Possible Reasons of Difficulties in Defining Youth Work: Analytical Essay

Definitions for youth work are numerous (see for example DENI 2013, NYA, 2020, Youth Work Act 2001) and it can mean different things to different people. When exploring the possibility of defining youth work, Davies explains that youth work has been “thought up and practiced by human beings – in all their diversity” (2010 p. 1). This diversity that exists has not only been recognised in youth work but it has also been acknowledged as an underpinning value in The Model for effective practice (DENI, 2003), it encourages respect for and expression of the range of identities represented. To give illustration, diversity can be seen by examining the structure of the Youth Service in Northern Ireland where there are nearly one thousand six hundred registered youth service providers made up of a wide range of statutory and voluntary service including faith and community based and uniformed organisations (DENI, 2020).

This assignment will explore possible reasons why youth work is not easily defined. In acknowledging that there are various similar key features of youth work, the feature of voluntary participation will be explored. The assignment will challenge the principle by looking at youth work in schools. Finally, it will investigate whether youth work can still be achieved if the voluntary participation principle is taken away from the young people.

Agreeing with Smith (2013) that the meaning of the term youth work is difficult to pin down, Metz offers an insight as to why this might be true. She identifies that young people and the wider society are both in continuous development. These developments, along with trends associated with young people, negotiated through government policy, result in changing assignments for youth work (2017, p. 5). Consequently, youth work has to develop new methods constantly and has little time to substantiate existing methods (Cited from Metz 2011a in Metz 2017). Unfortunately, due to the lack of precise youth work language, it is implied that youth workers have an apparent willingness to take on every task related to young people and that youth work can be used to support or used as an aspect of other services (Spence, 2004, p. 7).

Despite the diversity and the lack of precise practice language, it is possible to identify some fundamental purposes, values and key dimensions that have been presented to differing degrees since the early 1900s (Smith 2001). Examples include five key elements that define Youth Work Jeffs and Smith (2010), key defining features of youth work (Davies and Merton 2009), five marks that identify professional youth work Metz (2017) and the most influential of the distinctive forms of the practice (Davies 2010). One aspect present in all the above is that of voluntary participation and engagement in youth work; young people choose to be involved. In a Northern Irish context this is highlighted as one of the principles that underpins all aspects of youth work supported by Department of Education in Priorities for Youth (DENI, 2013, p. 13).

“Participation in youth services is voluntary and should enable young people to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to tackle the issues that are important to them.”

The work of Jeffs supports the voluntary principle stating that it “delineates youth work from almost all other services provided for this age group.” (Jeffs, 2001 cited in Jeffs and Smith 2010, p 1). Davies concurs stating that it is perhaps the defining feature of youth work (2005, p.

8). With their emphasis on voluntary participation and a person-centered approach, youth workers are in a strong position to initially come in contact with, engage young people and respond to issues that are important to them (Sapin, 2013). Davies (2005, p. 8) further highlights that the voluntary principle ensures that young people have and keep a degree of power because of a role and a status which are structured into their relationship with the adult, it is one that is advantageous the young person. The young person is free to leave at any time thus leaving the youth worker powerless to have any influence on them. In subsequent reports (Davies 2015, Davies and Merton 2009) of Davies original manifesto, interpretations of voluntary participation and engagement have been a focus of some healthy debate (Ord 2009) and challenged in practice.

Wood et al. (2014, p. 58) noted that more and more youth work now takes place in non-youth work organisations therefore bringing in the concept of non-voluntary participation. This is as a result of funding and target driven youth work (Coburn and Gormally, 2019, p. 8). Morgan (2009) noted that youth workers moving into another setting need to use the language understood by that organisation and that for a school setting this means developing measurable outcomes. However, many of the youth work outcomes, such as increasing confidence, relationship building, testing values and beliefs are perceived as ‘soft’ outcomes, which are difficult to measure (p. 50-51). For funders and policy makers to understand and see that there is an effective use of time and resources, there is a greater emphasis on more evidence specific outcomes (Morgan 2009, p. 55).

An example of target driven youth work is school based youth work. When investigating youth work in schools Morgan et al. (2008, p.151) findings acknowledge that youth workers who work in schools are doing so because of the influence of external forces such as funding. Controversially, they go on to suggest that there is an advantage that accessibility into ready-made audiences in schools offers. Sapin (2013, p. 27) agrees in stating that by having youth work in schools it is going to where the young people are, providing them with easy access to a youth worker.

One example in Northern Ireland where youth work takes place in schools, thus questioning the voluntary participation principle, is the schools based ‘Learning Together Programme’ (LTP). It was introduced in September 2014 through the Education Authority (EA) Youth Service School Based Youth Work Partnerships and has been developed with a number of post-primary and special schools.