Building capacity in youth work: Perspectives and practice in youth clubs in Finland and Sweden

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Abstract

Youth work broadly aims to support young people's development, socially and personally, and promotes learning in non-formal settings. One of the best opportunities for youth work in Sweden and in Finland is via the youth clubs, which are staffed by professionals who respond to the needs of young people according to firmly understood policies. In this article we analyse the historical constitution of youth clubs, the connection of youth work to Nordic social policy, the current state of youth clubs, and the perceptions the workers have in respect of their work and professional status. Our comparison of Sweden and Finland provides an analysis of the role that youth work plays in Nordic welfare services for the young, the nature of youth work in general and current tensions. One ubiquitous tension arises from the fact that youth work aims to respond to the perceived needs of society, to the needs of the young, or to the needs of both simultaneously. This article shows that the societal motivation for youth work is similar in both Sweden and Finland, but that the scope, structures and policies vary between the two countries. Whilst youth work is an integral part of welfare policy in Nordic countries, there is no agreement on its scope or even the target group.

Key words: youth work, youth policy, Nordic countries, welfare state, young people, Nordic welfare state.

THE INCLUSION and development of young people in society is one of the major challenges faced by late-modern, knowledge-based economies. Societal strategies to promote the competence and competitiveness of young people have traditionally focused on formal education, from the early years in compulsory schools, through to university studies and vocational training. These foci remain as core strategies. However, in recent years, greater attention has been paid to non-formal learning. The importance of recognising youth work as a way of promoting extra-curricular learning has, for example, been underlined in discussions about lifelong learning at a European level (Partnership Youth, 2011). However, there remains a considerable lack of knowledge regarding the foundations and practice of youth work. This article presents the history of, and challenges faced by a core strategy used in Sweden and Finland to meet and cope with young people outside of formal settings or sporting associations – the youth club. Although this strategy has not always been conceptualized as youth work in policy or practice, we have used it as a tool to introduce and delineate the objective of our study.

Youth work broadly describes measures used to promote capacity-building and learning for young people in youth organisations, leisure activities, youth clubs, and other non-formal settings. Both Finland and Sweden have a long tradition of youth-directed strategies in civil society, religious organisations and local authorities. Throughout their history, and in different forms and with different names, youth clubs have been discussed in official youth policy, and seen as a response to perceived societal short-comings and as one of the more articulate reponses to the question of the intended purpose of youth work.

Here we will both present our own findings and review the relevant research that has taken place in Finland and Sweden. Our own research covers various aspects of youth work, including the perspectives of youth workers on youth work, pedagogical strategies (Forkby et al, 2008), participation as a key tool of youth policy (Gretschel and Kiilakoski, 2007; 2012), history of participation in youth work policy (Forkby, 2010b), youth participation in youth clubs (Andersson et al, 2010; Forkby, 2010a; Kiilakoski, 2011), participation in on-line youth work (Kiilakoski and Taiponen, 2011), and an overview of international research on youth clubs (Forkby, 2011a).

This article aims to analyse the translations and tensions between ideology, core ideas and the practice of youth workers in local youth clubs in Sweden and Finland. We tackle the question of the nature of youth work in general and its adaptation into different settings. Therefore, we analyse the specificity of youth work structures in the two countries and look for common ground and unifying factors. The issues we discuss are as follows:

> *What is the historical constitution of youth clubs?*
> *What do the significant similarities and differences tell us about the connection of youth work with Nordic social policy in general?*
> *What is the current state of youth clubs, and how do youth workers understand their work?*

Youth work in youth clubs

Youth work is carried out in both formal and informal settings. Outdoor youth work can take place for example, in streets, parks, and car parks, or in front of a shopping centre. Indoor youth work can be conducted in different institutional settings, such as schools, youth clubs or prisons, or in commercial settings such as cafés or shopping centres (Sapin, 2009). There are relatively few settings in which youth workers are able to gain control of both activities and context. However, within youth clubs, they have the capacity to limit the clientele, to request that people be in a certain condition or behave in a particular way to gain admittance, to limit the opening hours and to provide a variety of different activities. Youth clubs are virtually the only place in which youth workers do not have to adapt to the existing organisational culture (Kiilakoski, 2011). The material basis, the social interaction, and the desired behaviours have often been decided on, or at least

have been under consideration, before young people enter a youth club (Siurala, 2011). To use the philosophical language of Stanley Cavell (2005), the constituents of the youth club are selected and gathered together to serve a certain pedagogical purpose, meaning there are many choices around what to include and exclude. Therefore, many youth workers regard the youth club itself as having intrinsic value as an instrument of youth work (Kylmäkoski, 2006). Due to their pre-planned nature, youth clubs can be seen as manifestations of the ideals of youth work, indicating what the nature of the interactions between the workers and the youths should be like, how peer-group relationships should develop and the types of activities that are desirable.

If youth clubs are to attract young people, the relationship between participants and leaders as well as cultural issues, are important (Masclet, 2001). Furthermore, if the young people are to actually contribute to the learning of pro-social behaviour, then they must feel secure, have a sense of being connected to the values and norms of the centre, participate in exciting and stimulating activities that engage them, and be guided and supervised by the leaders (Andersson-Butcher and Cash, 2010; Hilton, 2005, Williamson, 1997). Mercier et al (2000) found that successful youth centres should be flexible in order to meet the needs of different youth groups; they should offer exciting activities, provide freedom for the participants to experiment and learn under guidance, recognise the potential of individual participants, offer free and gender-mixed activities, and give support and follow-up to participant learning. The aims include offering an alternative space to the street, families and school, enhancing social and personal learning and contributing to leadership-formation (Ministry of Youth Development, 2010). Youth clubs that achieve this have an open and welcoming atmosphere and provide opportunities for participation in learning. Other studies have also underlined the importance of the fact that learning should include social awareness in a broader sense, such as being a responsible member of society and contributing to societal development and mobilisation (Cheung et al, 2004; Wilson and Snell, 2010), as well as developing a non-discriminatory praxis with respect to ethnicity, gender and age (Wilson and White, 2001; Wong, 2008), and that learning should encourage participation (Andersson et al, 2010; Forkby, 2010b). In some countries, there are also partnerships between schools or other organisations and youth clubs. One goal is to support vulnerable young people in their school achievement (Deschenes and McDonald, 2003), and/or encourage transformative learning and social and personal development (Dahl, 2009).

Youth clubs in Sweden and Finland

Youth work in Sweden and Finland shares many common themes. Both countries relate to the same basic idea of the Nordic welfare state, with relatively high levels of welfare spending, an emphasis on equality, and large public sectors (Nygård, 2006: 357). Youth work is regarded as a separate and independent social entity, distinct from both school and social work. Youth clubs are an example of provision that is primarily funded by the public sector, but not extensively controlled by legislation. Instead, youth clubs are able to operate on the basis of their professional

tradition, with an emphasis on tacit knowledge or 'know-how', meaning that there is no formalised and articulated knowledge-base (Argyris and Schön, 1975). However, lack of legislation means that youth work has a relatively low professional status and there are considerable variations in the backgrounds of workers. Youth work is recognised as an independent professional activity and youth clubs are viewed as an important, even dominant, form of youth work which the state should provide, but there are no clear boundaries regarding its scope.

Legislation and governance

Because no specific legislation covers youth work in Sweden, it is up to local authorities to decide which activities should receive financial help and/or other means of support. Although local authorities play the primary role in running youth clubs, approximately one third fall under the responsibility of bodies other than those in the public sector, through Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The National Board of Youth Affairs supports the local authorities and NGOs, primarily influencing policy and ideas (including publicising reports in different areas).

In Finland, youth work comes under its own legislation; the Youth Act of 2006, previously named the Youth Work Act, which first came into existence in 1972 (Youth Work and Youth Policy in Finland). Youth work is governed by the Ministry of Education and is viewed as a non-formal part of the educational system (Hirvonen, 2009). Local authorities govern all youth clubs, with the exception of 'Walkers: Children of the station', an NGO that operates in 13 towns.

Numbers of youth clubs and their target groups

In Sweden, a country with 9 million inhabitants, there are 1109 youth clubs and recreational centres in the 290 municipalities, but the number has declined by 30% since 1990 (SKL, 2011). In addition to these clubs, there are approximately 150 'youth houses', which are primarily for young people aged 17-25 years. The majority of the youth clubs are directed towards young people aged 13-16 and they attract approximately 5-10% of the target population (Elofsson, 2000; Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2006), often with a slightly greater numbers of boys.

In Finland, a country of 5.4 million inhabitants, there are roughly 1000 youth clubs in 320 municipalities, and their number has decreased from 1564 in 1989. In total, youth work reaches approximately 25% of the youth population (Myllyniemi, 2008), and it is estimated that 5-10% of young people regularly attend youth clubs (Kiilakoski, 2011). The target age group is 13-17 years of age. However, there are considerable differences: some youth clubs admit children aged as young as eight years, and some municipalities do not have an age limit. There are no 'youth houses' or equivalent for young people over the age of 18.

Vocational training, occupational group

In Sweden, while there is a vocational training programme for youth work, there is no focused programme in higher education. The standard of this training is considered to be of low and/or inconsistent quality. Most staff members working in Swedish facilities are trained youth workers (or 'recreational leaders') who have undertaken two years of vocational training at 'folk high-schools', but there are great variations in this training, and a sizeable number of staff members are lacking in formal professional education (Forkby et al, 2008). There are approximately 3,700 recreational leaders in different areas, half of whom are employed in municipal leisure and culture agencies. Individuals in this occupation are characterised by a relatively low mean age, low levels of experience and comparatively low pay. Therefore, there is room for enhancing the competence and status of youth work as an occupation (Gunnarsson, 2002).

Finland has a professional training programme with routes both in vocational training and higher education. Most of the staff trained before the twenty-first century have a higher secondary education degree. In the twenty-first century, 'educational inflation', due to training also being given in the polytechnics and universities, has meant that youth work requirements have risen and many municipalities prefer to employ workers with higher education. However, the situation varies. Some of the youth workers are not trained as such, for example, they may have a degree in social work. Approximately 3,400 people have been hired by municipalities (Nuorisotyö, 2012).

In assessing the content of the educational curricula for recreational leaders in Sweden (Forkby, 2011a), youth work appears to be relational (Laxvik, 2001), communicative (Kihlström, 1995) and participation-oriented (Andersson et al, 2010). However, since it draws on tacit knowledge (Svenneke Pettersson and Havström, 2007) and lacks an articulation of what it is meant to achieve (Gunnarsson, 2002), the personal skills and wisdom of the recreational leaders are fundamental to the practice of the work (Trondman, 2003). This resonates with the Finnish research, which implies that the activities, goals and methods of youth work remain largely undocumented (Cederlöf, 2007). Given that youth work is closely tied to local traditions (Hoikkala and Sell, 2007), the lack of documentation means that youth work might not remain connected to its past, thereby weakening the collective memory of the profession (Kiilakoski and Nieminen, 2007). Thus, youth work in Finland also appears to rely primarily on tacit knowledge (Kiilakoski et al, 2011).

Historical formation

Youth clubs in Sweden and Finland share a similar historical background. The first youth club in Sweden opened in 1931, but had a predecessor in the community centres that were organised by the settlement movement. The main growth took place post World War II, and had its heyday in the 60s and 70s; the 'golden years' of the expansion of the welfare state. In those days, youth clubs

could be quite impressive establishments, especially those that were built to meet the needs of inhabitants of newly constructed suburbs. Although there was never a political intention to exclude NGOs from running youth clubs, there was an understanding that local authorities had the prime responsibility for ensuring that these facilities were put in place. The political foundation for the expansion of youth clubs had already been established by the Youth Care Committee during World War II (SOU, 1945:22). Youth clubs were viewed as a response to the new 'youth' phenomenon, a way to counteract some parts of youth culture that were perceived as 'cheap', and, especially, as a way to meet the need of rowdy boys for structured leisure (Olson, 2008b). During this period, youth was a more visible social category in society, while many young people possessed at least some money of their own and enjoyed an increased amount of free time. Established youth organisations and groups did not perceive the changing social circumstances of youth as benign, and a discussion took place as to how young people could be enabled to cope with the new opportunities available to them. One answer was to support different youth associations; another was to establish youth clubs. It was believed that the proposed youth clubs should look and feel like a home, places in which young people would gain from meeting their friends in a comfortable milieu and be guided by empathetic and pedagogically trained leaders. The staff should avoid an authoritarian style, and instead should encourage the strength, capacity and initiatives of the young people themselves. The inspiration for these centres came from the English youth clubs. It was hoped that young people would engage in studies and handicrafts, would obtain information regarding a range of diverse subjects, and would take part in more unstructured activities, such as table-tennis and other games. However, it was stated that fostering ambition should not go too far, but rather must be balanced against young people's own interests.

Later, in the 1960s, it was thought that promotion, rather than prevention, should be the primary goal of the youth clubs; meaning that the interests and resources of the young people should be the focus, instead of what were held to be problems and dangers that could lead to maladjustment. From the 1970s onwards, different areas such as participation projects, gender-related issues, youth exchanges and drug prevention have been the focus of the youth work sector. However, the heritage of the traditional focus on the prevention of risky behaviour and keeping rowdy boys off the streets has never ceased to be an influence. There has always been a tension in the discussion around the aims and function of youth clubs. This tension could be summarised as the following question: Should youth clubs provide an open space for young people to come and socialise and have fun among friends without any demands for engagement in any pedagogical activity, or should they primarily be a place for learning and more structured leisure? (Forkby, 2010b; Olson, 2008a).

In Finland, considerable changes in youth policy came after World War II when the role of municipalities in youth work increased dramatically. Beginning primarily as bodies that allocated financial resources to the NGOs in the 1950s and 1960s, municipalities started to create their own sphere of work in the 1970s. This was connected to wider societal changes, such as rapid

industrialisation and urbanisation (the so called 'great move' from the country to town). The policy question of how to react to the 'youth problem' in urban settings found an answer in youth clubs, allowing the achievement of spatial control (keeping young people away from the streets in a controlled environment) and giving young people opportunities to learn and adopt democratic values. Today, the municipalities play the primary role in youth work, and are responsible for implementing official policy.

The first youth club in Finland opened in its capital, Helsinki, in 1957, to address the problems of street-gangs of boys and concerns about violence and anti-social behaviour (Vesikansa, 1988: 32). The premise was to establish an open youth club, an ideal that was strongly influenced by Swedish youth work. However, youth organisations offering structured services were doubtful about the idea of an open space, since it was seen as 'organised doing nothing' (Nieminen, 1995). In the 1960s, within the new suburban youth culture, young people sought activities beyond those organised by the Church or the NGOs, coinciding with the rapidly changing social conditions of the time. This paved the way for a great expansion of youth clubs, which primarily happened between 1972 and 1995 (Kylmäkoski, 2006). These establishments can be seen as a part of the building of the Nordic welfare state, in which social institutions function as key players in the vision towards securing equality. Compared to other Nordic countries, Finland can be seen as a late-comer, only building the principal instruments of a welfare state from the 1970s onwards. Youth clubs are still being built today, but the primary focus is on renovating older clubs.

The pedagogical ideas behind youth clubs have followed the same course as Sweden. From the mid-1970s onwards, the critical discussion regarding the nature of youth workers has brought with it an emphasis on community education. More recently, the discourse has changed from community education to participation and active citizenship. This shift is surprising given that the degree in youth work in the applied universities of Finland translates as community educator (yhteisöpedagogi), the first of which was established at the beginning of the last decade. Although the students are trained in community education, it seems that the communal status of youth clubs remain unchanged. There is evidence that the participatory activities in Finnish youth clubs have diminished, at least within the last 10 years (Gretschel, 2011; Kiilakoski, 2011). The diversionary function of youth clubs – that is, keeping troubled young people off the streets – has, however, remained as a public perception of their purpose.

The part that youth clubs play in the network of local authority provision is significant. There is evidence that the youth work ideal has changed from being an independent initiative conducted in isolation within youth clubs, to collaboration in networks in which youth clubs function as part of wider youth-directed services (Kiilakoski, 2011).

Comparing Sweden and Finland, it is clearly visible in both countries that youth clubs are seen as an instrument of social policy and as a non-formal learning environment. The rise of youth clubs

coincides with the emerging Nordic welfare state, which Sweden developed ahead of Finland and which influenced Finland accordingly. In the pedagogical landscape, two opposing social aims have influenced youth clubs. Their social justification stems from the fact that youth clubs have been seen as instruments for fostering participation, or, alternatively, as learning environments for a narrow conception of citizenship. The citizenship perspective emphasises the need to take rowdy young people away from the streets and give them learning opportunities, thereby normalising their behaviour, especially in the cities. The participation perspective emphasises supporting the ideas and desires of the young and helping them to define and give voice to their experiences. Youth clubs are historically seen as instruments for reproducing and renewing existing social relationships.

Target groups and attendance

The Nordic welfare system relies primarily on offering universal services. The idea behind this is that it is the role of a just society to offer similar services to different user groups, an idea that is internalised in the occupation of youth work. A youth club generally aims to reach a broad group of young people in certain age groups and neighbourhoods, but in reality the type of group identified does not always correspond to the group of young people who attend. On average, those who attend recreational centres are in more difficult life situations compared to other adolescents, having problems that include difficulties at school, being involved in crime and using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Although the youth clubs aim to prevent anti-social behaviour, it appears this can actually be increased, especially if the activities and organisation are unstructured, and lack goals and conscious planning. Rather than the promotion of positive capacity-building, there can be a negative interplay between the high number of vulnerable young people attracted to the youth clubs, an unclear role for the staff and a lack of constructive feedback to individual young people on their behaviour. This can lead to a situation in which a negative local youth culture provides a boosting effect to exactly the kind of behaviour and attitudes that the youth clubs aim to discourage. Therefore, youth clubs are at risk of having a contradictory preventative effect (Andersson-Butcher and Cash, 2010; Mahoney and Stattin, 2000; Mahoney et al, 2001; Robson and Feinstein, 2006; Feinstein et al, 2006). This process has been described as deviancy-training, meaning that those young people who are more experienced in anti-social behaviour inspire and work as role models for (often) younger teenagers (Dodge et al, 2006).

Youth club staff in both Sweden and Finland usually emphasise the open nature of the clubs and generally do not wish to see hindrances placed on entrance (Forkby et al, 2008; Kiilakoski, 2011). However, research has shown that some clubs become subject to an 'occupation' of the club by certain groups, such as young men presenting challenging behaviour, older young people, or males only (Pettersson, 1989). A fair amount of attention has been paid to gender and cultural aspects. When most young people attending are male, there can be a masculine atmosphere, which makes

it difficult for girls to attend (Honkasalo, 2011). However, perhaps the most obvious tension of today is related to the interplay between indigenous and migrant youth, whereby one or other of these groups can make the club their place, excluding the other. This reveals how young people themselves can limit and normalise a youth club's atmosphere and therefore contribute to how the club can fulfil its mission in youth policy.

Recent literature has emphasised this cultural control of youth clubs by young people and questions whether youth clubs really are open spaces where everybody can attend. The existing client group may control the space through ignoring or excluding new young people. This point was illustrated by a 15-year-old young woman from Finland: 'Youth clubs should be somehow changed. You can't go there, because it is attended by a certain gang that stares at you in an annoying way if you go there.' Studies on youth work have also revealed how racist discourses and symbols have kept migrant youth away (Perho, 2010), sometimes through the use of racist gestures and remarks that were recognised among the young people but not by the staff (Honkasalo and Kivijärvi, 2011). However, lack of knowledge of the purpose of youth clubs on the part of the migrant young people and their parents could also hinder attendance (Kiilakoski et al, 2011).

The use of working methods that aim to achieve strong social cohesion within groups can also unwillingly create an unintended practice of exclusion that builds barriers between groups of young people (Gretschel, 2011; Kiilakoski et al, 2011). A certain amount of social capital is required to enable a young person to be willing, or feel sufficiently comfortable to attend a youth club (Perho, 2010). It is linked with knowing people already attending the club and knowing the cultural preferences and practices inside the club. This shows that the way a worker operates to exert control in a club must consider the broad impact on young people.

Target group and practice

A comparison of youth work research conducted across both Sweden and Finland reveals great similarities in regard to what youth workers consider to be good practice. The opinion that youth workers have of their goal is closely linked to their perceptions of the target group and how they explain the situation of the young people. Whilst most youth workers believe that they invite a diverse group to an open space, there are differences in whether they really think that the group is entirely inclusive, or if it is a limited group which requires special consideration. The practical consequences of this can be shown using data from a focus group study, conducted with youth workers in Sweden (Forkby et al, 2008). The study raised the following question: should the primary target group of youth clubs be broad and inclusive, or an average amount of young people living in the area, or should it be narrower and aim at socially disadvantaged young people? Moreover, are the challenges faced by young people best explained by their psychological development or are they to do with their place in society?

These tensions are present within the traditions of youth work. Psychological and sociological expressions of youth work reflect the tension between youth work as personalisation or socialisation. This is usually the question of whether the work should aim at creating active citizens and operate on shared societal norms or whether it should seek to empower the young to express their voice and fulfil their hopes, regardless of whether they are for or against the norms of the society. The educational psychologist, Jerome Bruner (1996: 67), stated that the opposite forces of individual realisation (giving tools to express one's wit, skills and passion) and societal reproduction (ensuring that culture can further its economic, political and cultural ends) constitute a fundamental antinomy of education. In the context of youth this means that personalisation and emancipation is one obvious goal of the youth club but that there is also a demand to socialise the young to the rules, beliefs and narratives of society. Both poles of this basic antinomy have been historically upheld in Nordic youth work (Nieminen, 1995: 410).

Figure 1. **Perspectives on youth clubs with regard to target group and primary explanation of youth problems** (Forkby, et al, 2008).

Primary target group	Explanation	
	Psychological	*Sociologocal*
Broad and inclusive	Safe haven	Room of opportunities
Narrow	Behaviour training centre	Arena for empowered action

If youth workers direct their activities towards attracting the broad 'general' group and draw on psychological explanations, they tend to focus on dangers and talk about the threats that adolescents should be protected from. Unstructured 'hanging out' in neighbourhoods is perceived as a risk that should be counteracted by offering a safe haven in which young people motivate themselves and are guided by strong leaders. If youth workers are more oriented towards attracting a narrower group of troubled or disadvantaged young people, and still primarily draw on a psychological explanation, they are inclined to view their role as one in which they should foster behaviour that enables the young people to function in different situations. They focus on (some) young people who are considered 'rowdy' or in trouble at school and consider these issues as primarily due to problems in the family and personal arena. The role of the youth worker can be said to compensate for what the young person is missing in other circumstances.

If youth workers are more inclined to think in sociologically inspired terms and think that youth clubs should not have a broad target group, the practice they have often called for could be described as a room of opportunities. The youth club should be focused on providing room for

activities that really express what the young people want, and to a lesser extent, which allow them to see that aspirations can be fulfilled. The youth worker should act more as a working, producing partner than as a better, knowing leader. From the sociological perspective, a narrower group may be held as a primary target group; namely marginalised or exploited young people. By using explanations that are more likely to identify societal dysfunctions than individual problems, the youth workers maintain that a youth club must enable young people to partake in and affect how society works. This line of work stresses the importance of raising consciousness and taking action in order to address various shortcomings, be it locally in the community or via an international solidarity project.

The four perspectives outlined above relate to different roles of the youth worker (Kiilakoski, 2011). Youth clubs are seen as leisure-time spaces with little behavioural control or normative pressures. The method of the youth club is to construct a space that is both youth-culturally attractive and a viable pedagogical instrument for achieving the goals of the youth workers. The open access perspective tends to emphasise that youth clubs should be entertaining places for young people to hang out. The targeted approach often emphasises adult control of the club; the workings of the club should be pedagogically sustainable and should offer the workers ways to control the young, creating a safe environment and ensuring that the worker is accepted as an important part of the club. However, this appears to create tension. When the workers express the desire that a youth club should be 'an open city or an open space, where you don't have to tear your life open... You can talk, but you don't have to. … You can listen to music, you can play games or just hang out. You can watch TV' they view the youth club as a sanctuary, a place away from the surveillance and pressures of families, schools and streets (Jeffs and Smith, 2010: 5). However, increasing professionalism and a simultaneous emphasis in public management on measurability and controllability (Koskiaho, 2008) tends to mean that youth clubs should also be controlled yet non-formal environments where the young can learn different attitudes, skills and practices. This creates tensions such as 'hanging out vs. adult-led education' and 'letting the young be vs. participation'. In the daily life of the youth club this is most apparent when the workers have to decide whether the young should be obliged to attend to youth house meetings where the affairs of the youth club are decided.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article we have presented some core ideas behind youth clubs, including their historical background, staffing and actual practice. We claim that youth clubs represent an ideal picture of what youth work can be about, while being one of few areas that the staff can control with regard to target group and activities. We can identify several primary characteristics and challenges from our discussion.

There is a considerable lack of literature concerning youth clubs both not only in Finland and Sweden, but also internationally. As a result, there is no clearly defined description of their aims, or methods, or an evaluation of these institutions. The everyday practice of youth clubs is based on an often unarticulated professional tradition (Hoikkala and Sell, 2007; Kiilakoski, 2011). There is even variation in such a basic question as the nature of a target group. Although political management emphasises the importance of young people with limited social networks as a target group (Lanuke, 2007-2011), youth workers generally try to avoid labelling their target groups.

Although youth clubs are relatively well accepted as part of the welfare services and have a decades-long tradition, contradictory conceptions about the role of the youth club and its basic pedagogical mission still remain. Compared to work conducted in other public institutions, youth work has a relatively loose professional control over the workings of youth clubs. This creates room for pedagogical autonomy, but actually means that situations vary.

The concept and aspirations of youth work are broad, and could in some instances be contradictory: it is claimed that youth work helps young people find themselves (personalisation), but, in contrast, it is said to contribute to inclusion in peer-groups and to finding ways to engage with other youths (socialisation to significant others). Furthermore, while aiming to socialise young people to pre-existing values, structures and practices (socialisation), it is also said that youth work promotes a questioning of the status quo by young people, and encourages them to articulate their dissatisfaction with society (adoption and articulation of a critical perspective).

The historical expression of the policy of youth clubs in both Sweden and Finland is of broad and inclusive practice, which varies according to different agendas of hopes and threats concerning youth and their place in society. On a thematic level one can distinguish five themes: democracy, pedagogy, public health, social work and cultural work. Democracy concerns enabling young people to participate and influence the activities at the clubs. Pedagogy concerns the role of youth workers in enhancing young people's learning and the development of their talents. The public health perspective has gained greater influence in later years and is realised as promoting young people's sense of coherence about their circumstances and a comprehensive view of their life situations, for example their use of alcohol. Influences from social work practice are obvious from the time when youth clubs first were established until today, and can be articulated as compensating socially disadvantaged young people with offers of activity and providing positive alternatives to hanging about on the streets. Cultural work describes what many of the activities are about, for example, giving young people an opportunity to play and learn music, dance and practise theatre and, in its entirety, to provide a place where youth culture has a value (Forkby, 2011b).

In both Sweden and Finland, youth clubs are considered as instruments of youth policy, but the exact nature of that instrument or the professional qualifications of the workers responsible for using the instrument remains undefined. In practice, this has led to the formation of different

professional frameworks on the nature of youth clubs. A relatively weak profession has not been backed by research, so there is a lack of basic knowledge and even of a professional vocabulary in some cases.

Furthermore, youth clubs are viewed by the professional group as an open space offering learning, entertainment, things to do, and a safe environment with the possibility of having a relationship with an adult that does not represent pedagogical authority in the manner of parents or teachers. However, there is evidence that this ideological self-image might not correspond to the experienced reality of the young themselves, or that described in research.

There is a long tradition concerning the strategies employed to enhance young people's awareness of their role and to 'empower' them to partake in decision-making. However, while the discourse of participation is wide-spread, the actual practices can be quite different, depending on the underlying idea regarding the role of the youth worker, and the aims of different activities. If the aim of the youth club is for it to be a place of learning, then the young people are necessary participants in most of what happens, but, in contrast, if the aim is to realise a practice of offering specific activities, the young people are more likely to be invited to a more or less already-set agenda of what is supposed to be done (Andersson et al, 2010; Forkby, 2010a).

Two conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, since the majority of the research has concentrated on the workers' perspective, it is debatable whether the results reflect what is actually happening in the clubs. It might be more accurately described as offering an ideal type of professional image that could serve as a desired goal. When young people are interviewed or practice is observed, the picture of the daily life of a youth club tends to be different. Secondly, it raises the question of the individual and group dimension in the clubs. Both internationally (e.g. Sercombe, 2010) and nationally, workers usually see themselves in engaging with a young person as an individual, yet the group dimensions of youth clubs are evident. This seems to suggest that more attention should be paid to the social psychological dimension of the youth club.

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