The development and use of curriculum in youth work in Northern Ireland.

In 2012 Youth Work in Northern Ireland marked the 25th anniversary of the introduction of a central youth work curriculum with no fanfare at all. These twenty-five years spanned a period that was marked by an emergence from the troubles, through a fractured peace process and towards a period of unprecedented political stability in Northern Ireland’s recent history. (Hargie et al, 2003).

This paper explores the use of curriculum in youth work during this twenty-five year period. It presents an historic overview of the introduction of a central youth work curriculum in Northern Ireland and its subsequent development and impact over the last twenty-five years. The paper highlights some of the documented responses to the introduction of curriculum (DENI 1987) and outlines the reworking (DENI 1997) and subsequent revision (DE 2003) to succeeding curriculum documents. In particular it examines the varying responses within the youth work sector. Firstly I examine the responses characterised by ‘compliance,’ which are linked to a conceptual understanding of youth work as “content” and “product” (NEELB 1993). I provide examples of some of the mechanisms of accountability and managerialism that accompanied the introduction of curriculum and its categorisation as a ‘political’ project. (Jeffs & Smith 1990) Secondly I examine responses that seek ‘commitment’ which are more closely aligned to a conception of curriculum as “process”. To illustrate this I consider youth work practice developments in the areas of gender equality (Trimble 1990, YCNI 1994, Morgan & McCardle 2009), community relation’s work (Smyth 2007) and participation (YCNI 1993).

The paper argues that the existence of a youth work curriculum has been a key medium for youth work policy debate and government influence concerning the purpose and nature of youth work in Northern Ireland. I contrast this with the absence of academic debate in Northern Ireland concerning the nature of curriculum and the seemingly lukewarm desire of youth workers to mobilise around curriculum as a means to articulate of youth work purpose and practice (McCormick 1998, Harland et al 2005, McCreary (2012). Finally the author asks ‘is a curriculum still relevant to youth work’ in Northern Ireland following the publication of the new Department of Education policy ‘Priorities for Youth.’ (DE 2013)

References not included due to word count but are available from author or symposium convenor