Enhancing group work and programmes of youth work organisations

Equity, diversity and interdependence are parameters for innovative social group work. Applying the themes to work with people and groups is to see equity (fairness plus justice) as the structure of the space the youth worker creates for people to come into; diversity (being different and having a place) as the stimulus and ease which different people gradually sense when they enter the group; and interdependence (being valued as a person and valuing others with you) as the increasingly open engagement between members about living in this place and elsewhere. Interdependence is the experience when a group comes to life and engages.

Table 3: *Equity, diversity and interdependence and the use of resources*

	Time	Spaces/ Events	Energy/ Resources
	Being given air time and discussion/ practice time	The spaces for events and experiential learning the organisation creates	Energy and resources the organisation controls
Equity	Members, staff and volunteers actively promote relationships that are fair and open to others Enabling people to be confident and at ease is a central drive of the programme work More people from vulnerable backgrounds grow in self-confidence every month	Staff and members are given opportunities to develop group activities, discussions and courses associated with fair treatment There is a robust balance of evening, day, weekend and residential education elements that challenge people around fairness, prejudice and bias	Young women and men do not have to fight or negotiate for a place in the agency They experience having a place as of right with staff
Diversity	Assisting people to be at ease with difference is a central theme in the processes and programmes of the agency Learning events and projects on this theme are evidenced annually The organisation can point to a developing history of practice in this area	There is a robust programme of work that challenges members and staff on the theme of prejudging others different to them The organisation's learning spaces are challenging. There are networks of wider relationships that members and staff bring to the agency	Members, staff, volunteers and management are practically seeking opportunities to be involved with people from different backgrounds to those of the existing members
Inter-dependence	There are formal links made between the organisation and other organisations about Good Relations practice	Members, volunteers and staff give attention to open and significant trust building within the organisation, especially across lines of tradition and potential misunderstanding	People are continually being invited to share and develop joint programmes of work that promote more understanding, international learning, compassion and care

Table 3 shows how the principles of equity, diversity and interdependence can be used to critically inform and examine how people, formally and informally, use their

time, organise spaces and events for experiential learning and use the resources available to them. These are tools for the enthusiastic practitioner, team, manager and management board.

A central task for the youth worker is to create the potential for growth and development in relationships where each young person has his or her place and does not have to rival for it. A youth work practitioner whose work is informed by these practical insights believes in creating, maintaining and being vigilant about the spaces he or she administers or organises. In these spaces people meet and engage together and the youth worker brings his or her ease with difference to the individual members of the group, setting them free to imagine new activities and make new choices.

Conclusion

In Northern Ireland, community is often another word for sides; it is less a question of 'our interdependence' and more a declaration of 'political opposition'. Communities here have tended to develop as communities in antagonism, defined by beating their opponents. The peace process has been the search for an alternative to such active hostility, and the political agreement restorations of institutions in 2007 is perhaps a new acknowledgement of diversity and interdependence.

Recent history alerts us to the need for promoting Good Relations, a shared future and fair treatment in this society, this island and elsewhere also. We live in the shadow of Auschwitz, the Black Civil Rights Movement, apartheid, the horrors of genocide where communal antagonism led inexorably to destruction and barbarity and the legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict. Antagonism, if nursed and never addressed, will turn our current transition into a gap between periods of violence. Improving the quality of life for all is the imperative and it is no longer helped by organisations that only fight for resources for their own traditions or protect their place above all else.

Trust building is too important to be the responsibility of only children and young people. Trust building and Good Relations work must be owned by adults and by the wider political and civic society. This can be partly achieved through the outworking of policies such as *A Shared Future* and the securing of Good Relations through legal demand. However it is only when people embrace this challenge – because it makes sense to develop a society where people are treated fairly, differences are acknowledged and yet where people live and work together as interdependent citizens – that we will advance the pace of social change.

Adult society needs to commit to securing greater equity for all young people, beyond conflict. Such a shared society would make space for young people to move within and between different areas freely and at ease in order to meet others, seek opportunities and improve their educational, social and economic position. To be at ease with difference, young people must acquire the skills of dialogue, inquiry, negotiation and mediation in their relationships and group life in a more diverse society. These are skills that good youth work practice, allied to the new school curriculum in 2007⁶ can provide.

Interdependence in reality is the search for an end to hostility and enmity, the search for relationships in which people who are different receive the same treatment and are recognised, appreciated and assured of a place where they are given value and dignity. The Youth Service has much to offer, in both visionary and practical terms, to this wider societal challenge. For the first time in over thirty years in Northern Ireland

there are building blocks in place at the legal and policy levels to promote trust building. This means that the valuable learning and experimental work in trust building pioneered by many youth workers and agencies over the years can now become central to the development of trust-building policies and programmes.

The principles of equity, diversity and interdependence can be used to motivate the internal structures of youth organisations to focus on promoting social justice, celebrating and preparing young people to be more open to difference and building trust between diverse people. As such, youth work has an opportunity to position itself more centrally and promote itself as explicitly encouraging and delivering desirable social change and building a new intercultural society.

Notes

- 1 Interview between author and Dr John Alderdice, Director of Green Park Psychotherapy Centre, Belfast, August 2006.
- 2 <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/hate-crime/>
- 3 The relevant paragraph reads:
Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland
The establishment over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence.
- 4 <http://www.corrymeela.org/sitepage/youth.aspx>
- 5 Values in Teacher Education, a research programme currently within the UNESCO Centre, University of Ulster.
- 6 See www.ccea.org.uk for Northern Ireland school curriculum developments

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Biographical Note

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Research Digest

Young People's Views about Recreation and Leisure: Findings from a National Study¹

Áine de Róiste and Joan Dinneen

Introduction

This study was commissioned in the context of policy development in the field of young people's recreation and leisure. It set out to determine:

- What do young Irish people do in their free time?
- What are the barriers and supports they experience?
- What are their aspirations with regard to recreation and leisure?

Leisure time activities comprise between 40–50% of an adolescent's life (Caldwell et al., 1992). Adolescence is a formative, transitional period from childhood to adulthood. It is a time of identity development and major adjustment for young people to changes within themselves and their social lives. International research has shown that leisure involvement enhances self-concept, identity and social and emotional development, including the development of initiative and resilience to cope with the demands and stresses of life (Driver, 1992; Dworkin et al., 2003). Leisure involvement fosters a sense of belonging in a community or locality, and may also address specific developmental needs of adolescence (ibid). Leisure activities are also a context through which young people can forge new friendships and meet and learn about peers who are different to them in ethnicity, race and social class. In terms of international policy, Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) declares:

State parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

A variety of studies have also reported the psychological and physical health benefits of regular physical activity and physically active young people are more likely to carry the habit of regular physical activity into adulthood (Department of Health and Children, 1999; National Heart Alliance, 2001; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

The Study

A survey was undertaken with over 2,260 young people, aged 12–18 years, via a random sample of 51 schools across the Republic of Ireland. Most counties had two schools in the sample, with additional schools from the more populated counties. A further 100 young people participated in focus groups and interviews, designed to gain insight into the additional needs of young people with disabilities and those at a socio-economic disadvantage. A questionnaire was specifically developed for the study. It was designed to elicit information on the three research questions set out above. Past

research, theory and pilot focus groups were used in designing the questionnaire. It was translated into Irish for use in Gaeltacht schools.

The survey was undertaken over a period of 6 weeks, from November to mid-December 2004. The focus groups and interviews were conducted from February to April 2005. The authors travelled to 90 per cent of the school settings to administer the questionnaire; a trained research assistant administered the other 10 per cent. Respondents were made aware of the rationale for this research in the context of policy development. From their experience of both data collection and input, the researchers believe that the respondents positively engaged in the study. This can be seen in the high completion rate of the full questionnaire and the low number of spoilt questions. The focus groups and interviews had similarly high levels of engagement.

Current Leisure Practices of Young Irish People

What do young Irish people do in their free time? As already noted, leisure time activities comprise between 40–50 per cent of an adolescent's life (Caldwell *et al.*, 1992). For the purposes of this research, leisure time activities have been divided into four broad areas: general free-time activities; hobbies; community/charity groups; and sports.

The vast majority of young Irish people enjoy their free time. Most are engaged in a broad range of activities – 88 per cent report some involvement in sport, nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) report one or more hobbies, and nearly one-third (32 per cent) participate in one or more community clubs or groups (e.g. youth clubs/groups). Most report strong support from family and friends for their leisure preferences.

There is a small but striking proportion of young people (6 per cent) who appear to have very low levels of both engagement and enjoyment in their leisure time. This sub-group of the population warrants further research since these young people may have particular needs with respect to leisure provision.

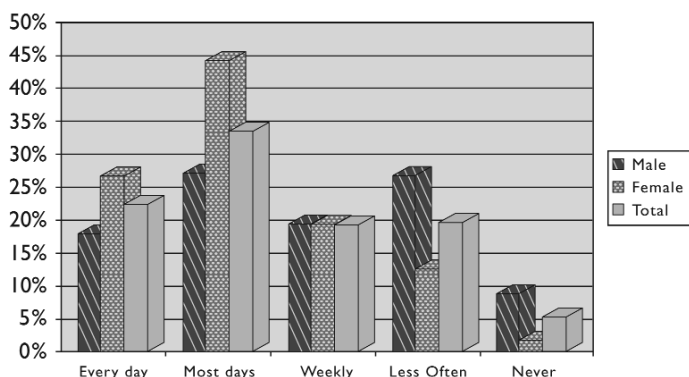
General Free-Time Activities

Watching television and listening to music are, predictably, very common leisure time activities: 94 per cent of young people watch television and 89 per cent listen to music every day or most days. Television viewing is popular for both sexes and shows no significant rise or fall across the age span of 12–18 years. Listening to music is more popular with girls and young women, and increases in popularity from 12 to 18 years.

Computer games are a popular leisure time activity for young Irish people. Only 2 per cent never play computer games, while over one-third play every day or most days. There is a marked gender difference with regard to computer games: over 60 per cent of boys and young men play every day or most days, compared to only 13 per cent of girls and young women. Little difference was found in game playing between young people in the different parental occupation socio-economic status (SES) groups.

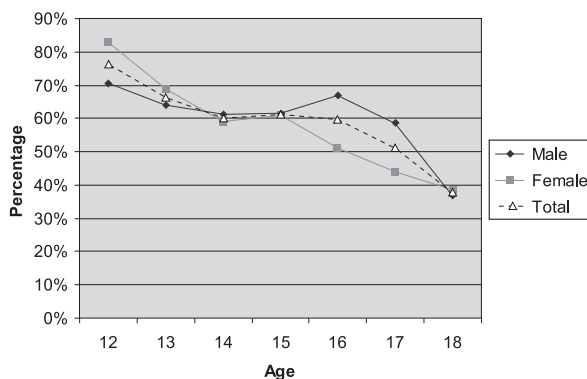
Over half of young Irish people read in their free time every day or most days. A striking gender difference is present, with girls and young women reading significantly more than boys and young men (see Figure 1). There is also a link between parental occupation and reading frequency: those in the higher SES groups report greater reading frequency. The findings with regard to gender, SES and reading are consistent with other research. For the purposes of this study, reading was defined as including reading books, magazines and newspapers.

Figure 1: *Reading frequency, by gender*



‘Hanging around outside’ is an important leisure time activity for adolescents. Over 90 per cent of adolescents in all age groups enjoy hanging around with their friends (see Figure 2). There is agreement in the research of both the normative nature and relative importance to the young person of hanging around with peers. The frequency with which young people hang around outside decreases with age, especially among girls and young women. In contrast to other groups, young people whose parents are in the higher SES group (professional/managerial) report less frequent hanging around outside.

Figure 2: *‘Hanging around outside’, by age and gender*



As is the case elsewhere, attending the cinema and discos are popular leisure time activities for Irish adolescents. About one-quarter of young people attend discos on a weekly basis, while one in five never attend. From the focus groups, it was apparent that a lot of young people feel there are not enough discos for older adolescents (15–18 year-olds). Attendance at the cinema is similar, with about one-quarter attending weekly; however, less than 5 per cent of young people report that they never attend the cinema. For girls and young women, looking at shops is a very common activity, particularly for those in urban areas.

Over one-third of young people work part-time weekly or more often (including baby-sitting). There is a rise in the number working part-time from 12–18 years. Boys and young men work part-time more frequently than girls and young women, and slightly more young people in the lower SES groups work part-time. Also, young people in rural areas work part-time more often than those in urban areas. A huge majority of young Irish people (95 per cent) own a mobile phone. Girls and young women use their phones more frequently than boys and young men. There is a rise in mobile phone ownership from 12–18 years: 87 per cent of 12 year-olds own a mobile phone, rising to 100 per cent of 18 year-olds.

Hobbies

Outside of the general free-time activities mentioned above (such as watching television, reading and listening to music), nearly two-thirds of young people report one or more hobbies. The most popular hobbies are playing a musical instrument, looking after pets and art (see Table 1). Dance is very popular with girls and young women, and playing pool or snooker is a popular hobby for boys and young men. In agreement with past research, girls and young women report more hobbies than boys and young men. Young people who are low in leisure motivation are less likely than others to have a hobby. This is understandable in that low levels of leisure motivation have been reported to be associated with feelings of apathy and a lack of initiative and effort.

The higher a person’s socio-economic background, the more hobbies they are likely to have. As has been found in past research studies, participation in hobbies diminishes across the adolescent years. This drop-off pattern was even more striking in community/charity groups and sports participation.

Table 1: *Most Popular Hobbies by Gender*

Total n=1475		Male n=660		Female n=815	
1st	Play music 30.7% n=454	1st	Play music 28.7% n=190	1st	Dance 34.9% n=285
2nd	Pets 21.5% n=318	2nd	Pets 19.2% n=127	2nd	Play music 32.3% n=264
3rd	Art 21.4% n=317	3rd	Pool/Snooker 16.5% n=109	3rd	Art 26.9% n=220
4th	Dance 20.3% n=300	4th	Technology 15% n=99	4th	Pets 23.8% n=191
5th	Cooking 10.4% n=148	5th	Art 14% n=97	5th	Cooking 16% n=131

Columns do not add up to 100% as respondents could choose more than one hobby.

The average frequency that hobbies are engaged in varies depending on the hobby. Playing a musical instrument and looking after pets are undertaken, on average, on a daily basis, while dance, art and pool or snooker are undertaken ‘most days’.

This research recommends the greater promotion of dance because it is a very popular ‘like to join’ activity for girls and young women. As a leisure activity, dance is inexpensive with regard to equipment and facilities, and incorporates physical activity, artistic expression and cultural features. In addition, it may be done individually or with a group.

Community/Charity Groups

Nearly one-third of young people are members of one or more groups. The most popular groups are youth clubs/groups, choirs/folk groups and groups that engage in voluntary work (see Table 2). Girls and young women report greater participation in community/charity groups than boys and young men. Young people who are low in leisure motivation are less likely than others to report involvement in a community/charity group. Rural dwellers are more likely to be members of groups than urban dwellers. Those in the older years of adolescence are less likely to be members of community/charity groups. The average frequency of participation in community/charity groups is weekly.

Table 2: Most popular community/charity groups, by gender

	Total	n=728	Male	n=291	Female	n=437
1st	Youth Clubs/Grps	58.7%	Youth Clubs/Grps	68%	Youth Clubs/Grps	52.6%
2nd	Choir/Folk Grp	25.9%	Scouts/Guides	11.3%	Choir/Folk Grp	37.5%
3rd	Voluntary Work	11.2%	Voluntary Work	9.2%	Voluntary Work	12.3%
4th	Scouts/Guides	10.3%	Choir/Folk Grp	8.5%	Scouts/Guides	9.6%

Columns do not add up to 100% as respondents could choose more than one group.

Focus groups identified a number of issues relating to youth clubs and groups. These included the importance of ‘being able to relax and hang-out with friends (and away from family) in a safe place’; ‘having a choice over what to do’; there not being ‘too many rules’; and ‘liking the leaders and the others there’. Many of the males mentioned that they would ‘like the club to have pool/snooker tables’ and a small number mentioned the cost of joining a youth club as a concern. A minority also expressed apathy about youth clubs, indicating that ‘they all get boring after a while’; this may reflect low leisure motivation or depression.

Sports

Almost nine out of ten young people play at least one sport, either competitively or recreationally. Soccer, Gaelic football and hurling are by far the most popular sports for boys and young men. For girls and young women, the most popular sports are basketball, Gaelic football and swimming (see Table 3). Participation in sport declines with age: 96 per cent of 12 year-olds are involved in at least one sport, compared to 77 per cent of 18 year-olds. This decline is particularly marked for girls and young women, with a decrease from 98 per cent of 12 year-olds to 68 per cent of 18 year-olds reporting involvement in sport. Frequency of participation in sport also decreases between the ages of 12 and 18. Individual sports, such as swimming, tennis and cycling, are significantly more popular with girls and young women.

An interesting theme from the school-based focus groups was the belief that there should be exposure to a greater range of sports. One group mentioned the ‘dominance of the GAA games’ and another suggested ‘having tasters of different ... unusual sports, like water sports and American football’. One young male was of the opinion that people end up playing what the others in their area play: ‘I play soccer and so do all the lads in my area; my cousin plays nothing but hurling because that’s what they all play near him’. Overall, the numbers participating in individual sports are

significantly lower than for team sports, with the ratio of team to individual sports cited in this research almost exactly 2:1 (3,268 team sports; 1,603 individual sports). This is in line with other research on sports (Connor, 2003; Aaron et al., 2002; Sport England, 2003) and in contrast with the sporting patterns of Irish adults, where individual sports dominate (Fahey et al., 2004).

Notwithstanding its popularity among Irish adults, walking for leisure is not popular with adolescents, particularly boys and young men. Indeed, comparison of the sports preferences of adults and teenagers show very different patterns of involvement (see Table 4).

Table 3: *Numbers participating in sport, by gender*

Sport	Male	Female	Total
Soccer	711	262	973
Gaelic football	577	351	928
Basketball	158	371	529
Hurling/Camogie	303	180	483
Swimming	143	314	457
Cycling	117	115	232
Athletics (incl. Running)	78	97	175
Tennis	59	116	175
Rugby	140	22	162
Horse riding	28	124	152
Hockey	29	114	143
Golf and Pitch and Putt	106	22	128
Badminton	31	79	110
Martial Arts (incl. Kickboxing)	27	40	67
Volleyball	11	39	50
Boxing	38	7	45
Water sports (incl. Rowing and surfing)	21	10	31
Skateboarding and Rollerblading	23	8	31

The drop-off in sports participation evident in this study, together with the huge decline in sports and physical activity participation from adolescence to adulthood found by other studies in Ireland, suggests that adherence to physical activity cannot be easily predicted and is a complex, multivariant issue that warrants further research.

The public health implications of the decline in adolescent involvement in physical activity will be enormous. An individual’s risk for all-cause mortality, and in particular for premature death and/or morbidity from non-communicable diseases, is significantly increased by having a sedentary lifestyle. Thus there is a need for targeted physical activity promotion during adolescence, especially during the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. Given the decline in participation in team sports during this transitional period, we would support the recommendations of Aaron et al. (2002) that more emphasis be placed on providing opportunities for adolescents to develop the skills necessary to participate in individual sports. Other research shows that individual sports are more likely to be maintained into adulthood.

Table 4: Comparison of adolescent & adult most popular sports (excl. walking)

	Adult male	12–18 male	Adult female	12–18 female
1st	Golf 17%	Soccer 70%	Swimming 17%	Basketball 38%
2nd	Soccer 13%	Gaelic Football 56%	Aerobics/keep fit 10%	Gaelic Football 36%
3rd	Swimming 12%	Hurling 30%	Cycling 3%	Swimming 33%
4th	Gaelic football 8%	Basketball 15%	Golf 3%	Soccer 27%
5th	Billiards/ snooker 6%	Swimming 14%	Tennis 3%	Camogie 19%

Source: Adult data from Fahey et al.

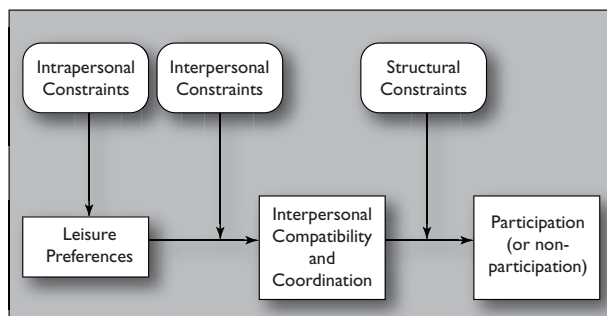
Columns do not add up to 100% as respondents could choose more than one activity.

Barriers and Supports to Leisure

In order to best understand the barriers and supports young people experience with regard to leisure, this study uses the hierarchical model of leisure constraints developed by Crawford et al.(1991). This model proposes that the barriers a person encounters, and their ability or inability to overcome these, affects participation or non-participation in leisure activities. Furthermore, the model proposes that barriers are encountered hierarchically (see Figure 3). Leisure preferences are formed, it is proposed, when *intrapersonal barriers* are absent or have, with supports, been overcome. Next, the person may encounter *interpersonal barriers*, particularly where a partner or group is required for the activity, as is the case, for example, in tennis, choir or scouts. Finally, participation will occur if there are no insurmountable *structural barriers*, such as a lack of money, time or transport.

From a public policy perspective, it is the latter – structural barriers and supports – that are of most interest. While the interplay between intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural barriers is unlikely to be totally linear, the model does provide a useful framework for the examination of barriers and supports to leisure participation.

Figure 3: A hierarchical model of leisure constraints



Source: Crawford et al.(1991: 312)

Intrapersonal Barriers and Supports

This first level of barriers and supports to leisure participation involves personal characteristics, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes. Examples in this category include self-esteem, motivation and beliefs. This research shows that the majority of young Irish people have high levels of intrinsic motivation to do what they do in their free time. Most do not encounter intrapersonal barriers. Only 13 per cent of young people do not enjoy joining new clubs and groups. Interestingly, over three-quarters of Irish adolescents enjoy competition, particularly boys and young men. Just over one-quarter of young people describe themselves as shy. (Interestingly, shyness is twice as common in the 6 per cent of the adolescent population who are low in leisure motivation.) The vast majority of Irish adolescents do what they do in their free time out of choice and for enjoyment rather than because of external pressures.

Low self-esteem and a poor body image have been linked to low participation rates in leisure activities and to increased incidence of depression (Raymore et al., 1994). A significant finding from this study is that only just over half of girls and young women and three-quarters of boys and young men are happy with the way they look (see Table 5). This finding is similar to that of other Irish and international studies.

Table 5: *'I'm happy with the way I look', by age and gender*

	12 year old Males	12 year old Females	17 year old Males	17 year old Females
Strongly agree	28.9%	22.1%	27.9%	10.7%
Agree	49.5%	40.0%	57.1%	44.0%
Don't know	14.4%	18.9%	7.9%	15.3%
Disagree	4.1%	8.4%	4.3%	18.0%
Strongly disagree	3.1%	10.5%	2.9%	12.0%

Interpersonal Barriers and Supports

Interpersonal barriers and supports to leisure participation are those that arise from social interactions. Examples include parental and familial support or lack of support, peer support or negative peer influence, and relationships with coaches and leaders. A very positive finding is that the vast majority of young Irish people have a high level of interpersonal support with regard to leisure. Parental support, in terms of parental permission, for the young people's leisure time choices is high (86 per cent). Over 90 per cent of young people report that they enjoy what they do in their free time. Over 87 per cent report that they do what they do in their free time because they want to and over 93 per cent of young people enjoy hanging out with their friends. There are small percentages of young people who report not enjoying hanging out with peers and low parental support for their leisure time choices. Boys in the 12–15 year-old age group are least likely to enjoy mixed sex leisure activities. Just less than 50 per cent of young people prefer leader-led leisure activities. A further 32 per cent of respondents chose the 'don't know' response to the statement 'I like activities where there is a leader/instructor'. The high 'don't know' response to this statement is interesting and warrants further investigation.

From the focus groups undertaken, a striking finding was the frequency with which young people who were not attending school (and instead undertaking Youthreach training) spoke of being ‘barred’ from leisure facilities. The issue was not explored in depth and again further research in this area is warranted.

Structural Barriers and Supports

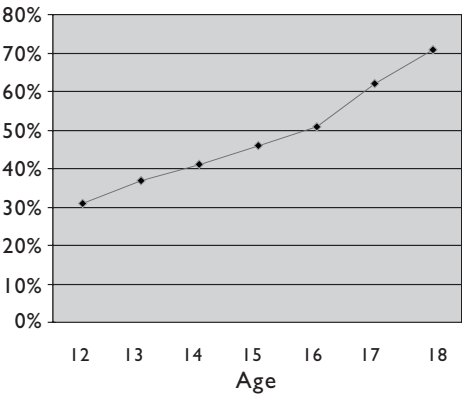
Structural barriers to leisure participation include lack of money, time, facilities or transport, weather, lack of resources or provision, and any other physical or material constraints on leisure. The majority of young Irish people do not experience financial barriers to leisure participation (see Table 6). Older adolescents from lower socio-economic groups are those most likely to experience financial barriers. This finding reflects the trend towards more commercial leisure as the individual progresses through adolescence (Hendry et al., 1993). Overall, one in seven young people do not have enough money to take part in the leisure activities that they would like to.

Table 6: *Money as a barrier, by age and gender*

Age	12 and 13 male (n=302)	12 and 13 female (n=311)	17 and 18 male (n=338)	17 and 18 female (n=325)
Strongly agree	5%	4%	5%	8%
Agree	6%	6%	9%	13%
Don't know	16%	13%	8%	14%
Disagree	40%	46%	48%	47%
Strongly disagree	33%	31%	30%	18%

Time as a barrier to participation in leisure activities increases dramatically with age, from 31 per cent for 12 year-olds to 61 per cent for 17 year-olds and 71 per cent for 18 year-olds (see Figure 4). An interesting finding is that young people who work part-time do not report time as a barrier to leisure participation. This is in contrast to other Irish research (Morgan, 2000).

Figure 4: *Time as a barrier, by age*



Girls and young women spend significantly more time doing homework and studying than boys and young men. Approaching half of girls and young women (43 per cent) agree that most of their free time is spent doing homework and studying, while less than one-third of boys and young men agree (29 per cent). This gender difference is even starker when we focus on those in their Leaving Certificate year: 60 per cent of young women agree that most of their free time is spent studying compared to only 28 per cent of young men. This finding is interesting in the context of girls significantly out-performing boys in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations (State Examination Commission, 2003).

Older adolescents and those in rural areas are more likely to experience difficulties with transport. However, even among those who live in the countryside 57 per cent do not report transport difficulties. The increase in transport difficulties with age is likely to reflect the broadening horizons of the late-adolescents’ recreational sphere. Seventeen and 18 year-olds are likely to want to travel further from home for leisure activities and also they are likely to want to be out later at night. One in seven young people do not feel safe going to and from activities in the evening. This sub-group is most likely to be female and urban dwellers. Those in the middle years of adolescence are more likely to feel unsafe than their younger or older peers.

Notwithstanding the high involvement rates reported above in the sections on sports, hobbies and community/charity groups, a majority of young people believe that there is very little leisure provision for adolescents in their locality (see Table 7). Rural dwellers are strongest in this belief, reflecting a lack of facilities and provision for rural adolescent leisure. No provision of, or facility for, the activity is the most common reason cited for not joining an activity that they would like to join.

Table 7: *‘Very little leisure provision in my area’, by home place*

	City	Town	Village	Countryside
Strongly agree	25.0%	35.2%	36.8%	42.7%
Agree	20.5%	18.6%	20.7%	25.4%
Don’t know	10.7%	9.1%	10.5%	6.4%
Disagree	25.0%	22.3%	20.1%	17.2%
Strongly disagree	18.8%	14.8%	12.0%	8.3%

While Ireland does not experience climatic extremes, such as heavy winter snowfalls or searing summer heat, the weather is often cited as a barrier to leisure participation. Young people in this study were asked to respond to the statement ‘Because of the weather I don’t like outdoor activities’. Over two-thirds (68 per cent) disagreed with the statement, suggesting that weather is not a barrier for the majority of young people. Despite a significant difference between western and eastern counties with regard to the number of wet days in the year, we found only a slight increase in the numbers reporting weather as a barrier between western and eastern coastal counties. Overall, for one in five young people, the weather is a barrier to their participation in outdoor activities.

Interpersonal and structural barriers have a major impact on the leisure opportunities of young people with a physical disability, sensory impairment and special needs. These young people often attend boarding school or travel a distance to school. This results in them having widely dispersed friendship groups and militates

against them meeting up informally with friends to hang out, go to the cinema or play recreational sports. Transport, cost, equipment, access, provision and programming all pose difficulties that result in very low access to mainstream leisure provision for these minority groups. Dedicated provision varies hugely across the State: it would appear that Dublin has the best range of leisure provision for young people with disabilities and impairments.

Drop-out of Leisure Activities

That young people drop out of activities as they progress through adolescence is completely natural and predictable. This study investigates the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of adolescent drop-out in Ireland.

Three-quarters of young people report that they have dropped out of an activity. The most common activities that girls and young women drop out of are dance (predominately Irish dance), basketball, drama and music. Drop-out among boys and young men is most common in soccer, martial arts and swimming. By far the most common reason cited for drop-out is that the individual lost interest in the activity. This is not a surprising finding and previous research has shown that young people are likely to drop particular leisure activities as particular developmental needs are fulfilled (Kleiber et al., 1986; Kelly, 1987). Other reasons for drop-out are, in order of importance, time, not liking the leader, skill level, peer drop-out, rules, age and cost. Not having a good enough skill level is cited as a reason for drop-out by over one-fifth of the sample. Not surprisingly, this reason is highest in sports where skill level is closely associated with both success and enjoyment.

The profile of reasons for drop-out differs from activity to activity. Table 8 shows the reasons cited for drop-out across a range of popular activities. The percentages represent the number of people within each activity who gave that reason for drop-out.

Table 8: *Reasons for drop-out, by activity*

	Dance	Gaelic Football	Soccer	Youth Club	Music	Scouts/ Guides	Swimming	Martial Arts
Lost interest	57%	44%	50%	60%	65%	68%	36%	65%
Times didn't suit	33%	27%	36%	25%	38%	26%	43%	34%
Didn't like the leader	31%	29%	29%	17%	32%	39%	16%	28%
Skill level not good enough	14%	32%	27%	7%	24%	6%	17%	12%
Friends dropped out	18%	8%	9%	34%	8%	29%	16%	16%
No way to get there	9%	13%	11%	14%	3%	5%	24%	8%
Didn't like the rules	10%	8%	9%	16%	10%	17%	6%	15%
Felt I was too old	13%	2%	6%	2%	14%	29%	10%	6%
Felt I was too young	2%	4%	5%	4%	3%	3%	3%	5%

	Dance	Gaelic Football	Soccer	Youth Club	Music	Scouts/ Guides	Swimming	Martial Arts
Cost too much	11%	2%	6%	9%	9%	7%	10%	9%
Bullying	0%	5%	5%	4%	1%	2%	0%	3%
Health/ injury	2%	5%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%
Felt I was the wrong sex	2%	3%	2%	5%	1%	4%	4%	4%

Columns do not add up to 100% as respondents could choose more than one reason for drop-out.

Barriers to Joining New Activities

To further the investigation of the barriers and supports that young people encounter with regard to leisure time, information was gathered on activities that they aspire to join and the barriers preventing them from doing so. Three-quarters of young people expressed a desire to join a new leisure activity. Seventy-five different activities were cited. The majority (65 per cent) of the activities listed were sports. There are significant differences in the activities cited by urban and rural dwellers. The most commonly cited barrier to joining a new activity is that the location of the activity does not suit the young person (see Table 9). Location is most likely to be a barrier for swimming and least likely to be an issue for those who would like to join Gaelic football. This reflects the ubiquitous coverage of GAA facilities and the poor provision of swimming pools, particularly public ones.

The second most common barrier is not knowing anyone else involved. Overall, nearly one-third of respondents identified this interpersonal barrier to participation. It is most likely to influence dance and swimming, and least likely to be an issue for soccer and Gaelic football. Other barriers include transport, not knowing how to join, time, cost, parental disapproval and age. Table 9 shows the reasons cited for not joining a range of popular activities. As with drop-out, the profile of reasons differs by activity.

Table 9: *Barriers to joining, by activity*

	Soccer	Dance	Rugby	Boxing	Swimming	Gaelic Football	Drama	Youth Club
Not located nearby	36%	43%	50%	43%	52%	21%	42%	30%
Didn't know anyone else	22%	40%	26%	30%	36%	24%	34%	27%
No transport	36%	30%	36%	26%	40%	18%	25%	27%
Didn't know how to join	10%	33%	22%	27%	19%	18%	27%	33%
Times didn't suit	26%	23%	25%	21%	32%	42%	26%	27%
Already too busy	19%	19%	29%	21%	20%	15%	11%	12%

	Soccer	Dance	Rugby	Boxing	Swimming	Gaelic Football	Drama	Youth Club
Skill level not good enough	23%	14%	13%	8%	18%	28%	17%	7%
Cost too much	8%	23%	3%	6%	8%	4%	26%	5%
Parents didn't approve	5%	3%	13%	25%	0%	7%	6%	8%
Not offered for my sex	9%	2%	10%	10%	1%	6%	2%	0%

Columns do not add up to 100% as respondents could choose more than one barrier.

Young People with Additional Needs

In order to give voice to young people with additional needs, the three research questions that form the basis of this study (see Introduction) were explored in focus groups and interviews. The minority groups represented include young people with sensory impairments (visual and auditory), intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, members of the Traveller community and those attending Youthreach training centres.

Not surprisingly, young people in these groups experience additional barriers, including:

- at the intrapersonal level, young people who leave school early appear to lack self-confidence with regard to leisure;
- at the interpersonal level, members of the Traveller Community and early school-leavers reported their experiences of being barred from leisure facilities as an issue;
- young people with sensory impairments (deafness and blindness) often have dispersed friendship groups due to the fact that they attend school in Dublin; this impacts negatively on their leisure opportunities in their home place;
- young people with physical and learning disabilities reported parental over-protectiveness as a barrier to leisure participation;
- with regard to structural barriers, it would appear that young people with additional needs experience more structural barriers to leisure than others, with transport, access, programming, finance and lack of facilities all featuring prominently.

For all of the minority groups investigated, there were examples of high quality, dedicated leisure provision through schools and other services. While positive about their experiences of dedicated leisure provision, integration with 'mainstream' youth leisure was an issue for all of the minority groups. It should be stressed however that the sub-samples of young people from minority groups should not be taken as representative in the way that the main sample is. The research undertaken in these sub-studies was designed to broaden the sample so that minority groups were assured a voice. The findings from these smaller studies may serve as signposts for future research.

Summary and Conclusion

This study attempts to provide a picture of the current leisure practices and preferences of young Irish people. It also gives an insight into the barriers and supports that young people encounter in accessing leisure. The broad geographical and socio-economic spread of the sample, coupled with the high level of engagement by respondents, increases confidence that the results accurately reflect the current situation and are generalisable.

There are a number of free-time activities that are almost universal across the adolescent population. Almost all young people watch television, listen to music, own a mobile phone, go to the cinema and enjoy hanging out with their peers. 'Hanging around outside' is an important leisure time activity for adolescents. Over 90 per cent of adolescents of all ages enjoy hanging around with their friends. There is agreement in the literature of the normative nature and relative importance to the young person of this activity. Sport is also an important leisure time activity. A large majority of young people in the sample (88 per cent) reported involvement in at least one sport. However, there is a very significant decline in sports, particularly team sports, with age. This decline is particularly marked for girls and young women. Given the decline in participation in team sports, it may be worth placing more emphasis on providing opportunities for young people to participate in individual sports as they grow older. An interesting issue emerging from the school-based focus groups is that there should be exposure to a greater range of sports.

Dance is a very popular 'like to join' activity among girls and young women. It incorporates physical activity, artistic expression and cultural features and thus may have a significant contribution to make particularly in view of the fall-off in physical activity by girls and young women. It can also be done individually or as a group.

Most young people have at least one hobby. Just under two-thirds (65 per cent) of the sample reported one or more hobbies. The most popular hobbies are playing a musical instrument, looking after pets and art or drawing. Far fewer young people are involved in clubs/groups than in sports and hobbies. Just under one-third (32 per cent) of the sample participated in one or more clubs/groups. The most popular were youth clubs/groups, choir/folk groups, voluntary work and scouts/guides. The relatively low involvement by Irish young people in clubs and groups is somewhat worrying since membership of such community and charity groups has been linked to increased levels of 'social capital', self-esteem, citizenship and an increased likelihood of the person volunteering in later life.

The main purpose of the study was to explore the opportunities, barriers and supports that young people experience with regard to leisure. The study examined intrapersonal barriers and supports, interpersonal barriers and supports, and structural barriers and supports. The latter are those most amenable to policy intervention.

Intrapersonal barriers and supports include personal characteristics, beliefs and attitudes. This research showed that the majority of young Irish people have high levels of intrinsic motivation. In other words, they are self-motivated. Most do not encounter intrapersonal barriers. There is a small group (6 per cent) of young people who appear to have low levels of engagement and enjoyment in their leisure time. Low self-esteem and a poor body image are linked to low participation rates in leisure activities. A finding from this study is that just over half of girls and young women and three-quarters of boys and young men are happy with the way they look. This finding is similar to that of other Irish and international studies.

Interpersonal barriers and supports are those that arise from social interactions. Examples include parental and family support or lack of support, peer support or negative peer influences, and relationships with coaches and leaders. A very positive finding from this study is that the vast majority of young people have a high level of interpersonal support when it comes to their leisure time activities. Parental support is high and the vast majority of young people enjoy hanging out with their peers. Just under 50 per cent of young people reported preferring leader-led activities. When coupled with the relatively small number of young people who are members of clubs/groups, this points to a potential issue with young people's experience of leaders, which may warrant the development and enhancement of leadership/coach development programmes targeted at adolescents. In focus groups undertaken with young people who were not attending school, a striking feature was the frequency with which they spoke of being 'barred' from leisure activities.

Structural barriers are a broad category of physical or material constraints on leisure that can impact on a person's participation. Over a range of structural barriers identified in the study, the findings show that:

- Notwithstanding the high involvement rates in a range of activities, a majority of young people believe there is very *little leisure provision for adolescents in their locality*. Young people from rural areas are strongest in this belief, reflecting a lack of facilities and provision for young people in rural areas.
- While the majority of young people do not experience *financial barriers* to leisure participation, 15 per cent of young people do not have enough money to join the leisure activities that they would like to join. Older adolescents from lower socio-economic groups are those most likely to experience financial barriers.
- Older adolescents and those in rural areas are more likely to experience *difficulties with transport*. The increase in transport difficulties with age is likely to reflect the broadening of recreational activities by older adolescents, who are likely to want to travel further from home.
- *Safety* is also an issue. One in seven young people do not feel safe going to and from leisure activities in the evening. This group is most likely to be female and urban dwellers.
- *Time constraints* increase substantially with age. Outside of the time spend in school, many young people spend large amounts of time studying and doing homework, with girls and young women spending significantly more time doing this than boys and young men.
- *Weather* was a barrier to recreation for one in five of the sample.

Transport, cost, equipment, access, provision and programming all pose difficulties for young people with a physical disability, sensory impairment and special needs in accessing mainstream leisure provision. Dedicated provision varies hugely across the State. It would appear that Dublin has the best range of leisure provision for young people with disabilities.

In conclusion, the study shows that young people in Ireland are engaged in a wide range of leisure and recreation activities. These range from structured activities, such as sports, to more casual activities, such as hanging out with friends. In determining the barriers and supports to leisure, cognisance was given to factors internal to and external of the individual young person. Overall, the study paints a positive picture with regard to the level of intrinsic motivation for leisure and recreation among young

people in Ireland. Significant gender, age, socio-economic and geographical differences do emerge when structural barriers and supports are investigated. These barriers are compounded for young people with additional needs.

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Go raibh maith agaibh go léir.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on the executive summary of the research report *Young People's Views about Opportunities, Barriers and Supports to Recreation and Leisure*, commissioned by the National Children's Office (now part of the Office of the Minister for Children) from Cork Institute of Technology and published in December 2005. The full report is available from the authors or online at: http://www.omc.gov.ie/documents/policy/Young_Peoples_Views_about_Opportunities.pdf

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Notes on Practice

Involving Young People in Conference Planning: Some Lessons from Practice

Celia Keenaghan and Mary Roche

Introduction

There is sufficient evidence in relation to the usefulness of participation of children and young people to promote it as a principle of the work of the Health Service Executive (HSE). It is a new and evolving area of work that presents many exciting opportunities and challenges. This paper aims to share the lessons learned from the experience of the Programme of Action for Children in involving young people in planning and delivering its annual national conference.

The paper examines how and why young people became involved and what impact their involvement had; and it presents recommendations in relation to good practice.

Planning Youth Participation

Background

The Programme of Action for Children (PAC) is a Health Service Executive initiative aimed at promoting integrated service delivery for children and families; improving health and well-being for children, adolescents and parents through conjoint working; supporting quality standards and promoting best practice. Since 2001, PAC has hosted an annual national conference on best practice in child and adolescent health. Each year the target audience has been senior managers and practitioners in the planning and delivery of child and adolescent health services, policy makers and academic leaders. The broad aims have been to influence the dissemination of best practice, support evidence-based practice and to share knowledge and networks.

The National Children's Strategy *Our Children, Their Lives* (Department of Health and Children, 2000) provided an explicit national context for hearing children's voices in matters which affect their lives. With the publication in 2002 of Best Health for Children's second major strategy *Get Connected – Developing an Adolescent Friendly Health Service*, recognition of the need to engage with and involve young people in working towards their health and well-being was placed firmly on PAC's agenda. The decision to involve young people in the 2005 national conference 'Changing Our Future – New Directions in Health Services for Children and Young People', was the culmination of the expanding participation culture within the organisation and work of PAC. Before providing the reader with further detail of the process and practice involved, we summarise in Box 1 the key lessons learned. These points are elaborated upon as the article progresses.

The Vision

As an organisation we had a vision of having young people alongside adult delegates at the conference. We wanted to recognise their right to a voice in matters affecting them. To this end we set out to involve them in planning and participating in an important national event where their health was the subject of discussion and learning. We believed that young people and adults would gain from the experience in terms of new understanding, ideas and perspectives. At the same time we needed to maintain a general target audience of influential adults in child and adolescent health and well-being. We aimed to involve young people appropriately, with honesty as to the opportunities for influencing decision making and in a way that would leave them empowered respected and feeling they had made a difference. We also needed to ensure they were properly supported.

Box 1: *Lessons learned in planning youth participation*

- Get young people involved in the conference planning process as early as possible.
- Young people are willing to participate at a national conference if they feel part of a group and are visible to each other and to adult delegates. This means sharing the stage and the floor.
- Work with committed partners who understand and are willing to share the costs. These partners are often the ones who can support young people in their own settings.
- Ensure all the target audience have the necessary experience to participate in the conference. We only involved young people who had previous experience working on health and related issues. Other fora for participation need to be used to involve people without this experience.
- To participate fully in a conference, young people need to be targeted, supported and paid for, through their organisations, services or projects.
- Regular face to face contact between organisers and young people directly involved in the conference planning is important. At a national level there are enormous barriers to working on a regular ongoing basis with young people scattered across the country. Issues of accessibility may override geographical representation. Moving the conference around the country each year and working with local groups each time goes some way to addressing this issue. Young people from around the country can be involved in presentations, chairing and as delegates.
- Targeting young people between the ages of 14 and 18 years of age provides the best fit for a conference of this nature.
- Youth participation needs to have a budget in the overall service plan and in the conference project plan. Bursaries need to be made available to enable some groups and organisations to participate and this needs to be built into conference costs.

The Young People's Planning Group

The conference was to be hosted in Sligo. Based on previous experience we decided to source young people locally for a young people's conference planning group. With the support of Foróige at the CRIB (a youth health café), twelve young people became involved in the group with a consistent core group of seven who moved the work forward. It should be noted that it is a good idea to link in with young people who have good support mechanisms available to them.

Box 2: *Key features of the young people's planning group*

- Locally based.
- Supported by youth organisation.
- Formally linked in to conference planning process.
- Clarity as to parameters of influence and input.
- Openness in balancing young people's needs and interests with PAC agenda.
- Transparent administrative process – agenda, minutes, and agreed actions.
- Met in a youth friendly venue with snacks available.
- Suited the young people's schedules.
- Used mobile phone text for regular reminders.

The first meeting took place in early March 2005 and we set the scene with a discussion on adolescent health issues to establish a context for what was to follow. The CRIB provided a youth-friendly venue with good kitchen facilities that the young people were familiar with. Planning group meetings became a regular event (three to four weekly intervals) and as the ideas emerged and took life other young people became involved along the way. Regular meetings allowed a relationship to be built up between the adults and young people. Seeing their ideas taken seriously, being acted on and becoming tangible was important to them. Young people have significant demands on their time – school, extracurricular activities, homework, holding down part time jobs, meeting the demands of family, friends and interest groups and generally becoming themselves. It is easy to underestimate this.

How the Young People Helped Shape the Conference

Most of the ideas from the planning group were incorporated into the conference. Day 1 of the conference was scheduled as a celebratory day to showcase innovative participatory projects and generally give the young delegates and presenters a high visibility – setting the tone for the conference. It included a launch of SpunOut.ie, a national youth health website by young people from Community Creations; and the Guide – the 'ultimate school journal' – by Health Service Executive North West (HSE NW) and young project participants. A hip hop youth dance presentation 'Sligo Street Elite', by St Anne's Youth Centre and friends, captured the energy young people brought to the conference at the end of the first day. A member of the planning group designed the flier for the conference and together the group chose and adapted the conference title from a selection provided by the PAC team. Their idea for a film for the conference became a project in its own right developed in partnership with the Model Arts and Niland Gallery's education department in Sligo. This resulted in two short films, one of which was presented at the Conference.

The choice of an interactive seminar on mental health and young people was commissioned from the HSE NW Regional Mental Health Promotion Service and run in parallel with adult seminars. Entitled 'I get knocked down but I get up again' it was attended by all the young people at the conference. A key outcome from the seminar was a mental health resiliency pyramid (akin to the 'five portions a day' model) which is being used as a basis for further work by the mental health promotion team HSE West.

An idea to get younger children imaginatively involved in the conference albeit indirectly resulted in another project run through PAC where all the primary schools in Sligo were invited to participate in an art competition on the theme of health. All the art was photographed and exhibited electronically. Delegates were invited to take the actual pictures of their choice in exchange for a charity donation. In this way they could display works of children's art in their offices or use them in reports. Winners of the art competition were invited, along with their parents and school principal, to a presentation at the end of the opening day of the conference.

Members of the planning group, along with the Children/Young People's Forum (CYPF) of the National Children's Office (NCO, now part of the Office of the Minister for Children, OMC), took on the responsibility for co-chairing each plenary session and attended the conference as delegates (see below for more on sourcing delegates).

The planning group also took on responsibility for the entertainment by suggesting, sourcing and operating Salsa dancing classes, DJ decks and DVDs. Dancing proved to be a simple, fun idea which was enjoyed by both adult and young delegates.

Box 3: *Key conference ideas from the young people's planning group*

- Have a significant proportion of young delegates attend (minimum 10%).
- Ensure young people get to present and co-chair.
- Commission St Anne's Youth Centre to showcase their youth dance performance.
- Design the conference flier.
- Choose a conference title.
- Make a film and show it at the conference.
- Provide an interactive seminar specifically designed for young delegates on the theme of Mental Health.
- Include younger children in the conference indirectly through art.
- Organise a dance class as an energiser.
- Have entertainment for young delegates.
- Invite members of the planning group to attend the conference.

Other Elements of Youth Involvement

Sourcing Young People as Delegates

PAC had developed a close working relationship with the National Children's Office and an invitation to participate in planning and as delegates to the conference was extended through the office of Head of Communications. Twenty members of their 27 member Children and Young People's Forum (CYPF) from all around Ireland (four of whom are on the National Children's Advisory Council) were enabled and funded by NCO to attend. CYPF is elected or chosen from local Comhairle na nÓg and sits for two years in an advisory capacity to the Office of the Minister for Children.

Box 4: *Sources of youth health expertise and participation in PAC Conference 2005*

- Foróige (foroige.ie)
- Dáil na nÓg and Chomhairle na nÓg (dailnanog.ie)
- NCO – Children/Young People’s Forum (CYPF) elected from local Comhairle na nÓg (omc.ie)
- SpunOut.ie a national youth health web-site by and for young people (spunout.ie)
- HSE (hse.ie)
- National Disability Authority (NDA)/People With Disabilities Ireland (PWDI) (nda.ie)
- Irish Association for Young People In Care (IAYPIC) (iaypic.ie)
- National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) (youth.ie)
- Youth Work Ireland (formerly National Youth Federation) (youthworkireland.ie)
- Ógra Chorcaí (ograchorcai.org)
- Young Social Innovators (youngsocialinnovators.ie)
- Sligo Institute of Technology Public Health and Health Promotion Students
- Consumer Panels Project for Children in Care HSE Mid West
- St Anne’s Youth Centre, Sligo

Invitations were extended through a range of networks to young people involved in participation activities around Ireland. One of the difficult lessons learned from previous conferences was that finding a suitable good value and high quality hotel venue for a conference does not always mean that young people will be equally or indeed respectfully catered for. From the beginning of preparations for the 2005 conference, PAC made this a core criterion for the choice of venue and in the end it was one of the deciding factors in the final choice. The event managers were able to assure us that young people would be treated with the same courtesy afforded to adult delegates and guests. They were enabled to use the leisure facilities on a par with the adults. (Often leisure centres are managed independently of the hotel and may have limits on the times young people over 14–16 can use the facilities e.g. not after 7.00pm. They offer a very useful way for young people to expend their energy and have fun together). The catering choices were made in consultation with young people and the hotel was always willing to adapt the menu on request. A ‘chill’ room was set aside for the use of young people and the hotel independently supplied good quality board games. Their accommodation was reserved in the conference hotel. This reduced complexity of travel costs and arrangements. Minibars were disabled in rooms young people were to use. The young people themselves felt that they were very well treated by hotel staff and expressed their appreciation of this time and again.

Box 5: *Key features of a youth friendly venue*

- Provides the same service to young people as it does to adult customers.
- Can provide accommodation for young people on event site.
- Is flexible about the use of facilities such as gym and swimming pool.
- Prepares staff to be flexible to meet the needs of young as well as adult guests.
- Offers a range of juices and non alcoholic wines.
- Adapts the menu on request.
- Imaginative use of spaces to accommodate informal and formal meetings and discussions among and between young people and adults.

Looking After Young People at the Conference

It is a significant responsibility to ensure the well-being and safety of a group of young people for three days and two nights, in a hotel away from home. Without the considerable work of a number of supporting adults it is simply not possible to enable youth participation at a conference or indeed any event. The support organisations had safe practice guidelines in place and were used to arranging the organisation of parental and school principal permission. A sufficient ratio and gender breakdown of support staff need to be available all day and all night to supervise and to meet young people's needs. Each supporting organisation prepared for all this well in advance of the conference. They entered into a verbal contract with their young delegates in relation to codes of behaviour for the duration of the conference. The project team and the young people felt it was good practice for adults attending to support young people to observe the same codes of behaviour, for example not drinking alcohol.

Box 6: *Key elements in supporting young people's safety and wellbeing at a conference*

- Follow guidelines for looking after children (safe practice/child protection statement).
- Secure parental consent for young people's participation.
- Consent is needed from parents and young people for photographs to be taken and used.
- Secure consent from school principals for young people's absence with permission.
- Ensure transport to and from venue is organised and clarify insurance arrangements.
- Have a named person available to meet and greet young people.
- Look after young people's organisation support staff.
- Provide youth-friendly space (a 'chill room').
- Have drinks and snacks available.
- Consult on and adapt menus.
- Arrange activities such as dance, music and games.
- Involve young people in conference programme design and seating arrangements to ensure their needs are met.
- Provide additional support for young people chairing or making presentations.
- Provide certificates of attendance and tokens of thanks.

The conference had a round table format with assigned seating. A number of these tables were set aside for young people and in expectation of their wish to leave the 'heavier' more academic sessions they were situated near exit doors. Interestingly the young people stayed throughout and participated in the same way the adults did. Young people who were presenting papers or chairing sessions also needed careful and timely preparation and support throughout. Both the adults and the young chairpersons were provided with guidelines and information on the session they were chairing. They were introduced to each other in advance of the session and given time to decide on a breakdown of responsibilities.

Debriefing for young people after the conference is recommended and gives the opportunity to explore any unnoticed or unexpected outcomes. It is important that young people have someone to speak to about any issues raised for them by participation in the conference. All were presented with certificates of appreciation for their attendance and their participation. Those who chaired and made presentations were given book tokens in appreciation.

Funding Young People's Participation

The costs of participation were borne by either supporting organisations, the HSE or both. Much participation work relies heavily on partnership with the voluntary sector, such as Foróige and other youth organisations, whose budgets simply cannot cover these kinds of expenses. They can however match funding with personnel time and expertise and share their venues. If youth participation is in an organisation's business plan it needs to have an accompanying budget.

Box 7: Funding of youth participation in the PAC Conference 2005

- For each young delegate there was a cost of the conference fee, transport, accommodation and dinner. In addition support staff had to be funded to accompany the young people.
- Funding arrangements included young delegate and support staff paid for in entirety by sponsoring organisation; grant aided by sponsoring organisation or paid in full/in part by a bursary from PAC.
- The planning group were funded by PAC.
- Youth participation costs were built in to business plans.

The Impact of Young People's Involvement

There were 45 young people participants in the conference making up about 15 per cent of the delegates. Their presence added an exuberance and cheerfulness to the proceedings which was noted by many participants. The young delegates themselves enjoyed and benefited from the experience.

'... we have a voice and want it to be heard, perhaps have another youth planning committee next year – it worked very well this year.'

(Young delegate)

'They were proud of having been able to contribute to the event. They felt respected and heard. They learned a lot.'

(Accompanying adult)

'We could do with another young people centred seminar (mental health one worked brilliantly).'

(Young delegate)

'We got to see all our hard work put into play, we also got an adults opinion on our ideas and our work.'

(Member of youth planning group)

For members of the PAC team it was a challenging but very rewarding experience. Working with student interns assigned to participation work is a great idea. Students from Sligo Institute of Technology, the local 3rd level college, were invited to volunteer to help during the conference in return for the opportunity to sit in on sessions. This also worked very well. All the speakers had been briefed on the participation of young people and were asked to tailor their presentations accordingly. Speakers and experts were very open to the youth presence and time and again welcomed the opportunity to share the stage with and hear the voices of young people. Their assessment of the young people's participation was extremely positive, as the following comments illustrate.

'This was an outstanding conference. First and most importantly, while many speak of youth participation, the voice of youth was integrated into every session in a thoughtful and meaningful way. That does not just happen; rather, it speaks to a deep commitment to young people and to their needs and development. Secondly, the content of the meeting was practical and most useful for those who participated.'

I was thrilled to be part of the program.'

Professor Robert Wm. Blum,

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

'It was a novel experience for me to chair a conference session with so many young people presenting and in the audience. If I had any concerns about my role as (an ageing) Chair, they quickly vanished as the young speakers presented their experience of being consulted on the issues that are important to them. Each one spoke with great conviction, clarity and self confidence. They conveyed the excitement of working together in different fora to improve the quality of young people's lives. They lifted spirits and increased our faith that the future was safe in the hands of young people such as these'.

Dr. Ruth Barrington,

CEO Health Research Board.

'I have attended and spoken at many professional conferences in my career but I have not previously had the pleasure of participating in a conference in which the involvement of children and young people went far beyond the usual token representative. The PAC conference in Sligo in October 2005 was such a conference. Children and young people were an integral part of the organising committee and they jointly chaired plenary sessions. During each session, young people gave presentations and contributed actively to the discussion. The conference organisation was orientated to the needs of young people. I was delighted to have been involved in this innovative conference and congratulate the organising committee and the

children and young people on a genuinely ground breaking development.'

Professor Nick Spencer

School of Health and Social Studies, University of Warwick, U.K.

The evaluation forms filled in by delegates indicated a high level of satisfaction with the youth participation elements of the Conference. A small number of adult delegates indicated a discomfort with young people's involvement and a small number felt that young people from marginalised communities were excluded. Respondents to the evaluation indicated that they felt they could put what they had learned into practice in relation to the inclusion of young people in planning and delivering. Youth participation was also identified as the most common response in relation to questions on what delegates found most interesting and most meaningful.

Recommendations

Throughout this paper good practice and lessons learned have been highlighted. Direct contact should be made with the authors for further details on any area of interest. Distilled in the box below are some key recommendations for people considering the participation of young people in health service conferences or other conferences with a youth-related focus.

Box 8: Key recommendations for participation of young people in conferences

- Be clear about the purpose and target audience for the conference.
- Build young people's participation into the planning process at the outset.
- Identify a dedicated budget and dedicated staff.
- Be honest and explicit about the scope for young people's roles in relation to decision making.
- Work with partners who are actively involved in working with a wide range of young people.
- Examine the conference theme and purpose for how it fits with meaningful participation of young people.
- Establish a young people's planning group.
- Establish clear lines of communication between the young people's planning group and the host organisation's planning group.
- If young people are invited to share the stage, they should be visibly well represented in the audience.
- Choose a venue that will meet the needs of adult and youth delegates.
- Make safety and wellbeing a priority by addressing issues of consent, care, engagement and recognition.
- Evaluate the process and share good practice.

Notes

1 This article draws on a report published by the Health Service Executive (Keenaghan and Roche, 2006).

References and Resources

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Biographical Note

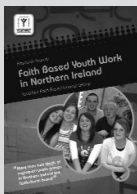
Dr. Celia Keenaghan is Principal Research Officer with HSE Children and Young People's Team, Population Health. Previous research posts have been with Best Health for Children, the Public Health Department in the North West and as an independent consultant serving a range of voluntary and statutory agencies and groups. Current research interests include youth participation, public consultation in public health, health inequalities and child and adolescent health.

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Reviews



Macaulay Associates, *Faith-Based Youth Work in Northern Ireland*

(commissioned by Youthnet Faith-Based Interest Group).

Youthnet Northern Ireland, March 2007, 61 pp.

Tony Morgan,

Community Youth Studies Unit,
University of Ulster at Jordanstown.

This report's topic is worthy of consideration as Northern Ireland moves to a new era of peace and reconciliation. Additionally this new era has witnessed an increase in immigration and an increasing number of new cultures creating a multi-cultural society. While for many the notion of 'faith-based' youth work may conjure up concepts associated with the two dominant religions in Northern Ireland, i.e. Catholic and Protestant, any adequate definition of the concept of 'faith-based' youth work should take cognisance of this changing society if it is to be inclusive. This report is timely as a first step in attempting to both define and understand the nature of faith-based youth work in Northern Ireland.

Choosing the correct methodology for such a study requires a clear definition of the concept of faith based youth work. The authors state that:

For the purpose of this research, faith based youth work is youth work ... that is motivated by any religious faith and underpinned by the values of a religious faith. (p. 16)

However, many of the values underpinning the work documented in the report are heavily influenced by 'generic' as well as 'faith-based' youth work principles, for example personal and social development, promoting rights, protection, participation, peace-building and partnership. Therefore the definition of faith-based work seems to be dominated by traditional youth work values with the concept of 'faith' appearing to be an add-on. This suggests that the concept of faith based youth work may not be robust enough for researchers to identify indicators or variables that facilitate measurement. The researchers collected secondary data (i.e. data normally used for other purposes) followed by semi-structured interviews and focus groups using a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, if the concept has not been clearly defined at the outset is it possible to infer, with any degree of certainty, that the data presented represent only faith-based youth work?

When they say that they have used a 'scoping' approach, one assumes that the researchers are alluding to a brief investigation that might, at a later date, lead to more in-depth analysis. The difficulties associated with scoping are illustrated in the 'Scoping Report' by the Department of Constitutional Affairs (Public Legal Education Strategy (PLES) Task Force (2006). The introduction states:

Within the timescale allowed, it has not been possible to contact everybody with information to share, nor to identify and assess all material which may be relevant. Therefore, gaps remain and some of what follows is impressionistic.

This ‘impressionistic’ sense also characterises parts of the Macaulay report. An example is in the section dealing with training, when it is stated that ‘a significant number or interviewees referred to a “chill factor” for faith based youth work within the degree course at University of Ulster’. Firstly the numbers of interviewees in the sample is minimal; and secondly it is the case that many students are placed, and place themselves, in a variety of placements within church, faith and ethnically orientated youth work agencies while on the aforementioned programme. An impressionistic response to an impressionistic assertion!!

Kumar (2005: 55) says that if you want to find out if a programme is effective, if a service is of quality or if there is discrimination, you need to be careful that such judgements have a rational and sound basis. This warrants the use of a valid and reliable measuring instrument because it is through the process of measurement that knowledge about variables can be acquired. Stressing the importance in research methodology of operationalising a concept, Kumar notes (2005: 56) that:

Concepts are mental images or perceptions and therefore their meanings vary markedly from individual to individual, whereas variables are measurable, of course with varying degrees of accuracy.

The research report under consideration does not identify variables that operationalise the concept of faith based youth work nor does it underpin the research with a review of relevant literature. Such a review might have discussed the difference between Catholic and Protestant perceptions of faith based youth work, or addressed the relationship between ‘faith based’ and ‘Christian’ youth work, or asked the question whether faith based and church based youth work are the same thing.

Furthermore, the secondary data presented may be representative of a variety of types of ‘faith based youth work’, such as youth work in church premises; generic youth work with minimal faith based aspects; youth work with strong faith based inputs; youth work with historical links to a church; youth work that is faith based but not church based; youth work that is neither faith based nor church based, and so on. Without a clear conceptual understanding of the term ‘faith based’ the data remains very difficult to interpret. It seems clear, at least from the focus groups, that most of the youth work outcomes mentioned in the report are not exclusively or necessarily ‘faith based’ – for example, citizenship; community spirit; shared values; community involvement; work with other groups; personal and social development. These are all examples of generic youth work practice.

Much more thought is needed on what the indicators of faith-based youth work might be and how these could be turned into variables. One indicator might be attendance at a youth centre that has a faith-based activity (some are mentioned in the report, for example, faith based projects such as Christian Aid, attending mass, involvement with other religious groups, faith development activities and faith-based interventions). This in turn could be developed into a measurable variable such as length of time spent on faith based activities, for example three times a week for thirty minutes. Otherwise, as this report suggests, all those registered in a notional faith-based organisation are involved in faith-based youth work.

Social capital is presented in the report as a theoretical framework within which the potential of faith-based youth work can be 'positively' understood. The report suggests that faith-based youth work *bonds* individuals through closer ties with families and other groups. Social capital offers a *bridging* process between people and the wider society, and is good for 'getting ahead', *linking* individuals to positions of power and authority. If we accept this analysis then we might add that traditional youth work can also deliver social capital.

In any case we should be cautious about viewing social capital too uncritically, as is advised by John Field (2003) whose study, interestingly, was based on evidence collected in Northern Ireland. Field talks about the 'perverse effects of social capital' stating that a reasonably clear distinction can be drawn between productive social networks, which we might define as those that generate favourable outcomes both for members and the community at large, and perverse networks, which we could describe as those that have positive benefits for their members but include negative outcomes for the wider community. Field calls this the 'dark side' of social capital and continues:

... negative social capital, in the form of racism or religious bigotry, has been widely associated with close ties, or bonding social capital. It has also been associated with a tendency towards particularised trust, that is, a propensity to trust those to whom one is related by kinship or personal acquaintance, or who share membership of a known common grouping such as a church or association.

(Field, 2003: 87)

Field is alluding to the fact that some forms of closed membership may lead, either intentionally or unintentionally, to the exclusion of others. The use of social capital is therefore open to challenge in terms of perpetuating 'negative' aspects of a culture especially in a divided society. That is not to say that faith-based youth work does not perceive its role as reconciliatory or that society, and indeed the changing cultural milieu of Northern Ireland, has not moved on.

There is one obvious incongruity that is worth exploring in the findings in this report. The facts as presented suggest that:

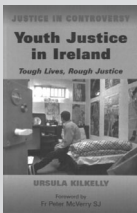
- Faith based youth work applies to 1405 units;
- There are 98,902 members of faith/church based groups;
- Faith-based work has 16,457 volunteer leaders;
- There are employed 160 full-time youth workers;
- 68 per cent of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland are faith/church based;
- 57.8 per cent of all members of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were participants in faith/church based youth groups in 2005.

Further on in the findings one reads that '*... negative responses and low profile are the major barriers to young people accessing faith-based youth work*'. Given that there are so many people involved in faith-based youth work one wonders at the validity of this comment. Is it that young people are involved in faith-based youth work simply by association? Does it mean that if young people are attending a certain group that says it is faith/church based then no other indicators or variables are needed to discern or challenge the taken-for-granted assertion that they are involved in faith-based youth work? Are numbers and attendance, de facto, sufficient indicators of faith-based youth work?

In summary, while the *Faith-Based Youth Work in Northern Ireland* report pays timely attention to an important topic, a clearer definition of the concept itself is needed. The report would have benefited from clarifying the difference between faith-based and church-based youth work, including a Catholic and Protestant perspective and addressing the changing nature and context of Northern Ireland as a multi-cultural society. However, there is no doubt that the report raises a key question for consideration: is *spiritual development* just the work of faith-based youth groups? This itself is a worthy question for further research.

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Ursula Kilkelly

Youth Justice in Ireland: Tough Lives, Rough Justice

Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006. 278pp. €55.00 hb (cloth); €27.50 pb.

Nicola Carr,

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Trinity College Dublin.

This publication aims to explore the operation of aspects of the Irish youth justice system through the lens of human rights standards; these include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), of which Ireland is a signatory, and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which has been incorporated into Irish law. In addition to these core conventions, there are a number of non-binding United Nations guidelines with specific relevance to young people in conflict with the law, which Kilkelly uses in her analysis of the system of youth justice in Ireland.

The question, in fact, of whether Ireland has a youth justice 'system' (if one takes the term to mean a coordinated, coherent framework, with established principles) is a moot one. In the chapter dealing with the Children Act 2001, the first major piece of legislation in this area since 1908, Kilkelly shows that there has been a lack of coordination, leadership and effective management of this aspect of the Irish criminal justice system. Authors elsewhere have sought to explore why this has been the case. McCullagh (1992) has attributed the situation to a 'failure of reform', while Raftery and O'Sullivan (1999) highlight the institutional template which historically dominated the

response towards young people in conflict with the law and the pivotal role of the Catholic Church in the operation of this system.

Kilkelly charts events leading up to the Children Act 2001 from 1970, the year of the publication of the Kennedy Report, which recommended a significant overhaul of the Industrial and Reformatory School system. While the author presents important information on the failure to fully implement the Children Act 2001 and the subsequent reforms, the preceding analysis is quite brief and does not outline key elements of the historical context in which the recommendations of the Kennedy Report were made. While this publication does not purport to undertake a historical analysis, a more thorough perspective is important in any attempt to understand the present configuration of youth justice services, particularly in regard to situating the discussion of the rights of children in conflict with the law.

The first section of the book thus deals with a brief setting of the context and in reviewing of some of the research and information available on youth justice in Ireland, Kilkelly identifies information shortfalls and data deficits which hamper a thorough interrogation of this area. Based on a review of the available Garda figures and various studies in this area, Kilkelly attempts to analyse trends in youth crime. While she notes some of the shortfalls in the Garda statistics, most notably the categories into which offences are recorded, she does not acknowledge any of the other inherent and thornier problems in the use of official crime statistics, for example the manner in which policing operates (see for example Bottomley and Pease, 1986; Maguire, 2002). Given the fact that in a later section of this book important questions are raised regarding aspects of discretion in policing and issues concerning the transparency of the Garda-operated Juvenile Diversion Programme, the use of any such statistics in this context require a more thorough 'health warning'.

The more substantial part of this publication deals with the operation of various aspects of the youth justice system, including chapters on the Juvenile Diversion Programme, the Courts and sentencing practices, the detention of young people and the relationship between young people and the Gardaí. The chapter on 'Diversion from the Criminal Justice System' makes some important points with regard to the diversion programme, including its uneven national resourcing, with significant differences in the numbers of Gardaí dedicated to the scheme across the country. In addition, concerns are raised regarding aspects of its operation, relating for example to the transparency in the decision making process of admissions onto the scheme. Kilkelly indicates that there is no check on the powers of the Director of the Diversion Programme, who ultimately decides on a young person's suitability for diversion and thereby whether they avoid prosecution. These factors she argues are significant in light of '... allegations of unequal treatment frequently levelled at diversion schemes' (p.75). Furthermore, she raises the concern of 'cherry-picking', in other words the suggestion that the success rate of the scheme, measured on recidivism levels, may be 'artificially high' on the basis of the young people selected for the programme. Given the fact that, as Kilkelly asserts, the system lacks transparency, the concerns named in this chapter cannot be substantiated; but their naming is a useful exercise and opens up further avenues of possible research.

A further significant point made in this context relates to delays in admission onto the scheme, with large backlogs in the cases with decisions pending. The issue of the timeliness of interventions and the length of delays, at all stages of the criminal justice

process, is a consistent theme throughout the text. However, having raised all of these issues as concerns, the author states in her conclusion to the chapter that: 'The Diversion Programme, in particular, is one of the most well-managed and coherent parts of the Irish youth justice system and its success rate in preventing re-offending by children and young people is impressive' (p.94). She then proceeds to summarise the negative aspects previously raised. The contradictions in this analysis are apparent.

The information in the chapter on 'Young People Before the Courts' is based largely on two recent studies conducted in the Children Court: McPhillips' (2005) study on the Dublin Children Court and Kilkelly's (2005) own 'rights audit' of the Children Courts in Limerick, Cork and Waterford. The fact that this information is based on primary research that the author has undertaken in this area aids the analysis and adds a greater depth to this chapter. Some of the points raised concern the ability of young people to understand the proceedings in court and the physical environment in which proceedings are heard.

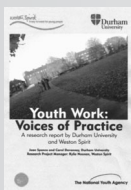
The chapters in this book dealing with other stages of the criminal justice system are largely based on documentary analysis. In the section on 'Young People and An Garda Síochána', the author highlights significant concerns regarding the treatment of young people in Garda custody. The information here is primarily based on newspaper reporting of these cases. In the chapter on 'Young People in Detention', the analysis of the operation of the Children Detention Schools is primarily based on Department of Education Inspection Reports and information from the websites of the detention schools. While this is one approach to conducting an analysis of the rights compliance of these facilities, the information presented in this section would have benefited from more in-depth research of an area in which, as the author asserts, the author asserts, 'little is known' (p.194). While recognising the constraints of access and research resources, this section would have particularly benefited from interviews with young people who have experienced these interventions.

The information presented on St Patrick's Institution, where young offenders between the ages of 16 and 18 are detained, is derived from the Reports of the Inspector of Prisons, and presents a stark view of conditions in this institution, containing the observation: 'St Patrick's is a disaster, or at least one waiting to happen, as it is only in the future that the true neglect of the young people who spend time there will be realised' (p.233). Given her overall positive assessment of the compliance of the Children Detention Schools with international standards, the author is concerned that the move of the schools to the Department of Justice (which operates St Patrick's Institution) may threaten the ethos of these facilities. However, the potential of the newly formed Youth Justice Service to bring greater coherency and strategic direction to the system is viewed by the author as a potentially positive step.

It has been noted elsewhere (O'Sullivan 1998) that much of the research on youth offending in Ireland has tended towards descriptive studies of young people who have been 'processed' through the criminal justice system. There has been very little primary research conducted on the actual operation of the system and the 'pathways' of young people's journey through it. While this publication does not present new research, it gathers information on various aspects of the system and as such presents an overview of some of the concerns in this area at a point in time where there are significant changes proposed. It also highlights questions for future research in what has been a neglected area.

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Jean Spence and Carol Devanney

Youth Work: Voices of Practice – A Research Report by Durham University and Weston Spirit

(Research Project Manager Kylie Noonan)

Leicester: National Youth Agency, 2007. 159 pp. STG£8.50

Diarmuid Kearney

Chief Executive Officer,
Youth Work Ireland.

This publication aims to explore the meaning and value of youth work, locate it in the contemporary conditions of the UK through documented research, and comment on a range of themes. The first theme focuses on those often unpredictable aspects of practice which do not readily correspond with policy, such as relationship, dialogue, time and space. The second theme considers the 'narrative of everyday practice' which takes place between young people and youth workers. A further theme focuses on exclusion, exploring the range of causes and the impact of interpreting the social exclusion agenda. The final theme pays attention to the tensions evident in the mechanisms of accountability for the practitioner. These themes create a focus for the main sections of the report and provide a constant thread of cohesion throughout the publication.

Beginning with an examination of the research context, background and themes *Youth Work: Voices of Practice* provides an extraordinarily concise and insightful overview of the contemporary youth work environment in the UK, exploring the tensions and

dilemmas faced by youth workers in their efforts to reconcile an understanding of the purpose and process of their work with the demands of a public policy environment seemingly unrefined in its understanding of youth work.

The research method and issues are set out clearly, demonstrating an acute awareness of the youth work environment and its complexities and allowing for the recording of a very real picture of youth work as delivered and experienced in a diverse range of projects across the UK. Research of youth work by youth workers presents inherent challenges, and these are addressed in the research design. Nonetheless, there are doubtless those who will question whether such insight and comprehension of the complex youth work environment, coupled with a perspective so clearly committed to youth work, are compatible with a fully objective view.

Chapters three to ten of this publication create a vivid picture of youth work in practice. Issues such as unpredictability, communication, performance, facilities, programme and accountability are all presented comprehensively, illuminated through direct quotes from research participants and subjected to rigorous analysis. In the case of everyday practice the application of values and the '*conceptual cohesion in the language of informal education*' moves us towards a clear definition of the youth work process. It is suggested that at worst youth work projects provide a social service but where most effective they can engage with young people who refuse other institutional participation. Youth work can also maximise the benefits of other more structured approaches. Youth work is described as transitional, beginning with informal approaches which are person-centred and relational, moving to planned, structured interventions which can be issue or problem-centred. This approach is seen as being in conflict with policy priorities which are inherently problem-centred and which underestimate the importance of the informal for youth work. However, there is a clear acknowledgement that youth work is not always appropriate for all young people and this is seen as important in the context of partnership working, as is an understanding of the interface between youth work and more dominant institutions such as family, school and police.

The centrality of communication in a process which is essentially relational is significantly reinforced while it is accepted that this can often be 'masked' by an apparent preoccupation with activities, programmes and outcomes. Communication is described as a two-way process with 'listening' identified as an essential tool for the youth worker in dialogic and present-orientated engagement with young people. The non-linear and rapidly adjusting conversations which take place in the structured and un-structured situation are seen as insensitive to predetermined outcomes and evaluation within specific timeframes. External communication is also addressed both in terms of how youth workers have a tendency to 'play to the audience' rather than articulate the realities of their work in an environment where few external agency representatives have any real understanding of the youth work process. Most interestingly, the publication visits the variance in young people's ability to articulate the benefits of their involvement in youth work and its impact on outcomes and their measurement.

In relation to social exclusion, *Youth Work: Voices of Practice* is strong on the importance of centering the young person rather than the problem and stresses how important this is to establishing the voluntary commitment of young people. Similarly,

it is proposed that a focus on deficit rather than positive identities of young people, with programme goals created externally rather than with the involvement of young people themselves, predisposes the process to failure. The authors are quick to add, however, that this does not signal a weakness in youth work but rather that the dialogue with young people, rooting the work in the reality of their everyday lives and viewing them positively, is an essential prerequisite to effective practice. It is conceded that in some circumstances success can be achieved on the social exclusion agenda but this is in specialised situations and '*... depends upon the maintainance of the professional informal educational values of youth work within the youth work team*'. However, the authors go on to point out that '*the full potential of generic youth work is being inhibited by the way in which the social exclusion discourse fragments practice into specialisms*'.

The report makes it clear that bureaucracy, accountability and evaluation are subject to some confusion in practice. It is clear that increasing accountability to public policy goals rather than those of young people shifts the balance and with youth workers focusing primarily on practice rather than political influencing there is a poor prospect of redressing this bias. An increased focus on the youth participation agenda is identified as an important action in ensuring prevention of any further erosion of the fundamentals of youth work practice as is a much greater investment in the development of qualitative rather than quantitative measures of success. Caution is also advised that focus on the achievement of agency outcomes could create a bias for working with those young people most likely to achieve those outcomes. It is suggested that fundamental to the development of more appropriate bureaucracy, accountability and evaluation is the development of a more articulate voice for youth work practice in the arenas where decisions are made; and the need for discussion on the nature of professionalism within youth work is stressed.

In conclusion the publication makes reference to the lessons learned in the course of the research and its hope to influence both practice and policy in the future. *Youth Work: Voices of Practice* is an exceptionally well tooled articulation of contemporary issues in youth work which have significant relevance to both the UK and Ireland. It presents both a strong analysis of youth work today and an identification of some key actions for the amelioration of the negative consequences of a problem-centred agenda set by policy makers ignorant of the youth work process.

Youth Studies Ireland

Notes for Contributors

1. Papers submitted for consideration will be sent for anonymous peer review. Manuscripts, which should normally be 4000–6000 words in length, should be sent to:

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For chapters within books: Garat, D. (1997) 'Youth Cultures and Sub-Cultures', in J. Roche and S. Tucker (eds) *Youth in Society*, pp. 143–150. London: Sage/The Open University.
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Inside

Articles

Youth Mentoring in Ireland: Weighing Up the Benefits and Challenges
Bernadine Brady and Pat Dolan

Worldviews Apart? Perceptions of Place among Rural, Farm and Urban Young People in Ireland
Brian McGrath and Saoirse NicGabhainn

Young Rent Supplement Claimants in the Private Rented Sector: An Analysis of Socio-Economic Characteristics and Duration of Claims
Dermot Coates and Michelle Norris

Coming of Age at Last?
Youth Work, the Good Relations Legislation and the Shared Future Policy in Northern Ireland
Derick Wilson

Research Digest

Young People's Views about Recreation and Leisure: Findings from a National Study
Áine de Róiste and Joan Dinneen

Notes on Practice

Involving Young People in Conference Planning: Some Lessons from Practice
Celia Keenaghan and Mary Roche

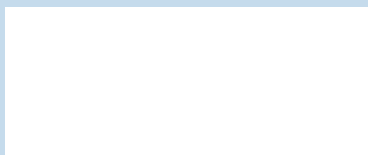
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