

What can youth work offer the learner?

Having been on maternity leave now for five months, I found myself last week, a rare opportunity to sit and read the European Commission report 'The contribution of youth work to address the challenges young people are facing, in particular the transition from education to employment'. It was a real pleasure to read the findings, a piece of professional guidance that evidenced clearly the invaluable role that youth work can play within the formal education sector and beyond.

Before the nappies, dummies, washing and sleepless nights, I had, for many years, been managing a variety of youth work projects, within a formal education environment. I have consistently come up against the same line of questioning, from other youth professional colleagues and partners, 'What is it that youth work can offer formal education that it can't already offer it self?'

I have sat round many different tables, in many different rooms, accompanied by a variety of youth sector colleagues and defended the place of youth work. I have actively promoted the integral role that youth work plays, in supporting young people to achieve their potential, both within the labour market and beyond. Through effective partnership working, brokerage and empowering service delivery, youth work can help the young person access avenues that previously they never knew existed.

The European Commission report has taken the opportunity to use some interesting case studies to explore and evidence, the real potential of youth work within this arena.

Specifically within formal education settings, I have lost count the number of times I have been asked, 'We have teaching assistants already, what difference can a youth worker make?' I set about explaining youth work; the key principles and practices of youth work, the voluntary relationships, the empowering decision making processes, the mutual respect shown. These are so appealing to young people, especially 'those from disadvantaged backgrounds'. I then explore with colleagues where they see their own role differing and where they see youth work could make a positive impact. Inevitably, we always agree, youth work is invaluable.

Youth work within this arena has proven it's weight in gold, in passing on opportunity to learn within everyday routine, this informal education is priceless when preparing young people with the analytical skills they need to succeed in society. Youth work can take what is taught in the classroom environment and turn it into a life skills curriculum that prepares young people for the labour market and higher education.

It would be naive to think that it is only our other youth sector colleagues who question the role of youth work within education. I have had many a long discussion with fellow youth workers regarding the identity of our profession and how, when working so closely in partnership with our formal education partners, we can maintain our key principles and core ethics. It is, in my opinion an achievable task, stay true to your youth work principles and you will never fail to ensure youth work is what you deliver, simple. Targeted youth work is appropriate in this environment. We are living in a world that is unsure of the worth of youth work and we are therefore responsible for ensuring we can evidence, with facts and figures,

that what we deliver is essential, integral and effective. Yes, we are yet again back in this revolving door, having the same discussion!

Youth work can take what is learnt and evolve this into something that is owned and appreciated. Youth work can show young people that they are at the centre of the learning process and that what they own, they can shape and apply. Youth work can build a better, brighter future for young people by taking a learner and making an active community member. All this in addition to the recognised outcomes associated with the formal learning process.

The beauty of youth work is its ability to impart learning. This learning happens primarily without having the young person recognising the learning that has taken place. A colleague of mine, was taken aside by a teacher and informed that they had spoken with a young person and asked them what it is they do with the youth workers and what is it that they learn. The young person replied that mainly they 'play games in their sessions with the youth workers'. The teacher saw this as completely inappropriate and demanded to know what went on in the youth work sessions. The youth worker responded 'if (he) has fed that back, then that is brilliant. He has not recognised the learning outcomes beyond the methodologies, he has seen the fun and engaged fully. What he has not recognised yet is the fact that he has now attended ten sessions in a row without being excluded, he has also in these sessions developed basic numeracy skills and a range of communication skills. He has also proven to himself that he has the ability to start and finish a project, which he has never done before. In addition he has developed his team working skills, addressed his time keeping issues, his social skills, his ability to understand his role in his community and much more. All by engaging in the games'.

Let's show the world what youth work can offer, how it can offer it and why they should back it. Let's get employers on board, get them to say first hand how the softer skills are so integral in making a team member effective within their work environment. Lets get the young people to stand up and share their positive experiences of how the informal helped to prepare them for the world of work. Let's continue making noise and a spectacle of ourselves. We are and we should be, proud of what youth work is and proud of what youth workers can offer that others don't.

Youth work works.

Esther Horner-Aird
Kinetic Youth