

UNIVERSAL YOUTH WORK A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

SUMMARY REPORT EDINBURGH YOUTH WORK
CONSORTIUM AND THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

KEY MESSAGES

Universal youth work has the potential to contribute to a range of important outcomes and achievements for young people, in particular health and wellbeing, educational attainment and employment.

Universal youth work draws on a wide array of traditions and principles that combined can identify and nurture the potential of young people in contemporary society.

The youth work sector need to be more informed about the nature and purpose of their impact through ongoing longitudinal research.

FOREWORD

This original piece of joint research by the University of Edinburgh and the Edinburgh Youth Work Consortium is both timely and challenging.

Its focus on universal youth work comes at a time of genuine concern about the future of youth work in Scotland. It is timely because the new National Youth Work Strategy 2014 - 19 focuses the attention of young people, practitioners, and policy makers on the importance of youth work to our life as a nation and as local communities. The strategy explicitly includes the ambition to 'explore the potential for commissioning research to demonstrate the role and value of youth work'. Timely - because Community Learning & Development is under the spotlight, with local authority CLD strategies being developed, even as local CLD services face severe cutbacks. Timely - because the recent referendum has generated an unprecedented engagement amongst young people with the political process and the reality of democratic participation. Youth work has always dreamt of this.

At the same time, this research makes slightly uneasy reading as it presents a number of challenges to us. How do we continue to celebrate the best of youth work practice in an environment where public services are subject to radical surgery? How can we draw on real evidence about the way we work, rather than what we would like to hear? How can we invest time, energy, and resources to help us better understand the long term impact of youth work? Where does universal youth work sit within the National Youth Work Strategy?

Thanks are due to many people and organisations: to The Robertson Trust, YouthLink Scotland, and Youth Scotland for funding; to the University of Edinburgh for hosting and managing the research; to the Edinburgh Youth Work Consortium for initiating and guiding the work (especially Dona Milne chair of the Research Steering Group); to NHS Lothian and NHS Health Scotland for providing in-kind support; and to Dr Callum McGregor for undertaking the research.

This research is a small (but beautifully shaped) pebble in a large pool. We believe that the ripples will be felt by many, and there's a chance that they create a wave that will shape the way young people experience and benefit from youth work in the years to come.

Simon Jaquet
Chair
Edinburgh Youth Work Consortium
April 2015

SUMMARY

PURPOSE AND FOCUS

Recent research has highlighted the importance of youth work, both internationally and in Europe. This report adds to this growing canon of evidence. As a political and policy ideal, 'universal youth work' is acknowledged for its benefits to those young people who choose to participate and places youth work practice in the context of arguments for universal welfare provision. What emerges from the literature is recognition that all young people have the right to authentic opportunities for personal and social development; universal youth work offers such opportunities.

This extensive review attempts to define universal youth work and place it in the wider context of the theoretical and conceptual literature on youth work, the analysis and discussion are set against the background of the Scottish policy context. The findings point to examples of contemporary youth work practice, with particular emphasis on the purposes and outcomes of universal youth work. This systematic analysis also reveals that organisations providing 'universal' youth work often struggle to secure funding and to be recognised as contributors to positive outcomes for young people. Furthermore, practitioners with a commitment to the long-standing traditions and principles of universal youth work are increasingly under scrutiny to quantify the outcomes of their intervention in terms that are often at odds with the underlying purpose of their approach.

This report is presented with the knowledge and confidence that it can resource further dialogue, research and learning for the broad field of youth work.

Universal youth work usually has two connotations:

1. A political commitment to universal services and welfare provision;
2. Youth work interventions open in principle to all young people and not targeted at specific participants.

It is common to find universal youth work conflated with 'positive' framings of youth whilst in contrast targeted provision is more commonly aligned with 'deficit' perspectives. Thus, universal provision is associated with a holistic approach based on voluntary participation and processes which start with the lived experiences of young people. On the other hand, targeted provision is associated with meeting predetermined outcomes specified in and as policy.

The report addresses the following questions:

1. What theories and concepts shape contemporary youth work?
2. What outcomes arise from what we understand as 'universal' youth work provision?
3. Can we demonstrate the link between universal youth work and the 'national outcomes' (as defined by the imperatives of the Scottish Government)?

SUMMARY

THE CURRENT POLICY CONTEXT

Although youth work in Scotland and the UK operates within distinctive national policy environments, many of the policy trends shaping youth work are observable at the European level and beyond in a broader international context. Aspects of youth work are often incorporated into national youth strategies or action plans. As in other policy contexts, the tension between universal youth work as an open-ended social pedagogical process and the need to develop outcomes seems stark.

The outcomes agenda inevitably goes hand-in-hand with demands to demonstrate value for money and is a particular challenge for universal, as opposed to targeted, youth work. The YouthLink Scotland statement on the nature and purpose of youth work (2005) outlines the purpose of youth work in terms of the following three essential features:

- Young people choose to participate;
- The work must build from where young people are;
- Youth work recognises the young person and the worker as partners in a learning process.

This statement was adopted as an operational definition of youth work for the purposes of this study. Universal youth work is not the only term used in the youth work literature, generic youth work and open youth work are also widely used, often interchangeably. Distinctions between universal youth work, generic youth work and open youth work can be described, but we have treated these terms as compatible for the purposes of locating relevant literature.

METHODS

Since 2013 two important reviews have been produced. One (Dickson et al. 2013)¹ maps the international literature on youth work and includes a section on youth work outcomes. The other (Dunne et al. 2014)² reviews the literature on youth work in Europe and considers the evidence base around a variety of outcomes. Our first step was to take stock of this existing literature and determine the extent to which it could be synthesised in order to answer our research questions.

We decided to examine all relevant literature uncovered by our search strategy from 2004 onwards. Criteria were established as a basis for the inclusion or exclusion of material. Only studies published in English between 2004 and 2014 were considered in this study. Additional criteria are set out in more detail in the full report. For empirical studies addressing the outcomes of universal youth work, YouthLink Scotland's (2005)³ three distinctive features were used as criteria for inclusion or exclusion. This means that, for empirical evaluations of outcomes, non-voluntary interventions and interventions targeted expressly at particular at-risk target groups were excluded. Secondly, pre-defined issue based interventions were excluded. A sample of identified literature was assessed for inclusion or exclusion by members of the steering group, and results compared with the judgements made by the primary researcher. Approximately 1000 texts were identified of which 711 were refereed academic journal articles.

¹ Dickson, K., Vigurs, C.-A. & Newman, M., 2013. Youth work: A systematic map of the research literature, Dublin.

² Dunne, A. et al., 2014. Working with young people: The value of youth work in the European Union, Brussels.

³ YouthLink, 2005 Youth work in Scotland, Edinburgh.

SUMMARY

An analytic framework was developed by 'coding' particular texts and sections of text. Codes can either be part of branched hierarchies or can be 'stand-alone' nodes if they are not obviously related to part of a broader hierarchy of concepts. Variants for this procedure were applied in relation to each of the research questions.

EXISTING YOUTH WORK LITERATURE

The nature and purpose of youth work is historically contested and subject to a variety of definition. Moreover, the stated nature and purpose of youth work differs according to geographical, social, political and economic context.

This gives rise to three key issues:

- Professional identity and solidarity
- Universal youth work as a fundamental right for all young people.
- Evidencing impacts and outcomes

There is a strong argument to be made for historical research that uncovers insights and testimonies of past participants in specific practices. Contemporary conversations around the nature and purpose of youth work are also enriched by being historically contextualised.

BROADER THEMES AND ISSUES

The review of literature uncovered a breadth of understanding of the underlying theoretical concepts and frameworks that inform and shape contemporary practice. Despite embracing a 'structuralist' rhetoric, youth workers are often immured within either 'personalist' ways of working that aim to change individuals, or working to a 'deficit' agenda that superficially espouses learning through participation in local decision making, but provides limited and exclusive or invited participatory spaces in which to practice it.

The language of 'Positive Youth Development', popularised in the USA has become increasingly pervasive. Advocates argue that PYD is compatible with universal youth work, which is in principle open to all young people; that 'young people are conceptualised as resources to be cultivated, not problems to be solved'; that 'PYD programmes are structured' and aim to 'prepare adolescents for productive adulthood'. It is claimed that the core of the PYD process is the development of 'reciprocal relationships' between young people and adults in a range of different contexts and environments.

However, critics of this approach argue that youth work has acted as a critique of liberal individualism emphasising individual capabilities, by emerging from 'ideas of solidarity, be it in terms of social class, religion or nationality/nation-state'. This argument links the popularity of PYD to 'dominant neoliberal views on the relationship between individual and society'

SUMMARY

It is widely argued that universal youth work provision exists on a spectrum moving from open access work with an equally open purpose and curriculum to a pre-determined focus on specific intervention outcomes. That said, it is important to recognise that in reality much provision lies somewhere on a spectrum. Similarly, provision that is universal in principle may in reality target specific groups, whether this targeting is tacit, implicit or otherwise.

The standard critique of universalism in any area (including youth work) is that the rhetoric at best does not match, and at worst obfuscates, the reality of practice. In contrast, from a social justice perspective, a challenge for universal youth work practice is to demonstrate that it is not simply driven by the tacit desire to assimilate so-called risky youth into dominant social norms embodied by more privileged young people, without challenging the legitimacy of those norms.

WHAT COUNTS AS EVIDENCE?

What counts as evidence, and what research needs to be undertaken to fill gaps in the evidence base? The findings presented in this report suggest that there are three ways of looking at this. Different professional roles for the youth worker are associated with different contexts and approaches leading to an emphasis on different kinds of evidence. The framework that emerges is shown in table 1 below.

In the first conception, evidence is subordinated to the overall function of persuasion of power holders, content as we are in the tacit knowledge that good youth work works. The premise of the second conception is that the youth worker is concerned that evidence arises from democratic processes of social learning that relate to the lived experience of young people and give voice to this experience. In the third conception, questions of social justice and less grandiosely, positive outcomes, are the domain of the technical expert.

TABLE 1: UNIVERSAL YOUTH WORK - A SPECTRUM OF EVIDENCE

Rhetorical View Of Young People	Focus Of Practice	Measured Outcomes	Forms Of Evidence	Professional Role	Context Of Measurement	Approach
Positive	Universal	Soft Indicators	Qualitative	Youth Worker as Advocate	The Politics of what works? (Playing the Game).	Pragmatic
				Youth Worker as Informal Educator	Validating experimental learning	Relational
Negative	Targeted	Hard Indicators	Quantitative	Youth Worker as Social Scientist	Techno-rational Justification	Rationalist

SUMMARY

This discussion can be located in the broader debates over professional identity and professionalisation, which consumes a large proportion of the youth work literature. Some equate measurement with acting as an instrument of control and surveillance. Others argue that a shared family of standardised concepts and indicators is necessary for creating the robust scientific evidence base needed to advocate for youth work.

A wider issue perhaps, is what kinds of skills and knowledge do youth workers need to act as effective advocates? This might include literacy in social science methods, would also presumably extend to education and training in areas such as rhetoric, framing, behavioural economics, social psychology, social movement theory and so on, that advocacy workers in other fields (for example environmental communication) are increasingly incorporating into practice.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

‘Unwritten’ historical accounts of universal youth work practice present a potentially rich vein of data. We still simply need to know more about actual universal youth work practice, both from the perspectives of youth workers and adults who once participated in such practices as young people (e.g. Verschelden et al. 2009; Coussee et al. 2010; Baillergeau & Hoijtink 2010; Coussée et al. 2012; Taru et al. 2014).

Particularly with regards to long-term positive outcomes, community history projects represent a promising avenue for research.

There also seems to be very limited evidence in relation to the question of how particular types of provision affect the outcomes on various demographics of young people, suggesting that there is a long way to go to answer the research question: are there particular associations between types of provision and economic, demographic or social factors? If so what are they? What theories and concepts shape contemporary youth work?

Three major thematic groupings emerged from the youth work literature.

These were:

- Difference and inequality
- Professionalisation
- Theories of learning and pedagogy

The strand of the literature addressing difference and inequality accommodates debates on a broad array of topics such as gender, race and ethnicity, legal status, class, sexuality, ability, the role of faith in youth work, and place. This collective material draws attention towards the specific challenges of maintaining a commitment to universalism in differing contexts. Some challenges are evident in relation to how supposedly ‘open’ forms of youth work are seen to merely reinforce gendered, raced or classed social norms.

SUMMARY

The review of literature raised the issue and impact of professionalisation in youth work. Overall, this theme explored two driving questions:

1. Is professionalisation desirable and why?
2. What does it mean to be and act as a professional?

The final thematic strand emerging from the study is theories of learning and pedagogy. The youth work literature draws heavily on experiential learning theory. Youth work is often portrayed as a process of informal or non-formal education and learning characterised by voluntary and open processes. This seemingly foundational principle of youth work has generated an active discussion on the notion of 'curriculum' in youth work posing broader questions such as whether or not there is a place for it and whether it is best understood as product or process?

Studies of universal, open or generic youth work also frequently draw on various theories of critical pedagogy in a fruitful way. Whereas informal and experiential learning need not be normatively oriented, the critical pedagogy literature is expressly concerned with social justice, equality, intercultural learning and has been effectively employed to theorise both the shortcomings and the positive outcomes of being involved in universal provision.

Closely related to literature concerned with critical pedagogy and the topic of outcomes is a growing literature on participatory action research (PAR). This appears to be based on recognition that evaluation (like education and learning) is a political act and aims to empower young people with the skills to identify injustice and advocate and organise collectively to address it. What does literature tell us about the outcomes of universal youth work? Can these outcomes be mapped onto the Scottish National Outcomes?

OUTCOMES FROM UNIVERSAL WORK

There is evidence to suggest that youth work provision has positive outcomes which can be mapped across the spectrum of the Scottish National Outcomes. A general synthesis of the European evidence groups outcomes into the following areas: developing skills and competencies; strengthening networks and social capital; changing behaviours perceived as 'risky'. Furthermore, the specific skills relate to: 'self-efficacy; resilience; communication skills; confidence and 'social' and 'interpersonal skills'.

Assessment of the evidence from Europe in combination with primary research is that universal youth work can have positive outcomes in relation to:

- Educational attainment
- Employability
- Health and well-being

SUMMARY

Overall however, the picture painted is one of a great challenge in relation to the evidence base around outcomes. At a Europe-wide level, 'there is little evaluation data of youth work practice itself, which hampers the identification of the outcomes and the contribution that youth work makes in the lives of young people'. There is an obvious lack of evidence regarding the outcomes of universal youth work in Scotland and the rest of the UK. There is clearly a need for more research in this area at a more general level.

Nevertheless UK researchers have identified a range of positive outcomes from universal youth work. These are entirely consistent with the kinds of claims and aspirations expressed on behalf of the field by YouthLink Scotland. They include development of qualities such as confidence and self-esteem, and capacities such as the ability to take control of and responsibility for one's personal situation.

In addition the evidence points to positive growth in what might be described as the attributes of adults and citizens, for example young people's ability to manage personal and social relationships, their capacity to consider risk and make reasoned decisions, and the development of social awareness and commitment.

Additionally, a number of themes recur in the literature reviewed that suggest particular success factors in universal youth work to support achievement of positive outcomes.

These are:

- Prolonged and stable engagement over time
- Voluntary engagement in processes that begin with lived experience yet provide structured opportunities to problematise and reflect on that lived experience
- Adults and young people building authentic relationships and working as genuine partners in the learning process
- Starting where young people are 'at' by taking their forms of cultural expression seriously.

CONCLUSIONS

This review did find evidence that universal youth work produces positive outcomes and that these resonate with a broader political and policy agenda as evident in the National Outcomes of the Scottish Government. Evidence suggests that universal youth work settings can generate a range of health and wellbeing outcomes, make a contribution to improving formal educational outcomes, and impact on employability as well as providing safe yet challenging spaces for personal and social development and intercultural learning.

The majority of the research reviewed is qualitative case study research or cross sectional research, which is only generalisable in limited ways. There is a lack of quantitative research, in particular a lack of quantitative research guided by theories and insights generated from qualitative longitudinal designs. Examples of oral history research reveal powerful and lasting impacts of participating in youth work decades on.

Participatory Action Research approaches that involve young people and adults as partners in the research as well as the learning process hold promise and ensure that processes remain accountable to young people themselves.

The pressure to evidence outcomes in order to secure funding to maintain or develop services can be overwhelming, especially for the many small youth work agencies. The findings presented in this report go some way to creating a common understanding of the potential that universal youth work holds. We hope that the evidence presented here can be used as the starting point for a more local, contextualised account of universal youth work practice and the benefits it provides for the young people who participate and the community in which it was located.

This review has also illuminated the many gaps in the peer reviewed evidence base, and the need for the wider engagement of young people and youth workers in contributing to such work in the future.

We believe that the next stage of development has to be a wider engagement in such investigations. Just as youth work seeks to support young people's capacities and confidence, we should be driving forward the youth work sector's confidence in itself and capacity for constructive self-examination.

This next stage has to involve engaging the wider youth work sector, including young people themselves, in identifying the questions that are important for youth work and for young people, and working together to collectively contribute the evidence base for universal youth work.

UNIVERSAL YOUTH WORK: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE:
SUMMARY REPORT PUBLISHED JOINTLY BY EDINBURGH YOUTH
WORK CONSORTIUM AND UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
APRIL 2015

