



Youth Work in Schools. An evidence review from across the UK

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Youth Work in Schools

An evidence review from across the UK

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Overview

Youth work offers personal and social development, informal education activities, agency and decision-making for young people. Alongside more traditional forms of open access and centre-based youth work, the informal education approach of youth workers is a growing resource being utilised by schools. This seems an obvious synergy with schools supporting the entire cohorts of young people that youth work aims to reach. Recent research has demonstrated the positive impacts of youth workers in schools on attendance and behaviour. Within the HE sector, an increasing number of youth work graduates are being employed by formal education institutions and alternative education organisations. However, as this review of evidence from across four UK countries will show, there is not one uniform way in which youth workers become an integral part of everyday schools life. This policy briefing shares evidence of a range of good practices for implementing youth work in schools, alongside research conducted by our Universities, within this area. Together we show that this implementation varies depending upon the positioning of youth work within national-level policy.

Our recommendations to support leading practice of youth work in schools include:

- Research across the four Nations that scopes the comparative context and resourcing landscape in which youth work is implemented in schools.
- Seek the views and experiences of both professionals and young people involved in youth work in schools.
- Investigate ‘what works’ and what lessons can be learnt from successful partnerships and collaborative approaches.
- Scope the development and learning opportunities for teachers, school leaders and youth workers and develop CPD resources to meet these needs.
- Inform organisational policy change by sharing recommendations for collaborative practice, with both Senior Leaders and policy-makers.

The youth work landscape in England

Dr Frances Howard, Nottingham Trent University

Youth services funding in England currently is through patchwork provision of local authority, third sector and religious institutions. Previous government funding has tended to support capital resources (Youth Investment Fund 2022/23 to 2024/25, around £288m), rather than frontline provision of the youth work workforce. Cuts to youth services have been well documented nationally, with a 69% reduction, resulting in the loss of 4,500 youth work jobs and 750 youth centre closures since 2010 (LGA, 2022). Within education, as a statutory provision, the Department for Education has set as total school revenue funding as £57.7 billion for 2023-24, rising to £59.6 billion for 2024-25. However, those working in mainstream education argue this is not enough to deliver a 'whole school' approach that supports every young person.

The National Youth Agency (NYA) through its Youth Work with Schools Review (2022-23) highlights the 'complement' for formal education. The call for evidence and survey of schools and youth work organisations demonstrated that youth work can support schools on site or via outreach by engaging or re-engaging young people in learning and school, reducing exclusions and persistent absenteeism, and improving their wider wellbeing. There were also affordances for youth work in delivering enrichment activities that support a range of skills development, progression and community engagement.

We know that schools currently struggle to balance teaching and mentoring. This tells us the utilisation of youth workers is an imperative. Following the release of the findings in the Timpson Review (Timpson 2019), we can see the need for services and multi-agency approach is needed. The Department for Education (DofE) Attendance Mentors pilot (March 2024) provided evidence of youth work in schools improving attendance. Furthermore, the DfE Revised Behaviour in Schools Guidance and Suspension and Permanent Exclusion Guidance (2022) argues for the value of Mentors in Schools, and the importance of enabling young people to build relationships with 'different adults', such as youth workers.

We know that youth work reaches the most vulnerable young people. Findings from the DofE Children's Homes Workforce Census (March 2024) highlighted the importance of youth work as an outside care centre for improving young people's health and wellbeing.

Benefits were cited for connecting young people with their communities, enabling them to develop a strong sense of belonging and contribute actively to society and championing young people in care to have a voice in decisions which affect their lives. Youth work has also been demonstrated to support vulnerable young people to make a successful transition to adulthood through offering opportunities to take part in a wide range of activities through which young people build skills for life and work (Youth provision and life outcomes: a study of the local impact of youth clubs, February 24 DCMS).

Youth workers are in a strong position to work schools. This is because at its core youth work practice is about developing and maintaining good relationships as in principle the relationship is based upon both equality and respect for one another. It is at the central core of the nature of youth work. This tells us that if youth workers were to be active within in schools alone or in partnership with teachers it allows relationships to be maintained. The NYA Youth Work Practice Standards recommend using youth workers and youth work Practice in schools. Qualified youth workers and youth support workers have specific training to support young people in this way through the practice of youth work. Schools and other educational settings should aim to employ or to encourage employment of individuals with youth work skills and qualifications.

Supporting research conducted by Nottingham Trent University

Educating Informal Educators publication by Professor Pam Alldred and Dr Frances Howard

A Special Issue of 13 published articles that captures the particular pedagogies of youth and community work courses that sustain distinctive informal education practice. This series of articles celebrate the distinctive contribution of youth and community work pedagogues to the development of informal education pedagogies, covering themes of collaboration, creativity, student-lecturer dialogue, anti-oppressive practice, pedagogy of discomfort, critical and social pedagogy, and critical race theory as theoretical perspectives.

<https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/12/5/301>

Policy that supports youth work in schools in Wales

Julia Swallow Edwards, Cardiff Metropolitan University

The policy landscape in Wales that underpins Youth and Community Work currently is complex. The legislative basis for 'youth support services' is provided through the Education Act 1966 and the Learning and Skills Act 2000. Influenced by the Extending Entitlement Strategy (Dept for Education and Training, 2002, reviewed 2018), this encompasses supporting young people to "participate effectively in education and training" (Rose, 2020).

Welsh Government's Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF), published in 2013 and updated in 2022, places the onus on Welsh Local Authorities to 'identify and track' young people. Youth workers take on the role of 'Lead Workers...targeting those most at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)' (Department for Education and Skills - DES, 2013, p.25), the only respite being the Lead Worker title is so ambiguous, it's open to interpretation.

Following recommendations in the Donaldson report (2015), legislative changes to formal education in Wales commenced in 2022. Wales New Curriculum (WNC) aims to enable 'schools to develop their own curriculum ... and assessment' (Education Wales (EW), 2020). Based on 6 key areas, the purpose of formal education is described as developing lifelong learners, who are enterprising and creative, ethically informed, healthy, and confident (EW, 2020). With the current Youth Work Strategy for Wales (Welsh Government, 2019, pp. 11-14) stating young people should have opportunities to grow, have a voice, develop autonomy, and build skills, the similarities with youth work are transparent. Furthermore, the Ministerial Forward contained in the Youth Work Strategy for Wales (Welsh Government, 2019) refers to the integration of formal (school) and non-formal education and informal learning (youth work).

With Estyn (Education and training Inspectorate in Wales since 1992) due to roll out a standalone youth work inspection framework from Autumn 2024, in line with the Youth and Community Work Education and Training (Inspection) (Wales) Regulations 2006 (Estyn, 2024), there is a suggested convergence between youth work and formal education on the horizon.

Supporting research conducted by Cardiff Metropolitan University

'It's where we send the naughty kids': A comparative analysis of youth worker and teacher perceptions of each other, in five secondary school settings in South Wales

The aim of the study was to undertake a small scale comparative analysis of youth worker and teacher perceptions of each other, in five secondary school settings in South Wales. The objectives of the research were to gain an insight into, and better understand the views and lived experiences of both teachers and youth workers practicing in state run secondary school provisions, in order to improve project effectiveness and contextualise youth worker contributions within formal education settings.

The study was designed to undertake 'Practitioner Research', adopting a constructivist paradigm. Qualitative methods were used, in order to focus on and articulate the thoughts, feelings, attitudes and perceptions of the research participants. Semi-structured interviews were favoured, as these enabled research participants to influence the depth, pace and direction of the interviews, in a nuanced and responsive way.

Three key themes emerged from the research. Both teachers and youth workers recognised the importance of funding security, to provide consistency and continuity of delivery. However, perceptions of youth work contributions to Wales New Curriculum (WNC) by the two professions were markedly different. Whilst youth work participants recognised their role as totally aligned to WNC, teachers had failed to consider the role of youth workers, positioning the profession as something separate to education.

The research highlighted how teachers' perceptions and understanding of young people, influenced their views and engagement with youth work in schools. Despite teacher respondents stating they value youth works contribution to schools, it was disappointing that the research highlighted ongoing barriers to effective partnership working. The failure of teachers to acknowledge youth workers based in schools as equal partners, rather than a supplementary external service, has resulted in ongoing issues with information sharing, timely access to young people and the provision of a safe, appropriate place for youth workers to practice.

<https://www.youthworkwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/MA-JSE-2021.pdf>

The Northern Ireland context for youth work

Dr Mark McFeeters, University of Ulster

Youth work is a powerful community-based asset and through a non-formal educational approach, that removes barriers, giving socially excluded children and young people a safe place to go, someone to talk to who can quietly understand and assess their needs (EANI, 2022). The Northern Ireland context is distinctive in terms of the legislative protection afforded to the statutory provision of youth work via the Education and Libraries Order (1986). Article 37 (1986: 22) is entitled “Provision of facilities for recreational, social, physical, cultural and youth service activities”. This states that “Each board shall secure the provision of adequate facilities for recreational, social, physical, cultural and youth service activities and for services ancillary to education” (1986: 22). Consequently, A Policy for the Youth Service, Northern Ireland (known as the Blue Book) was launched in 1987, this provided two key directives – first, the policy itself, and then a curriculum for youth work. These would later be separated into two separate documents respectively in A Model for Effective Practice (1997 and 2003). This first policy for youth work in N. Ireland helped to drive funding priorities whilst the curriculum worked to drive the context of youth work programmes and provision.

Therefore, it is within this legislative context that youth work in N. Ireland is placed. The youth sector in N. Ireland consists of two parts; the Education Authority (EA) who are the statutory provider of youth services and, the community voluntary sector comprised of a diverse and eclectic mix of non-governmental and charitable organisations. The strength of the youth service in N. Ireland has been when there is genuine and meaningful partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors. Whilst there is a wide range of funding bodies in N. Ireland supporting organisations to work with children and young people, both the statutory and voluntary sector organisations work under the policy directives of Department of Education (DE) and avail of various levels of funding through the EA. Recent changes in the EA’s funding arrangements have sought to provide project development and strategic funding in alignment with the objectives of DE, thus reiterating youth work as an educational process. McCready and Loudon (2017) remind us that as the landscape of youth work policy evolves, youth work continues to endure and flourish. Indeed, as McCready and Loudon (2017) Hammond and McArdle (2024) purport, youth work must remain focussed on four things: relationship building, conversation and dialogue, participation and experiential learning.

The youth service in Northern Ireland comprises a broad array of provision which spans provision for those aged 4 to 25 years. Underpinned by clear philosophical and ideological concepts, youth work in N. Ireland, sits under the auspices of the DE and uphold three core principles that guide youth work in N. Ireland; “a commitment to preparing young people for participation, the promotion of acceptance and understanding of others and testing values and beliefs” (DE, 2003: 11). In Northern Ireland, DE sets the policy for youth work. The EA are the implementing body for youth work policy through Priorities for Youth (DE, 2013) under DE. Priorities for Youth – Improving Young People’s Lives through Youth Work (DE, 2013), whilst currently under review at the time of writing, remains the current policy framework for the delivery of youth work in Northern Ireland. The DE presents a vision that every child or young person achieving their full potential at each stage of their development. Indeed, Priorities for Youth signalled “a realignment of youth work policy with the strategic priorities for education” (DE, 2003). This includes effective youth provision that will contribute to raising standards in education. This policy effectively promoted the directive that youth work was seen as a vehicle to address the gaps in education and issues around underachievement, resulting in youth work becoming a functional support of achievement in formal education, rather than providing a uniquely different educational process.

As a province emerging from a period of prolonged violence, any discussion around society and culture must be understood within the context of conflict (Harland and Morgan, 2010). Post conflict Northern Ireland remains a divided society and the legacy of the conflict remains in communities that vulnerable children and young people inhabit. Many young people continue to experience tension at a community level and remain susceptible to the influence of paramilitarism and organised crime (EANI, 2024). Such communities continue to see some of the highest rates of mental health issues, child poverty and some of the lowest levels of education attainment (NICCY, 2018). Thus, providing support to young people at the forefront of community and sectarian violence, has been a major aspect of youth work practice in N. Ireland (Harland et al, 2005).

Supporting research conducted by Ulster University

The Taking Boys Seriously project

This project, whilst maintaining a distinct focus on young men, has opened opportunities for discussion around the nature of youth work and informal education approaches with educationalists in N. Ireland. Highlighting the influence of academic selection at aged 11, the segregated educational structure of N. Ireland as a legacy of the conflict and the favour given to those

families with tradition of academic success and financial strength works to reproduce educational privilege and disadvantage (Hamilton et al, 2024). These issues sit as part of a broader discussion around the role of youth work in schools. The Department of Education oversee the provision of EOTAS (Education other than at school) which sees a more flexible approach to curriculum for those who have disengaged from or have been excluded from school as well as the statutory and voluntary youth service. Thus, it is clear there is work to do around a clear policy directive which brings the processes of youth work as informal education alongside the formal educational approaches of educationalist. Whilst there are many youth workers building relationships and local partnerships with schools, these tend to be sporadic and based on individual relationship and opportunity, rather than a strategic vision for a collaborative approach in this area. Furthermore, whereas there are apparent strengths of bringing the formal and the informal together, indications from the work of Taking Boys Seriously, suggest that forming genuine and meaningful partnerships between schools and the youth sector is a key consideration in view of the future of how youth work and schools can work together.

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/social-work-and-social-policy/research-themes/taking-boys-seriously>

Youth work in schools, the picture from Scotland

Professor Sinead Gormally, University of Glasgow

Youth work within Scotland is a vibrant, innovative field of practice. Youth work falls under the broader umbrella of Community, Learning and Development (CLD) in Scotland. CLD has three domains of practice- adult education, community development and youth work. CLD approves youth work courses at a range of levels. Within Scotland there are introductory courses, modern apprenticeships, degree programmes and postgraduate qualifications. Within the Scottish context there is a strong recognition that youth work involves working alongside young people to facilitate their development. It also acknowledges the variety of settings that youth work can take place in, including formal education institutions. CLD notes, “Youth work may take place in a variety of settings including community venues, uniformed groups, schools, youth cafés and on the street, whilst using numerous approaches such as outdoor pursuits, drama workshops, health initiatives, peer education and single issue and single gender work to engage with young people. Youth work may be carried out by volunteers or via paid employment in the sector” (CLD, 2019, online).

In a policy context, CLD in Scotland sits within the remit of the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans. This Minister supports the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. This clearly places youth work within the educational remit of Government in Scotland.

The Scottish Government had a National Youth Work Strategy (2014-19) (Education Scotland, 2014) and identified five ambitions-

1. Ensure Scotland is the best place to be young and grow up
2. Put young people at the heart of policy
3. Recognise the value of youth work
4. Building workforce capacity
5. Measure the impact of youth work.

The updated Youth Work Strategy (2023-2028) is currently with the Scottish Government awaiting publication (Youth Link, online).

The Scottish Government have recognised the value of youth work in

supporting young people in closing the educational attainment gap. In 2019 the Scottish Government funded YouthLink Scotland with £324,000 specifically to deliver a youth work and Schools Partnership Programme in order to help close the attainment gap (Scottish Government, 2019). To this end, YouthLink Scotland have been actively helping to deliver the Curriculum for Excellence in an attempt to tackle the poverty related attainment gap through funding youth work in schools. YouthLink Scotland have produced a range of helpful documents from this work including Good Practice Guides, Practice Development opportunities, Resources to support youth work and school partnership evaluation, detailing the impact of this work and resources to support assist headteachers in using Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) to fund youth work and school partnerships, evidencing the improved educational outcomes for young people through this work (YouthLink, Online).

The Youth Work Education Recovery Fund (Scottish Government, 2020) provided £3 million for services which engaged young people from vulnerable communities with their education, social and emotional development post-covid. The work which focussed on supporting “...effective partnership working between youth work organisations (statutory and third sector) and formal education, found that from this fund:

- 82% of participating young people developed their skills
- 79% of participating young people experienced improved physical health and wellbeing
- 78% of participating young people overcame barriers to learning
- 61% of young people were more engaged in learning (YouthLink, Online).

Supporting research conducted by the University of Glasgow

Professor Sinead Gormally and Dr Helen Martin

Whilst Youth work within formal educational institutions has a long history in Scotland, the Community Development team at the University of Glasgow have recently embarked on a project evaluating the experiences of formal educators, teachers, educational leaders, community development and youth workers who have worked in partnership through professional practice placements. The study seeks to establish the experiences, challenges and impact of having youth and community practitioners working in schools. It aims to produce a range of recommendations for school leaders, policy makers, youth workers and community development practitioners on partnership working and rearticulating the focus of education. It also hopes to gain the views of young people who have worked with these informal educators to get insight into benefits, challenges or ways it could improve. It

will highlight the differing approaches adopted to engagement in informal and formal education and will also seek to inform our professional practice guidelines and future teaching inputs. Initial findings indicate that whilst all stakeholders believe that this work is crucial and brings huge benefits to young people, there are also distinct, and at times competing, ways of working. This can be from the engagement methodologies, views on behavioural management, lack of parity of professional esteem and differentiation in outcomes, priorities and resourcing. For some the experience was extremely positive whilst for others the professional differences caused practical problems. Nevertheless, the need for joined up, partnership working in the interests of young people was foregrounded and further analysis and dissemination will hopefully contribute to future, positive holistic practices.

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