

Article

Friendship: The ‘Achilles Heel’ of European Youth Work Policy

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Abstract: This paper analyses the historical development of friendship in youth work in the UK and more recent studies of the impact of youth work in both the UK and in the wider European context to argue that European youth work has failed to acknowledge this important aspect of practice. During youth work’s initial 150 years in the UK three concepts resided at the heart of the enterprise: (a) the ‘club’; (b) ‘membership’ and (c) ‘friendship’. Friendship eclipsed the others for they grew out of the friendships formed between workers and young people, and the young people themselves. Practitioners during this era expected to offer unconditional friendship to members, and to teach them the arts of acquiring and sustaining friendships via the modelling of virtuous behaviour. An exemplar founded upon Aristotle’s concept of friendship. Two recent research programmes highlight the degree to which friendship remains a core element within youth work. These are a comparative study of European youth work provision and a longitudinal study of youth work’s impact. Each found the acquisition of and ability to make and retain friends were viewed as key benefits accruing from involvement in youth groups. Both, however, stand in stark contrast to current formulations regarding youth work’s future role in Europe which pay scant attention to the centrality of friendship. This article discusses these developments and the important role friendship has and can play within youth work.

Keywords: friendship; youth work; Europe; policy; history; philosophy



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1. Introduction

This article provides a detailed analysis of European youth work policy in terms of the extent to which it embraces the embedded notion of friendship within youth work. The article draws on a range of secondary sources for its policy analysis, which includes all the major policy documents and reports published by both the EU and the Council of Europe in the last decade. The analytical framework is three-fold. Firstly, it utilizes a variety of historical sources to evidence the importance of friendship to the development of youth work. Secondly, it grounds an analysis of friendship in the seminal philosophy of Aristotle and Plato. Thirdly the analysis is further augmented by drawing extensively on contemporary research on the impact of youth work, which further foregrounds the importance of friendship to the process of youth work.

2. Friendship as an Ideal

Friendship has consistently attracted the attention of novelists, playwrights and screenwriters. An interest that mirrors the pivotal role it plays in our own lives. Friendship is a topic that persistently arises in conversation and doggedly occupies our thoughts. Not only do our own friendships concern us, for example, parents regularly deliberate on those of their offspring. Youth workers scrutinize the web of relationships prevailing amongst members and devote many hours to discussing with young people the trials and tribulations the latter experience acquiring, maintaining, and losing friends.

Early youth work literature placed significant emphasis on friendship. During the last half-century, however, explicit reference has waned somewhat. Mark Smith's article *Friendship and Informal Education* [1]; Robertson's 2005 book *Youth Clubs: Association, Participation, Friendship, and Fun* [2] and Huw Blacker's 2010 chapter on *Relationships, Friendship, and Youth Work* [3], being the limited examples. Contemporary youth work writers are not alone in displaying relative disinterest. Philosophers and social scientists exhibit an analogous posture. Graham Allan, possibly the sociologist most attentive to the topic during the last three decades, notes there 'are very few studies in sociology (or other social science disciplines) . . . explicitly concerned with friendship' [4] (p. 84). A gap that may partially emanate from the fact 'there is next to no information about friends in official statistics' [5] (p. 23). An absence that makes research costly and arduous. Michael Pakaluk similarly comments that although much deliberated upon by Athenian and Roman thinkers 'throughout much of the recent past philosophers have completely failed to discuss it' [6] (p. xiv). Subsequently, a measure of heightened awareness has transpired (see for example [7–10]), but friendship still remains a backwater. Hence over 2500 years after their appearance it is still Aristotle's writings that remain 'the foundation of every serious discussion of friendship' [9] (p. 8).

Friendship is a fluid concept; individuals collectively apply copious criteria as to who they might, or might not, designate a 'friend'. Youth workers, for instance, may refer to work friends, childhood friends, close friends, ex-friends, and new friends. In doing so they differentiate friends from others categorised, say, acquaintances, neighbours, peers, mates, clients, companions, colleagues or even enemies. Amongst those nominated friends we may enquire as to whether these are of equal standing. For example, how secure is the friendship with a colleague? Would it, for instance, survive your or their promotion? Similarly, can a teenage friendship outlive the discovery that your friend has now radically revised their political or religious beliefs?

Although youth workers cannot regulate who they come into contact with in a practice setting each retains a choice as to the gradation of friendship they extend to others. Hence it is legitimate to enquire when we discuss friendship in relation to youth work practice what type of relationship are we referring to? Can for instance a worker be friends with a young person linked to a project they manage? If one answers yes to that question, then one might justifiably probe as to whether such a relationship is say appropriate or equitable. Likewise, one can query if it is acceptable to employ a friend, even if no other candidate is to hand. Although Aristotle never encountered youth work he nevertheless addressed dilemmas akin to these in his books *Eudemian Ethics* (E.E.) [11] and *Nicomachean Ethics* (N.E.) [12]. For instance, he counselled that work-based friendships are rarely built on firm foundations, because they tend to arise from a reciprocated conviction that the friendship is for the present mutually beneficial. Similarly, if your colleague rises to become your manager, Aristotle doubted the friendship would outlast the disparity in status. By the same token the close friend who moves far away, Aristotle warned, will probably not long remain close. For he held meaningful friendships require shared experiences, recurring time together and above all the lubrication of conversation. Also, Aristotle knew, like any successful youth worker, that young people rarely opt to spend time with those 'whose company is painful, or not pleasant' [11] (1157b11) (Rather than using the normal page references employed in relation to all other material cited with regards Plato's *Lysis* and Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* (E.E.) and *Nicomachean Ethics* (N.E.) we employ the traditional line referencing system adopted by all editions of those texts). Consequently, those unable to make or sustain friendships are, if we apply Aristotle's analysis, ill-equipped to be community or youth workers.

3. Origins

Serious philosophical analysis relating to friendship commenced with Plato's dialogue *Lysis* [13]. This opens with Plato's teacher and friend Socrates entering into a conversation with two young men loitering outside a gymnasium. Gradually others join and depart

until Socrates remains the sole constant. What we encounter here is almost a textbook narrative of contemporary detached youth work in action. If we tweaked the language these exchanges might be occurring outside a modern-day gym or takeaway. Socrates firmly but sympathetically encourages the young men he happens upon to reflect on their relationships and behaviour. Quickly he discovers Hippothales is infatuated with the beautiful Lysis and he asks Socrates how best to woo the object of his desire. This triggers a discussion as to the disparity between infatuation and love during which Socrates invites the young men to reflect on whether the infatuated really know the object of their desire. The outcome is that they concur friendship, unlike infatuation, is founded upon mutual awareness. Thereafter the exchanges centre on the meaning of friendship, from which arise certain insights. The first is Socrates' declaration that he would 'rather have a good friend' [13] (211e) than the finest food or abundant wealth. Second, Socrates' questioning of Menexenus and Lysis, two later arrivals, prompts a recognition that deep friendships can arise between those who are unlike in terms of say age, social background, or belief systems (215–216). Third, the wicked and unvirtuous 'never enter into true friendship with either the good or the bad' (214d). Fourth, if you 'are friends with each other, then in some way you naturally belong to each other' (221e). Finally, as the dialogue draws to a close Socrates admits that although he counts Menexenus and Lysis amongst his friends he has been unable to discern from their dialogue 'what a friend is' (223). The ending may appear subdued, even disappointing, but as Vernon points out what Plato reveals is that friendship 'is a way of life, in the sense of being a constant process of becoming with others' [7] (p. 175). Therefore, like dialogue, good friendship will be open-ended and a way of life. Here we encounter a stance, we believe, youth workers can see eye-to-eye with. Is it not a function of youth work to help others acquire the capacity to embark on a life-long voyage of becoming? And during that journey assimilate an aptitude to form and nurture friendships which will help make the passage a fulfilling one.

Aristotle's indebtedness to Plato's *Lysis* [13] is apparent from the resemblances which surface within his own writings on friendship. However, Aristotle delves deeper into the topic notably in the *Nicomachean Ethics* [11]. Overall, his discussion concentrates on distinguishing three types of friendship; upon the relationship between justice and friendship and finally on various disputed issues. Throughout we encounter an analysis that speaks to youth work practice. Central to Aristotle's stance lies a conviction that 'without friends, no one would choose to live' whatever their status or wealth [11] (1155a5). A belief that resides alongside a conviction that friendship serves to hold nations, institutions, and communities together. A viewpoint that applies with equal force to a youth centre or community project. For these, like a democratic society, rely on members and affiliates internalising certain shared elemental rules and behavioural norms if they, and the project, are to flourish. The deeper the wells of friendship that they can draw upon the more they flourish and prosper. For it is friendship that enables a youth project to thrive and enmity that will bring it down.

Aristotle contends there are three discrete forms of friendship founded in turn upon utility, pleasure, or virtue. He differentiates the first two from the third as follows:

Those who love each other for their utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other. So too with those who love for the sake of pleasure; it is not for their character that men love ready-witted people but because they find them pleasant. (1156a10-12)

The opening pair are real but superficial forms of friendship. Two simulacra implode when one or both cease to view the other individuals as useful; or entertaining, interesting or diverting. Together they stand apart from a true friendship grounded in goodness and virtue wherein one desires for one's friend what is best for them. Perfect friendship is 'the friendship of men who are good, alike in virtue: for these wish well alike to each other . . . And they are good in themselves' (1156b5). When in this context Aristotle says a perfect friend is 'another self' he means the concern one has for your own well-being and good is to an equivalent degree extended to your friend. You wish the best for them for their sake not your own, and in essence, know them as you know yourself. Aristotle held such friendships were an essential

ingredient for a good life. However, the 'perfect' or 'complete' friendship was hard-won. Only the virtuous might hope to enjoy a 'perfect' friendship. Selfish, dishonest, greedy and narcissistic individuals, from the outset, are disqualified from such relationships being unable or unwilling to embrace the moral obligations essential to give them meaning. Here was a viewpoint that youth workers can surely share. For it would run counter to their role as educators to teach anti-social modes of behaviour and unsound values. Many might also endorse Aristotle's belief that the desire for pleasure can perform a disproportionate role in the formation of friendships amongst the young. Hence friendships with good and virtuous people, such as youth workers, can play a valued role in keeping them from 'error' [11] (1155a15), while simultaneously helping them acquire the talents and ethical values needed to embrace 'perfect' friendship at some future date.

Philosophers overwhelmingly share a common belief that friendship is a crucial component of a good life, a moral good that enriches individuals and society. One which cultivates moral sensibilities and sensitivity to the concerns, fears, and anxieties of others. Friendship, as Laurence Thomas [14] reminds us, enables one 'to grasp the moral experiences of another' so that 'our moral sensibilities cannot help but be awakened' (p. 156). Given youth workers, by definition, seek to ensure young people assimilate the traits Thomas outlines and empower them to become wise and virtuous adults it is inconceivable they will not strive to help them internalise attributes that will qualify them to fashion and nourish friendships. Further, although friendship may appear to be primarily a private relationship the values and behaviours that it promotes extend outwards into the wider community. As Suzanne Stern-Gillet [15] stresses for Aristotle the criteria for being a virtuous friend, a good person 'and those for being a good citizen do . . . coincide completely' (p. 157). A state of harmony, or what he referred to as 'concord', within civil society, a community, or a club can, therefore, only be secured where members share a common 'purpose and desire . . . for the same objects' [12] (1241a26-27). With reference to youth work that would surely include the promotion of friendship and concord. Although modern-day workers may not acknowledge those as prime motives it is self-evidently the case that they must be. Unless the worker is one of those who is driven by selfish ambition, in which case, they are unsuited for the office. After all, each club and project requires harmony and concord to thrive, and all workers will, if only to ensure their professional survival, endeavour to minimise enmity and conflict amongst those they work alongside as well as between themselves and the young people. To do otherwise would fly in the face of every known model of good practice.

We must, at this juncture, acknowledge that other philosophers have questioned Aristotle's conception of friendship notably Immanuel Kant and Soren Kierkegaard. Kant in his *Lecture on Friendship* [16] argues, by way of contrast to the centrality of the 'perfect friendship', that 'the more civilised man becomes, the broader his outlook and the less room there is for special friendships; civilised man seeks universal pleasures and a universal friendship' (p. 216). Kierkegaard [17] rebuffs Aristotle's model, in a similar fashion to Kant, but this time it is on the grounds that as a Christian he is required to love all his neighbours and this 'self-renunciation casts out all preferential love just as it casts out all self-love' [18] (p. 67). Thus, for Kierkegaard, there is no leeway left for friendships that exclude anyone or favour some at the expense of others. One can envisage a youth worker espousing this standpoint on the grounds that they cannot and should not discriminate against some young people by withholding the gift of friendship from them. Kierkegaard's and Kant's positions are, we believe, not, however, incompatible with Aristotle's. For example, in the case of youth workers, they may nurture benevolent feelings toward all the young people who attend their club or project and strive to secure all that is good for each of them, whilst simultaneously enjoying a friendship approximating Aristotle's 'complete' model, outside or inside the work environment. One does not surely eliminate the other. Indeed, Kant acknowledges this possibility when discussing individuals able to form many friendships. Persons who are 'of a kindly disposition, who are always prepared to look on the best side of things. The combination of such goodness of heart with taste

and understanding characterizes the friend of all' [19] (p. 69). This summation essentially captures core characteristics that one might hope to encounter within a youth worker. We might not expect everyone we meet or know to be of a kindly disposition or retain an air of optimism even when others despair. But youth work is a calling or profession which requires by definition a capacity to befriend the friendless, exhibit compassion and sustain a conviction that with the correct approach, the behaviour and attitudes of others can if required, be reframed for the better. Youth work as an educational pursuit must hold that it has some capacity to fulfil that role or it is reduced to being an exercise in futility. The proverbial man or woman in the street is not required to be a 'friend to all'. However, a youth and community worker is and hence, if they are fitted for the work, will be capable of complying with the high standards Kant delineates. During their daily round, the youth worker may well encounter the venal, narcissistic, or mendacious. Of course, they cannot hope for 'perfect' friendships with such persons, but they can offer friendships of utility and pleasure. We should also note, as Grayling reminds us, that a friend is someone whom one can trust to tell us:

When we are going wrong, reprove us, advise us, can suggest a course of action when we are wavering in a dilemma, can stand up for us or do something for us when we need an ally. She can also tell us helpful lies when we need reassurance or calming down. [8] (p. 178)

The above captures much of the role that a good youth worker can be called upon to fulfil. Over and above this role of the supportive 'friend' the worker must via modelling give expression to the attributes of 'perfect' friendship. They must offer those with whom they work an informal educational experience that will suggest alternative lifestyle choices and more appropriate values that will make for them the 'perfect' friendship something that is a feasible possibility.

4. Valuing Friendship in Youth Work

The scant interest philosophers have for a long-time exhibited interest in friendship is noteworthy, nevertheless the 'philosophical tradition', Nehamas concludes, 'by and large, considers friendship a crucial element in the good life, an unadulterated boon, a moral good' [9] (p. 95). Contemporary youth work is similarly outwardly apathetic towards friendship but during the first century or so of its existence youth workers not only shared Nehamas's opinion but held friendship and fellowship to be a core component of their practice. Notably by endorsing via their practice Aristotle's belief that friendlessness was 'a very terrible thing' [12] (1234b33) from which individuals should be rescued or offered an escape route. Hence, they endeavoured to ensure young people have tendered the hand of friendship and taught, via by word and deed, the arts of friendship. Friendship between worker and member was as a consequence viewed not as a dangerous or disturbing aberration but as a desired outcome, as was friendship and concord between members.

This trait was not unique to youth work for it matched the tenor of their times. Industrialisation, urbanisation and widespread impoverishment eroded the historical patterns of family and community life which it was rightly or wrongly assumed afforded support in a pre-industrial rural environment. The scattering of people who were once a community meant many living in the rapidly growing urban locales found themselves isolated and vulnerable. Thus, it was no accident that youth organisations and clubs emerged in the mid to late nineteenth century alongside an unprecedented growth in voluntary provision to sustain the sick, elderly, disabled, destitute, unemployed, and vulnerable (see [18]). Notably mutual-aid or Friendly Societies, as they were commonly designated, were created, funded, and self-managed by working-class men and women to help themselves and their neighbours survive 'hard times' [19,20]. Friendly Societies post-1800 increased in number and membership until by 1938 over 20 million adults were registered members, within an overall population of 38 million which included children [21] (p. 109). Youth work trailed in the footsteps of the Friendly Societies, adopting their organisational model and ethos. Concepts of membership, self-reliance, mutuality and friendship were embraced and in turn became the lynchpins of these early

youth organisations. Equally this mindset sustained the new adult education movements. G. M. Trevelyan [22], who simultaneously taught at Cambridge University and (unpaid) at The Workingmen's College (London), described the latter and their ilk as places where 'we are friends educating each other' (p. 198). A phrase later adapted by Josephine Macalister Brew [23] to describe the workings of an archetypal youth club as a community educating itself. Befriending was equally the key principle underpinning settlement, probation and social work during those ground-breaking decades. Little wonder then that the initial training programmes for all three were integrated with that for youth and community work.

The earliest national and international youth work organisation, the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association), was launched in 1844 by twelve friends gathered in George Williams' London lodgings. Ten years later the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) arose from a coterie of friends meeting at Emma Robarts' Barnet home. Their swift expansion was similarly reliant upon groups of friends collaborating to initiate affiliated branches. Predictably these organisations at every level placed great importance upon the promotion of fellowship. Besides undertaking evangelism and welfare work branches were mandated to proffer to friendless young people migrating to their town or city a place where each would encounter new friends and fellowship. From the outset the YMCA was inaugurated to extend to all the 'bond of fellowship' [24] (p. 125); whilst the YWCA similarly sought 'to provide Christian friends for all young women' [25] (p. 72). Neither in this respect was an outlier.

The YMCA and YWCA catered predominately for those drawn from the upper and middle classes. Or as Moor explained the YWCA enrolled 'girls of leisure and education' [25] (p. 24). The earliest agencies designed to accrue a membership enlisted from the working class were the GFS (Girls' Friendly Society) and MABYS (Metropolitan Society for Befriending Young Servants), which in tandem covered the nation. Launched in 1875 each, as their names stressed, sought to 'bring the good gift of friendship, with all its benefits to body, mind, and spirit, within the reach of every girl and young woman able and willing to join' [25] (pp. 5–6). Their shared *modus operandi* was the formation of small groups led by a financially secure woman who undertook to befriend each member. Tasked with furnishing practical help in matters such as securing safe and reputable employment and decent lodgings she, above all else, extended the hand of friendship to each member. MABYS expected leaders to invite their members to their homes for tea on a regular basis and to frequently visit them at both their residences and workplaces. When calling upon the young woman at their home the 'leader' would arrive with a small gift, much as they would when visiting a relative or long-standing friend. Gradually each organisation expanded their remit to establishing clubs which 'since the Club is for girls, the aim is that it should as far as possible be run by girls with. . . none excluded from friendship and fellowship' [26] (p. 25).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, separate boys' and girls' clubs began growing apace. The club movement was firmly grounded in the concept of friendship. First, each predominately grew via friendship networks. Friends encouraged friends to join, who in turn prompted other friends to affiliate snowball fashion; for as Matthews notes 'it is rare for any boy or girl to join a club where they do not already know somebody' [27] (p. 40). Second, they flourished because as Eager [28], the foremost historian of boys' clubs and himself a club leader, stressed 'historically, personal friendship, uncalculating and needing no formulas, has been the effective element in Boys' Club work' (p. 340). Leaders, frequently recruited from the ranks of ex-members, were inducted into a tradition that emphasised the concept of befriending. Charles Russell [29], who established an early club before becoming in 1916, the Home Office official responsible for juvenile justice, penned the first substantive text on boys' clubs. This highlighted friendship's primary function.

The talent for making friends is indeed one of the chief secrets of success in this work. It is not difficult; if a lad wants to talk, let him: do not put him off or snub him undeservedly, but listen patiently and appear to be—you will gradually become—interested in all the petty details of his life. However trivial his confidences, be sympathetic. Do not say "Oh,

really!" and walk off with the ill-bred manner with which you may defend yourself against a bore of your own age and standing. Make a point of inquiring after and visiting boys who are ill, and in general, show the active interest which all men show in the welfare of their ordinary friends. Unless a boys' club officer becomes a friend of the members, he will lose his greatest opportunities, and his other possibly excellent qualifications will be largely at a discount. (p. 57)

Basil Henriques [30], a pioneer club and settlement worker, in his textbook on club management identified two key roles each leader must undertake. The first being:

to know and to understand really well every individual member. He must have it felt that he is their friend and their servant. (p. 61)

An identical stance prevailed apropos girls clubs. Lily Montagu [31], who initiated the founding of the National Council of Girls' Club in 1911, in her autobiography held it to be a requisite that club workers shared three things with their members 'education, friendship, faith' (p. 33). For those leaders who had 'the gift of imparting knowledge, added to the gift for friendship . . . can teach them anything from Greek to lace making' (p. 52). A perspective endorsed in the first UK textbook on girls' clubs was published as late as 1932. Leaders, it emphasised, were teachers who came 'to share the fun and enjoyment of life' with her members to whom 'she is a human, understanding friend' [32] (p. 7). Collectively these viewpoints were not aberrations but prior to 1939 are to be encountered across the board in youth work policy documents, journal articles, textbooks and club histories.

The 1939 to 1945 war changed youth work in the UK, and incidentally the structure of most welfare provisions, almost beyond recognition. 'Total War' compelled the state to intervene in civil society on an unprecedented scale. Years of central and local government indifference to youth work evaporated in a matter of days not months. The local government hastily bequeathed legislative oversight of the provision and supplied it with funding to enable it to create its own network of clubs, centres and projects. Voluntary organisations were given headquarters grants to expand their training and provision, but the terms and conditions were laid down by the central government. The state aimed for universal uptake but despite the introduction of a 'registration system' in 1941 it never achieved more than a 70% rate of affiliation, and of these, a high proportion were members of uniformed, mostly military, units. After hostilities ceased successive governments opted to leave the new structure in situ. The return to voluntary provision was never viewed as a serious alternative to dominance by central and local government. It was a response that was mirrored elsewhere within the welfare sector. Friendly societies were effectively dismantled, and a centralised social security system was put in their place. Social work and probation were restructured as agencies whose priority was the management of 'clients' leaving no further room for the once dominant befriending model. Henceforth both adopted a formalised rule-based format in which power was unambiguously placed in the hands of the newly professionalised social workers and probation officers. Within youth work, weak funding streams led to the re-structuring being more drawn out but the policy drift was identical. Over time, 'members' ceased to be friends and became in turn 'clients', 'kids', 'punters' or 'customers'; whilst 'clubs' transmuted into 'centres', 'units', 'zones' or 'hubs'. In both cases, the changes reflected fundamental adjustments in the relationship between the adults and the young people. The staff were professionalised and the administration structures were bureaucratised. Henriques' [30] notion of being friends and servants of the members slowly but surely evaporated. Youth work was no longer a calling or part of a wider social movement but an occupation and a profession. Out went much of the moral and ethical element to be replaced with itemised outcomes. Education was by stages pushed aside by learning as increasingly youth work became a blunt tool employed by governments to address the 'moral panic' of the moment or whatever 'problem' was currently high up their political agenda. In this environment, there existed scant room for 'friendship'. In fact, professionalisation turned it into a dangerous presence that blurred the boundaries between staff and users; managers and clients. Thus as Young [33] warned

Subscribing to the idea of the youth worker as “friend” is problematic since the word carries heavy associations of “socialising” which detracts from the essential “professional” or “work focus” intended. (p. 74)

Even Robertson [2] who placed significant emphasis on the importance of friendship within the club setting felt obliged to offer up a similar warning against the worker becoming a ‘substitute friend’ (p. 56).

Unfortunately, once friendship becomes ‘problematic’ then it becomes much harder for the youth worker to embark on teaching it via example or dialogue. Likewise, barriers intrude that make it difficult, if not impossible, for a youth worker to engage in a dialogue with young people that will enable them as friends and equals to mutually acquire the virtues needed to guide us to a ‘good life’. At best ‘friendship’ might become, in this context, yet another item on the syllabus to be ‘delivered’.

5. Friendship and Youth Work in the Professional Era

The emergence of professionalism in youth work, arguably presaged by the Albemarle Report [34], as we have seen brought significant changes to the framing of friendship within youth work practice. Explicit references to friendship have now largely been replaced by references to ‘association’ both in youth work theory [35] and in UK government policy with this emphasis on association appearing in both the Albemarle and the subsequent Thompson reports [36]. The professional era placed firmer boundaries on the types of relationships youth workers might foster with young people. Balancing: ‘Being friendly, accessible and responsive while acting with integrity’ [37] (p. 4). This emphasis on professional boundaries was later codified in the NYA’s statement of professional principles in 1999 [38] which helped ensure youth workers were intent on meeting young people’s needs and not their own.

Another aspect of friendship that has been reframed is the shift from friendship to relationship-building. For example, Jeffs and Smith argue: ‘Relationship building has been central to the rhetoric and practice of much youth work. Relationships are seen as a fundamental source of learning and happiness [37] (p. 3). However, friendship has not disappeared entirely from descriptions of youth work. For example, Robertson [2] explicitly locates friendship at the heart of youth work in club-based settings stressing that the ‘important ingredient of youth work is the development of trusting relationships’ (p. 11). Clubs offer young people a rare opportunity to ‘test out and make new friendships’ (p. 13). Despite the shift away from an explicit embracing of friendship, it remains an implicit and central, but largely acknowledged, aspect of youth work as evidenced by recent research on the impact of youth work.

Firstly, a European study into the impact of youth work across six European contexts—England, Scotland, Finland, Estonia, France, and Italy [39,40]. The research elicited firsthand the impact of youth work on the lives of 844 young people who recounted the changes youth work had made to their lives. The most consistent finding across all six settings was that opportunities to sustain and make friendships were vitally important to the young people surveyed. Respondents time and again recounted how important youth work was in enabling them to make new friends and nourish existing friendships. Importantly not only was this described as an end in itself but the friendships were in many instances a precursor to a range of other impacts. In England, for example, it was noted that: ‘in addition to young people talking about meeting new people and making new friends, they also talked about being ‘helped’ to socialise with others and build relationships [39] (p. 123). In Finland, it was stressed how; ‘new friends can multiply and lead to doing things outside one’s home and the youth centre’ (p. 152). Other Finish young people recounted how they: ‘go out with friends more easily nowadays [and] . . . have the courage to socialise with others. . . made new friends and been accepted and . . . have become more open. [And another] made friends and learned social skills’ (p. 152).

Secondly *Launching Into Life* [41] a research project designed to assess the impact membership of the Sea Cadets had had on past affiliates. Over 3000 ex-members aged

18 to 90 plus were surveyed and interviewed. Consequently, *Launching Into Life* is the first longitudinal research project designed to assess the influence of a youth organisation's provision upon the adult lives of past members. It confirms that membership had 'a capacity to nurture the formation of strong enduring friendships amongst members' (p. 57). Amongst the list of the benefits gifted by membership, the acquisition of friends was sixth out of the 25 cited. Also highlighted was the fact that membership taught many how to socialise and mix with others and form friendships many of which lasted a lifetime. A significant number of those surveyed opted to mention leaders who, by word and deed, changed them for the better. Yet the Sea Cadets, unlike earlier youth organisations, did not specifically set out to prioritise either of these outcomes. However, this research reminds us that to young people at least friendship remains integral to youth work, a point that youth work policy makers should be mindful of.

6. European Youth Work Policy

Youth Work has increasingly been prioritised within the policy discourses of the European Union (EU), European Commission (EC) and Council of Europe (CoE). Generally, all these view it as a means of achieving a wide range of European policy objectives. Arguably this focus commenced towards the close of the last century with two simultaneous developments within the CoE. The first was the opening in 1972 of the European Youth Centre (EYC) located in Strasbourg. This has residential facilities which enabled it 'run an annual programme of 40 to 50 activities' [42]. The second was the formation of the European Youth Foundation (EYF) which was funded 'to provide financial and educational support for European youth activities' [43].

These early CoE initiatives, however, did not explicitly acknowledge youth work or the contribution it made, rather by omission it was subsumed within the wider umbrella of youth policy. A formula that continued throughout this early period, for example, youth work was not even referred to in the recommendation to promote youth exchanges [44]. Despite the fact that youth workers, from the outset, played a crucial role in their promotion and management. Youth work received one of its first explicit mentions within the Commission of the European Communities [45] *Youth for Europe* programme. Built on the early youth exchanges this initiative also supported: 'study visits', however, it pointedly called for the 'professional development for youth workers' and interventions aimed at encouraging 'collaborative activities in the field of youth work' (p. 13). Another key marker was the first 'European Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth' which took place in Strasbourg in 1985 and led to the launch of the *European Youth Week* [46]. The CoE shortly afterward initiated a review of member state's youth policies, the first of these took place in Finland in 1999. Importantly each review was obligated to include a discrete assessment of the country's youth work provision.

The establishment of the 'field of youth work' in the early 1990's was a seminal moment in European youth work discourse [47]. A 'field' being the official designation of a specific policy priority area across Europe. Once this occurred the way opened for the allocation of significant funds earmarked specifically for youth work. Soon multi-billion Euro funding streams such as *Youth in Action* and later *Erasmus+* came into being.

Another key marker was the *Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, on Youth Work* [48] which enacted a commitment 'to supporting and developing youth work'. This recognised youth work to be a key player in addressing eight 'cross sectoral' policy agendas relating to—education and training; employment and entrepreneurship; health and well-being; participation; voluntary activities; social inclusion; youth and the world and creativity and culture. The existing commitment to youth work was reaffirmed in 2020 with a further resolution that provided a *Framework for Establishing a European Youth Work Agenda* [49]. This latter resolution defined youth work to be 'a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people. . . geared to young people's needs' [49].

An additional notable milestone regarding the promotion of youth work within European policy discourse was the Council of Europe's *Recommendation to Member States on Youth Work* released in May 2017. The document contended that:

Youth work makes an important contribution to active citizenship. . . and is based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people and on voluntary participation. Youth work is quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision-making. [50]

A subsequent commitment from the same body went further and identified 'youth work' as one of its four: 'Youth Sector Priorities for 2022–2025' alongside: Revitalising pluralistic democracy; Young people's rights and Living together in peaceful and inclusive societies [51].

7. Friendship in European Youth Work Policy

References to friendship in European youth work policy are rare. Not entirely absent but given, as we have seen, the centrality of friendship to young people involved in youth work and its prominence within youth work theory, it is surprisingly scarce. The influential *Recommendation to Member States on Youth Work* has an implicit, if brief, reference to young people's peer relationships when it states that:

Youth work should create an enabling environment that is actively inclusive and socially engaging, creative and safe, fun and serious, playful and planned. . . It should focus on young people and create spaces for association and bridges to support transition to adulthood and autonomy. [50] (p. 9)

References to the importance of 'socially engaging youth spaces' and the focus on developing 'association' are important but it is surely remiss to not explicitly mention friendship. After all 'association' does not necessarily entail meaningful relationships between either a youth worker and the young person, or between the young people themselves. It may comprise only contact via an activity, event, or programme which has zero or minimal educational content and amounts to scarcely more than a gathering or passing experience. Of course, the recommendation can be read as valuing the development of adult or youth worker relationships with young people as much as or, even instead of, peer relations. However, peer relations which may be, and often are, brief and superficial cannot be viewed as in any way synonymous with friendship. At best, without the educational and dialogical dimension, they will amount to friendships of utility or pleasure, at worst merely socialisation or nodding acquaintances.

The Council of the European Union's Resolution on Youth Work makes no mention of friendship. It blandly acknowledges that 'young people are an integral part of an increasingly complex society' [48] (p. 4). Then proceeds from that statement of the obvious to suggest the self-evident, namely that peers play an important role in the life of young people, along with the home, school, the workplace and the media. The Resolution also concedes that through youth work young people can: 'learn from each other, meet each other, play, explore and experiment' [48] (p. 4). However, this is a minimalistic ambition that holds out little in the way of hope for a richer future. Friendship, and the intrinsic links it has to the fostering of moral, social, and ethical values, is overlooked. As such it is not perceived as having any role to play within this articulation of youth work practice.

Friendship, and likewise its educative qualities when located within a youth work setting, is viewed as even less central by many subsequent European Youth Work policy documents. In a systematic review of cross-sectoral youth policy *Needles in Haystacks* [52] friendship is absent despite the authors stating explicitly that their 'book intends to provide some instruments of reflection, design and implementation that could be useful to bring about improvement in young people's lives' (p. 6). They identify almost no role for friendship in this process. Indeed, the book contains only a solitary mention of friendship

located within a passage devoted to the identification of *Youth issues, needs, and interests for 10–14 year-olds in Estonia* (p. 81).

Two publications from the EC of particular note are the *Working with Young People: The Value of Youth Work in the European Union* [53] and *Quality Youth Work: A common framework for the further development of youth work* [54]. Again, each makes only limited mention of friendship. The former—200-page report—has just 17 references to friendship. Nine of which relate to discussions of youth-friendly, but non-youth work organisations and venues such as counselling centres. There are, however, three references to the extent to which participation is linked to friendship, for example, the comment that ‘young people’s participation also depends on whether their friends’ participate’ [53] (p. 83). Plus, there is an aside that in Estonia young people can acquire ‘new friends through volunteer camps’ (p. 148). The report does explicitly mention the importance of friendship to young people, citing it as a common feature of young people’s responses to the interviews undertaken for the research that underpins the report, as a result, it features prominently in a word cloud produced from these interviews. Despite this clear statement of the importance of friendship to young people, it is only identified as part of what the document refers to as the ‘broader contribution’ (p. 140).

Quality Youth Work [54] is a report from the Expert Group on Youth Work which ‘starts with a discussion on the nature and specifics of youth work . . . [and] its core principles’ (p. 9). This account barely mentions friends or friendship. In this 100-page report only passing references to friendship arise, such as when the authors remark ‘youth workers contribute towards creating a friendly and enjoyable environment’ (p. 29). Similarly, within a description of open youth work provision in Austria we are told that ‘young people can simply spend their spare time there, have fun and enjoy life, meet friends, and get to know new friends’ (p. 76). Finally, the authors in relation to a discussion relating to quality indicators employed in Dutch youth work cite one which refers to ‘the development of peer networks is also a success factor; [as] most of them were not having friendships before’ (p. 45). However, these minimal and occasional references in no way indicate that friendship is a characteristic that is central to ‘quality’ youth work.

Thinking Seriously about Youth Work, produced by the European Youth Partnership [55], is a substantial review of youth work practice within over a dozen European settings. The text seeks to provide a comprehensive account of contemporary youth work in Europe, but it again makes only limited references to friendship. Half a dozen iterations of the term ‘youth friendly’ arise in relation to environments, institutions, and relationships with youth workers. One of the editors, Williamson, in his introductory chapter *Winning space, building bridges—What youth work is all about* fails to even mention friendship, and this absence re-occurs throughout the bulk of the text. There are notable exceptions. One is Redig and Cousse’s discussion of practice in Flanders which stresses that:

The power of all youth work lies in its ability to create free spaces for young people (being young together) characterised by . . . friendship and relationships. (p. 35)

Another is Kiilokoski’s analysis of Finnish youth work which similarly stands apart when recounting how ‘ensuring that everybody has friends and is able to take part in a group is one of the aims of youth work’ [55] (p. 57). *Thinking Seriously about Youth Work* offers one further mention of friendship when it quotes the European Youth Forum suggestion that youth work: ‘Provides the space for building interactions, friendships, peer-learning, developing young people’s competences’ [55] (p. 182).

One of the few European policy documents to place friends and friendship close to its heart is *Between Insecurity and Hope: Reflections on Youth Work with Refugees* [56]. This 200-page report published by Youth Partnership contains 76 references to friendship. Most relate to the importance for young refugees of making or finding new friends and how this process is tied to a core principle of youth work which it identifies as ‘creating the space and opportunities to make friends, to hang out and to develop relationships, and to learn together’ (p. 17).

Within the publication, we encounter frequent references to the important role youth work can play in helping refugees access ‘a network of friends’. A focus on friendship within a commentary on youth work with refugees is perhaps to be expected. One can assume that refugees, who are uprooted from pre-existing networks, will place a heightened priority on establishing new friendships given their re-location may have led to a painful separation ‘from their families and friends’ [56] (p. 67). Therefore, youth workers who are in close contact with refugees might be expected to help them overcome what one young person described as ‘her loneliness [which they] experienced as a lack of friendships’ (p. 17). Discussions arise within the text relating to the merits of fostering friendships amongst fellow refugees who share common interests. Noting that ‘it is always easier to stay within one’s own circle of friends with the same language (p. 76) but in doing so they may, as a consequence, encounter difficulties ‘in creating relationships and friendships’ within the wider community ‘mainly due to religious differences’ (p. 107).

The authors place a marked emphasis on the need to establish new friendships in the host countries. Given the significance of friendship is highlighted in this context it is bizarre that it is overlooked elsewhere with respect to other youth work contexts. For instance, do not young people who relocate to acquire employment or continue their education also face the risk of separation or loneliness? Similarly, might not those who remain in their hometown often encounter loneliness as they transition to adulthood or because their past friends move away? We would, therefore, suggest that friendship is integral to the lives of all young people—not just displaced refugees—certainly young people identify it as one of the most valued aspects of youth work.

Before closing the discussion of friendship in the context of European youth work policy it is worth reflecting on the references to the related concept of ‘peers’. The term peer means something different from friendship, for example, individuals can be in the same peer group and not necessarily be friends. Peer relations in the setting of youth work tend to reflect a similarity in age, gender, or attraction to a given activity or location. As such in policy terms peer relationships possess a functional quality relating to the identification of relationships between young people which does not necessarily have any connection to friendship. Taking *Thinking Seriously about Youth Work* [55] as an example there are far more references to ‘peers’ than friends or friendship. However, these are almost exclusively focused on ‘peer learning’, and this again has little substantive connection to friendship *per se*. Some references to peers have a bearing on friendship but these tend to be limited. Such as Kiilokoski’s discussion of youth work in Finland which emphasises the importance of friendship but reiterates that ‘peer relations are seen as an integral part of youth work’ [55] (p. 57).

8. Demand for Friendship

More than 200 years ago John Pounds ventured forth into the slums of Portsmouth to befriend homeless young people and provide them with a rudimentary education, shelter, and nourishment. Thirty years later the YMCA and YWCA extended the ‘hand of friendship’ to young people who found themselves alone in cities and towns. Three decades on Jane Nassau Senior and her colleagues from MABYS pushed aside predatory pimps and other scoundrels to stand on the platforms of London’s railway terminals in order to extend the hand of friendship to young women forced by poverty to seek employment in the capital. Subsequently, girl and boys’ club workers picked up the baton of friendship and proffered it to generations of members.

Explanations for the numerical and relative decline of youth work are plentiful [57]. However, one amongst many is surely the abandonment of friendship as a core premise. Importantly recent research confirms that those who do engage with youth work and youth workers value friendship as highly as their predecessors. The ‘word cloud’ constructed from the interviews collected by researchers for the report *Working with Young People: The Value of Youth Work* [53] (p. 2) clearly indicates ‘friendship’ remains a crucial element within the youth work experience for young people. Those funding, organising, and managing

that experience, as well as those who formulate youth work policy, may not prioritise friendship or view it as either a value to be promoted or taught but the young people themselves clearly cherish it.

The post-1960 professional era of youth work appears to have gone a considerable way towards extinguishing the promotion of friendship as a focus for practice within youth work. Or maybe it has merely lowered its profile for evidence suggests young people continue to view friendship as a crucial element that draws them to youth work settings. Whatever the reality the focus on professional boundaries has served to stress that youth workers must be there 'for' the young people, and attentive to their needs and not their own. This has served to formalised and professionalise relationships between young people and youth workers. Thereby eradicating the possibility of everyday friendships emerging between the parties. The writings and customs of early pioneers, such as Hannah More, Charles Russell, Basil Henriques, and Lily Montagu suggest they would not have quibbled with these caveats. However, for them, and countless others, youth work was neither a profession nor a job but a 'calling'. A form of engagement wherein their prime responsibility was to become the 'servant and friend' of the young people they encountered. The voluntary principle alongside their social and or religious motivation meant these early practitioners consciously, or otherwise, viewed friendship in a similar way to that embraced by Athenian and Roman writers, notably Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. These workers believed their role as an adult was to help young people make sense of the world around them and via example, conversation, dialogue, and at times instruction enable them to enter the adult world as fully-rounded individuals. Their methodology mirrored the approach advocated by Aristotle that 'we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave acts' [11] (1130b). Friendship was to be 'taught' in an identical fashion. An earlier generation of workers, as we have already stressed, encountered few difficulties in embracing this mode of education. Unfortunately, professional youth work although it might be content to teach 'fairness', 'justice', and other virtues via this time-honoured method cannot cross their self-imposed boundaries to teach friendship as a lived experience. This helps to explain why unfortunately friendship although it remains a crucial element within contemporary youth work practice is so rarely discussed or its importance acknowledged.

9. Conclusions

We do not merely argue for the re-introduction of a focus on friendship in youth work because we believe that young people still desire opportunities to meet and make friends. Important though this is. We contend youth work should consciously, by example and word, seek to teach the arts of friendship. First, because available evidence shows that the number of friends individuals have in their lives is diminishing over time. Members of each succeeding post-war generation are more likely to be friendless, and more isolated, than their predecessors [58–60]. Loneliness has escalated year-on-year as this century has unfolded across a wide selection of nation-states [61]. Wherever research has been undertaken it has been shown to be a mounting problem [60]. Indeed, loneliness among teens appears to have been growing at an alarming rate since 2012 [59,61].

Secondly, the focus on friendship is important because evidence indicates that making close friends requires patience, time, sensitivity, and social skills. These skills are learned from the observation of others, through conversations with mature adults, and encountering role models who provide a lived example of friendship in action. Given schools and other educational institutions do not view teaching the arts of friendship to be part of their remit a persuasive case arises for youth organisations to intervene to do so [62]. Indeed, youth workers operating in informal spaces and places may well be those best placed to do this.

Finally, Aristotle was right friendship is an important constituent of a good life. This is confirmed by the most extensive longitudinal study undertaken over an 80-year period into lifestyle. It found having friends and good relationships is the most important indicator of producing a healthy and happy life. As Waldinger and Schulz [63] explain 'the single

decision that could best ensure your health and happiness, science tells us that your choice should be to cultivate warm relationships' (p. 10). It seems those pioneering youth workers were correct after all. Friendship needs to be at the heart of youth work for the well-being of all. Rarely if ever do young people join a club, association, or project to be educated or improved, rather as Pearl Jephcott [64] recognised, they opt to voluntarily enter 'into a friendly relationship' and that, therefore, above all else it is the quality of this relationship which is the test of the true effectiveness or otherwise of the group'. Policymakers everywhere, including those across Europe with a remit for youth work, need to be mindful of this.

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