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Youth work and youth workers as key elements for youth pedagogy development and realisation

Praca z młodzieżą i osoby pracujące z młodzieżą jako kluczowe elementy rozwoju i realizacji pedagogiki młodzieży

Abstract

In recent decades, youth work, being the tool supporting young people to develop and reach their full potential, is gaining more and more attention and support from various actors on different levels. As youth work is mainly focused on learning and personal development, it would highly benefit from a specification of the terminologies and refining the youth workers' professional profile, both putting a solid, scientific-based foundation for its development. Here, the youth pedagogy comes to the scene.

This paper is an attempt to identify and characterise “youth pedagogy” in terms of its specific approaches, contexts and ways of fostering the learners' development, differing from the classical (child-oriented) pedagogy and the (adult-oriented) andragogy. Additionally, the connection between youth work and youth pedagogy will be observed and analysed, exploring the out-of-school environment offering a number of learning opportunities in the context of both – non-formal and informal learning. Finally, outlines of a professional profile of practitioners delivering youth pedagogy activities will be suggested and explained.

Keywords: youth work, youth pedagogy, non-formal education, out-of-school environment

Streszczenie

W ostatnich dziesięcioleciach praca z młodzieżą będąca narzędziem wspierającym młodych ludzi w rozwoju i osiągnięciu pełnego potencjału zyskuje coraz większą uwagę i wsparcie ze strony wielu podmiotów na różnych poziomach. Praca z młodzieżą koncentruje się głównie na uczeniu się i rozwoju osobistym ludzi młodych, dlatego kluczowe jest uszczegółowienie terminologii i dopracowanie profilu zawodowego pracowników młodzieżowych, tworząc solidne, naukowe podstawy dla rozwoju subdyscypliny, jaką jest pedagogika młodzieży.

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą zidentyfikowania i scharakteryzowania „pedagogiki młodzieży” pod względem jej specyficznych podejść, kontekstów i sposobów wspierania rozwoju uczniów różniących się od klasycznej (zorientowanej na dzieci) pedagogiki i (zorientowanej na dorosłych) andragogiki. Dodatkowo będzie obserwowany i analizowany związek między pracą z młodzieżą a pedagogiką młodzieży, badane środowisko pozaszkolne oferujące szereg możliwości uczenia się w kontekście zarówno pozaformalnym, jak i nieformalnym. Na koniec zostaną zaproponowane i wyjaśnione zarzysy profilu zawodowego praktyków prowadzących działania z zakresu pedagogiki młodzieży.

Słowa kluczowe: praca z młodzieżą, pedagogika młodzieży, edukacja pozaformalna, środowisko pozaszkolne

Introduction

Youth is a special period of a person's life, representing the transition from the dependent role of a child to the independent role of an adult person. On the one hand, it is a very individually unique step in one's development requiring special attention, support and specific, carefully selected approaches and work methods. On the other hand, as a result of this transition, persons are expected to be already prepared to meet the requirements and face the challenges of "adult" life, as well as to adapt successfully to the roles the society would appoint to them – a person, a professional and a citizen. Although the formal educational system, represented by the schools, is carrying out such a task to a certain extent, it is still quite universal-knowledge- (rather than skill- and experience-) oriented. However, actually, this is what schools are made for – to provide a common ground (or an equal start in life) to all students in developing literacy, mastering math and science, and gaining some knowledge of arts and sports. Whenever possible, schools and teachers, besides the educational-standard-stated requirements, would also offer additional extra-curricular activities to support personal development and some specific interests of their students. In reality, however, these opportunities are far from sufficient to meet young people's diverse needs and aspirations. This is why the importance of out-of-school¹ activities, especially in the face of youth work activities, comes in handy to fill these gaps and offer young people opportunities to grow and flourish.

Research objectives

This article aims to highlight the importance of youth work as a factor for the harmonious development of contemporary youth, complementing the formal education experiences, as well as clarifying the role of youth pedagogy in youth work conducted by practitioners.

Why is the period of youth so important?

During the period of youth (between 14 and 29 years² of age), a person experiences a number of changes on physiological, emotional, mental and social levels,

¹ For the purpose of this article, "out-of-school" would be used as a synonym for "extracurricular", defining those types of activities that are not included in the official curriculum and are not obligatory for all students. However, such activities can physically happen in the school premises (e.g. sports activities taking place in schools sport hall or volunteers using available classrooms to gather and implement their activities there).

² Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/youth> (accessed: 29.12.2023).

but far not all of them go smoothly and well. While this is the moment when individuals gain independence in one or another aspect, they are also in a quite vulnerable position to adapt to everything that happens to them – changes in their bodies, changes in their brains, new emotions, as well as the higher demands of the society towards them. Additionally, this period is the “prime time to discover, explore and mould a value system”³. Usually, the results (success or lack of it) of these explorations and discoveries form the value system and identity, which will stay more or less rigid during the next stages in life.

In his lecture “What is Youth Pedagogy Today?” Dr Martin Rawson explains that “youth is [...] about being able to take control over your own thoughts and feelings and your actions to a greater extent than was there before”⁴ and connects it also with the freedom to make choices (advocacy), ability to reflect on the results of those choices and self-direct own learning in order to reach the point that the individual desires (not the one that adults expect the young person to reach).

The fact that every European country has settled their national youth policy⁵ in one way or another speaks for itself that youth is recognised by its importance by experts and practitioners in different fields: educators, sociologists, policy-makers, etc. “Young people are our future” already sounds like a cliché, but it is actually a fact that no one shall forget. Ensuring policies, practices and opportunities for young people to integrate into the labour market and society successfully, is equally important, both on individual and national/international levels, as this would bring “overall economic growth and social cohesion”⁶. That is also a reason why youth work in Europe has gained more (and absolutely deserved) attention in recent decades and keeps developing, receiving the support of institutions such as the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

Youth work and non-formal education

Youth work, as a practice, represents “actions directed towards young people regarding activities where they take part voluntarily, designed for supporting their

³ T. Olson, *Youth embrace self-identity when building their value system*, Youth Zone, <https://youthzone.com/2020/07/youth-encouraged-to-identify-values-to-see-what-makes-them-unique/> (accessed: 29.12.2023).

⁴ M. Rawson, “*What is youth pedagogy today?*”, online lecture held on 15.11.2023, held in the framework of UPSWE project – “Upper School – a place for self-development”, <https://www.goetheanum-paedagogik.ch/en/events/upswe>.

⁵ See Youth Wiki: Europe’s Encyclopedia of National Youth Policies, available at <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki> (accessed: 29.12.2023).

⁶ OECD, Youth employment and social policies, https://www.oecd.org/employment/youth/?_ga=2.11377844.1078760878.1703946675-1769606149.1703946675 (accessed: 30.12.2023).

personal and social development through non-formal and informal learning”⁷ and goes hand-in-hand with the out-of-school learning experiences.

By definition, non-formal education is “planned, structured programmes and processes of personal and social education for young people designed to improve a range of skills and competences, outside the formal educational curriculum”⁸. In this sense, non-formal education (NFE) can be represented by various activities, such as volunteering, participation in events and projects, membership in youth organisations, clubs of interest, etc. Its importance was recognised on a European level already in 2000 by the adoption of Recommendation 1437 (2000) on non-formal education by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. As stated in the document, “formal educational systems alone cannot respond to rapid and constant technological, social and economic change in society, and that they should be reinforced by non-formal educational practices”⁹.

This policy document, however, can be supported by a solid basis laid from a number of scientific papers: Many pieces of research have proven the positive influence of out-of-school activities on young people’s development – from mastering a specific skill (sport, playing a musical instrument, etc.) to developing a number of soft skills such as discipline, teamwork and leadership, time management as well as better academic performance at school¹⁰, gaining higher self-esteem, better school attendance and performance and are less likelihood to use alcohol, drugs and show problematic behaviour¹¹.

On top of that, extra-curricular activities provide additional opportunities for socialisation and discovering one’s own talents, strengths and weaknesses. They would provide young people with a safe space to experiment, find activities they would enjoy doing, choose their career path more consciously, and enrich their resume, providing them better chances to pursue the job they would like to have¹². These types of opportunities, being complementary to the classical formal education system, play a crucial role in the preparation of the individual to successfully perform the different roles of their „adult” life.

⁷ European Commission, *Quality Youth Work. A common framework for the further development of youth work*, Brussels, 2015.

⁸ Council of Europe, *Non-formal education in youth projects – Definitions*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-youth-foundation/definitions> (accessed: 30.12.2023).

⁹ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, *Recommendation 1437 (2000) on non-formal education* adopted on 24 January 2000 (1stSitting), <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XM-L2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=16762> (accessed: 29.12.2023).

¹⁰ S. Anjum, *Impact of Extracurricular Activities on Academic Performance of Students at Secondary Level*, “International Journal of Applied Guidance and Counseling” 2021, 2, p. 11, DOI: 10.26486/ijagc.v2i2.1869.

¹¹ N. Wilson, *Impact of Extracurricular Activities on Students*, A Research Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Science Degree in School Counseling, 2009.

¹² E. Massoni, *Positive Effects of Extra Curricular Activities on Students*, „ESSAI” 2011, 9, 27, <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol9/iss1/27> (accessed: 29.12.2023).

Besides the positive effects, however, the non-formal education activities, represented by youth work services, can also help address problems and issues. A research report published by the National Youth Agency in England (UK) in 2023 examines the impact of youth work by analysing the opinions of diverse stakeholders: schools and youth organisations, as well as young people. The main discovery is that, according to 95% of the responses received, youth work (when used well) can improve school attendance among groups of risk and have a positive impact on young people's well-being (including mental health)¹³. In the context of the dynamic development of the world today, imposing more and more challenges on young people, the need for such activities would grow even more.

As Filip Coussée points out, “youth work is a polyvalent and multi-faceted practice”¹⁴ that takes place in various settings, responding to the diverse needs and situations young people live and grow in. So, youth work being so multidimensional and rich in approaches, has the capacity to reach different young people and provide them with the best opportunities to grow.

Youth work competence models

In spite of the fact that youth work takes place entirely in the field of non-formal education and informal learning and happens in different settings, with the use of a number of methods and approaches¹⁵, which make it seem like a quite flexible “thing”, it still has its own reference frameworks, quality and ethical standards. In line with the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, the majority of European countries already have adopted mechanisms for ensuring the quality of youth work (by introducing Youth workers' professional standards, ensuring funding for projects aimed at improving the quality of youth work or both)¹⁶. Additionally, it is also possible to find relevant competence frameworks in some countries. A Mapping activity on the educational and career paths of youth workers conducted in 2017 examined existing documents defining youth workers' profiles in 10 European countries and identified the most common competences. Among them are included “Facilitating learning” and “Ability to analyse youth (group) needs” (both mentioned in 7 out

¹³ National Youth Agency, England (UK), *Better Together: Youth Work with Schools report*, 2023, <https://www.nya.org.uk/youth-work-with-schools/> (accessed: 30.12.2023).

¹⁴ F. Coussée, *The relevance of youth work's history* [in:] *The history of youth work in Europe and its relevance for youth policy today*, ed. G. Verschelden, F. Coussée, T. Van de Walle and H. Williamson, Council of Europe Publishing, 2009, p. 7.

¹⁵ Different types of youth work that exist are digital youth work, open youth work, detached youth work, youth information and counseling, etc.

¹⁶ See Youth Wiki: Comparative reports <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/comparative-overviews/youth-work/quality-assurance/2023> (accessed: 29.12.2023).

of 10 documents) and “Facilitating personal development of young people” (mentioned in 6 out of 10 documents)¹⁷.

At a European level, two main competence models of youth workers exist – the Council of Europe youth workers’ portfolio and the Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally, developed by the SALTO – Training and Cooperation Resource Centre in the framework of implementation of the European Training Strategy (ETS). Besides a list of desired “requirements”, both offer tools for self-reflection on the level of mastering one or another competence, which is a precious feature, making them ready-to-use tools for every interested professional.

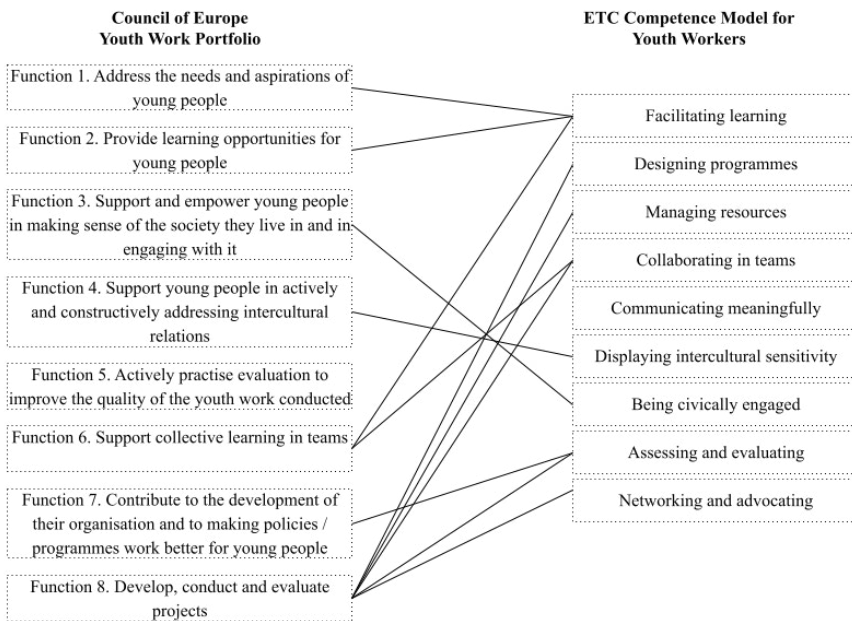


Fig. 1. Comparison between the Council of Europe Youth Work Portfolio and Portfolio and ETC Competence Model for Youth Workers

Source: own study.

While both of those models are similar (also in terms of competence areas included in both – a more detailed comparison is provided in Figure 1), each of them

¹⁷ J. O’Donovan (ed.), D. Cairns, M. Sousa, V.V. Dimitrova, *Mapping the educational and career paths of youth workers* [in:] *Youth worker education in Europe. Policies, structures, practices*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, 2020, p. 40–41. More detailed information is also presented in the table Table 10: Most common competences and skills for youth workers in 10 countries, prepared to the research report available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262613/Table+10.+Most+commonly+cited+competencies+and+skills+of+youth+workers+in+10+countries.pdf/b225a7b5-e19d-aafd-9887-0d0beaf99c35?t=1550248265000>.

has its specifics. The strength of the CoE Youth Workers portfolio is that it allows the users to define to which extent a certain function listed in the model is relevant or not to their youth work practice, which reflects an acknowledgement of the diversity of contexts and ways for implementing youth work. The Self-Assessment tool of the ETC Competence Model treats all elements of each competence group as equally important, so they all are part of the assessment process. However, for each of the competence groups, specific sets of four elements are defined: knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, as well as professional behaviour (measuring how often a youth worker demonstrates desired behaviours in their professional life). Adding an analysis of professional behaviour is an important element of the process and makes the main difference between keeping the acquired competence “latent” and really putting it into practice.

“Youth pedagogy”

Exploring youth work definitions, concepts, and competence frameworks¹⁸ and even observing youth work in real-life situations, one can conclude that it is mainly about learning. Still, the term “youth pedagogy”, as such, is quite rarely mentioned, almost absent in the English language literature. One reason for this could possibly be a matter of time – as youth work is a relatively new concept that is still gaining recognition, forming its field of competence and borderlines with other areas (such as formal education or social work with youth), possibly a certain period of time would be needed for introducing more solid scientific base supporting non-formal learning and pedagogy of youth. Another ground not to rush the process is the possible fear that the formal educational system could “patronise” the youth pedagogy by imposing strict rules and procedures on it, which could disconnect it from the youth work realities and principles of non-formal learning. Both factors have a place to be, but to ensure quality youth work and also assume quality learning experiences for young people, such a branch of educational sciences shall still start evolving and developing.

Researching the German language literature, it is possible to find the term “Jugendpädagogik” (Youth Pedagogy), and it is often formulated as Waldorf-Jugendpädagogik advising educators and other professionals to follow the holistic approach to young people’s development¹⁹. Additionally, in the article “Classical concepts of

¹⁸ In the framework of the ETS, SALTO Training and Cooperation has developed two competence models – one for youth workers and another for youth trainers (much more focused on designing and conducting educational training activities). In this paper, we have focused on the competence model for general youth workers.

¹⁹ See A. Wiehl, F. Steinwachs (eds.), *Studienbuch Waldorf – Jugendpädagogik*, utb. Germany, 2022.

youth pedagogy”, Helmut Fend reminds us that already in the first half of the 20th Century, a concept of youth pedagogy existed, “considering not only childhood but also the adolescent phase as a developmental stage that requires phase-specific pedagogical attention”²⁰, taking into account the specific characteristics of this stage of human development – including strengths and constraints. In the earlier mentioned lecture on youth pedagogy, Dr. Martin Rawson points out that: “The curriculum is a series of learning opportunities, which in youth pedagogy primarily have the function of activating the self-activity of the young person in whichever field we are engaging in”²¹.

Researching a bit further, one can find Mikhail Rozhkov’s textbook defining youth pedagogy as “a branch of pedagogy that studies the pedagogical influence on a person in adolescence in the process of personal self-determination and the formation of a socially oriented way of thinking, as well as serving the processes of socialisation and education of young men and girls”²².

So, in light of the above, the following characteristics of youth pedagogy could be drawn:

- youth pedagogy, being delivered by youth workers and taking place in the context of non-formal learning, shall follow its main principles (inclusive, assuring equal and voluntary, having planned programme and defined learning outcomes, process-oriented and learner-centred);
- it should provide safe space for young people and foster experiential learning by acquiring experience and developing skills;
- it shall support the socialisation process of the learners and enhance their adaptation into different settings and contexts;
- shall have a holistic approach taking into account the specifics of young people psychological and cognitive development.

Building up on that, the following suggestions on a professional profile of youth pedagogy practitioners could be outlined:

1. Following the good examples on the European level, the professional profile shall include not only a textual description but also a relevant self-assessment tool, which could support young professionals in their career development path;
2. The competence areas shall be defined by all four dimensions of a professional competence: knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, as well as (frequency of) professional behaviours;

²⁰ H. Fend, *Klassische Konzepte der Jugendpädagogik* [in:] *Entwicklungspsychologie des Jugendalters*, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden 2003, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-80943-8_22, p. 460 (in German).

²¹ M. Rawson, “*What is youth pedagogy...*”

²² M. Rozhkov, *Pedagogicheskoe obespechenie rabotay s molodyozhyu: Yunogogika*, Moscow 2008, p. 11 (in Russian).

3. Some of the competence areas of the youth pedagogist's professional profile may include:
- holistically approaching young people (understanding their needs, contexts, challenges, dreams and desires, demonstrating a respectful and open attitude, and building positive and equal relations with them, providing them opportunities and supporting them for (self)-advocacy),
 - fostering both individual and group learning, professionally designing the group interaction processes, as well as moments for constructive feedback and (self)reflection;
 - building and maintaining a safe and positive learning environment, both physically and methodologically, including fostering a positive culture of achievements in their youth work practice²³;
 - supporting young people's socialisation and development of social skills, (inter)cultural (self)awareness, tolerance and ability to adapt to different groups and behave inclusively towards vulnerable "others", while still acknowledging one's own identity and values.

Conclusion

Young people, being at a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, are in a difficult and vulnerable position, which calls for support in this complex but important step in their lives. On the other hand, the dynamically developing world we all live in imposes more and new challenges, which the formal educational system cannot always react to in such a promptly manner. This situation demands alternative solutions in the face of non-formal education and youth work using the emerging "youth pedagogy"'s approaches. Youth pedagogy would provide a solid basis for ensuring the quality of youth work for optimal reaching its objectives. If it takes a village to grow a child²⁴, it takes good cooperation between formal and non-formal learning experiences to help young people grow into successful adults who have the skills to shape and live the life they like and feel accomplished.

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²⁴ African proverb.

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