

The UK National Youth Work Curriculum—Democratic challenges from Finland

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Abstract

This article compares the only two countries—the UK and Finland—that have systematically applied the concept of curriculum to youth work on the national level. It begins by charting the development of a curriculum in youth work in England which has culminated in the production of the new UK government's Department for Culture Media & Sport funded 'National Curriculum for Youth Work' produced by the NYA in 2020. Whilst this entails a shift for youth work in England and removes an element of democracy for local youth workers to agree and establish their own priorities, it does provide a clear policy direction for a beleaguered youth sector. This article then discusses the published findings of a 10-year action research project led by the Finnish Youth Research Society which has worked with local youth workers and managers in a variety of municipal youth work organizations ($N=6$) to establish local youth work curricula. The model has been utilized in 26 municipalities since. The Finnish experience provides a marked contrast to the UK youth work curriculum, as they argue their approach is a more authentic method of establishing a youth work curriculum. The documents produced a clear representations of youth work practice and they contrast with the top-down national curriculum framework. Whilst the UK model may be a positive response to the policy challenges facing youth workers in the UK—the Finnish experience raises questions of the currency within and ownership by the field of any youth work curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

For many years (from 1989/1990 to 2010) the UK was the only country to explicitly articulate youth work by means of a curriculum. This changed in 2010 when Finnish Youth Research Society led an action research projects to apply the concept of curriculum to Finnish youth work. The work-developed tools and model have been utilized ever since, and even today, municipalities are preparing their youth work curricula. It is timely therefore to make a comparison between these two very different approaches.

Approach to the study

The study is a transnational comparative study (Wahlström et al., 2018). We would distinguish our approach from the over-optimistic predictive quality advocated by for example De Bosscher et al. (2008). Their approach to comparative analysis tends to underestimate the variables at play in comparative studies which are many and varied (Øyen, 1990). We are also mindful of Jowell's (1998) suggestion that: 'all social scientists undertaking comparative research should be as open about their limitations as they are enthusiastic about their explanatory powers' (Jowell, 1998, p. 174).

In our approach, we are aware of both the unit of study and the level (Dowling et al., 2018). The unit—the notion of the curriculum itself—is not necessarily translatable across differing European contexts for example. However, to mitigate confusion a working definition is accepted in both contexts that a curriculum is the means by which an educational proposal is made public, which may include aspects of its associated process, methods, and content (Stenhouse, 1975). The level of analysis is different in this study and the researchers are mindful of this. However, as the objects of this study are the differences between the Finnish 'locally' produced curriculum and English 'national' curriculum we did not seek to minimize this variable but are aware that it may well produce a variety of differences. Lastly, we are particularly mindful in our approach to the analysis of the concepts of 'time and space' (Wahlström et al., 2018) and how: 'social, cultural and historical traditions' (Wahlström et al., 2018, p. 655) impact the enactment of the curriculum in the differing contexts.

WHAT IS MEANT BY A YOUTH WORK CURRICULUM?

The UK was, until Finland's recent adoption, the only country to apply the concept of curriculum to youth work. This paper article by casting a critical eye on the development of the youth work curriculum in the UK which culminated in the production of the UK Government Department for Culture Media & (DCMS) funded, National Youth Work Curriculum (NYA, 2020). It then discusses the published findings of a 10-year action research project (2010–2019) on the development of a youth work curriculum in Finland. The two approaches have been very different. Whilst in the UK curriculum development in youth work has become increasingly top-down, in Finland by contrast, it has been democratic, and this has produced very different results. The ensuing analysis raises important questions about the concept of curriculum in youth work.

The importance of process in the youth work curriculum

There are a variety of theoretical approaches to the curriculum—for example, Eisner & Vallance (1974) proposed that curriculum should consist of five categories of cognitive processing, technology, self-actualization, social reconstruction, and academic rationalism. Lawton et al. (1978) on the other hand suggested three categories of the subject-centred, child-centred, and society-centred curriculum. In terms of the youth work curriculum, it is widely accepted (Ord, 2004a, 2004b, 2016) that the most apposite theoretical frame of reference is Kelly's (2009) curriculum model which distinguishes between three types of curricula, those based on content, product, and process. Application of these three types of curricula to youth work however requires clarity.

Curriculum as content

The theory of curriculum as content equates with the notion of a syllabus. It is based on the principle that there are essential elements of knowledge that must be transmitted, and this forms the curriculum (Kelly, 2009). In essence, it is concerned with what young people must learn and be taught, and what knowledge must they acquire. The notion of a syllabus is universally dismissed in the youth work curriculum as the NYA note: 'It [the youth work curriculum] is not a dictated set of subjects or a syllabus' (NYA, 2020). As Kelly points out: We must look beyond considerations of content' (Kelly, 2009, p. 25).

The purpose of youth work is not contested, they are defined by the NYA below, and it describes a person-centred practice which is holistic and is essentially developmental—a point on which the Council of Europe concurs (CofE, 2024)—the question remains what kind of curriculum is best suited to this purpose. What is certain is a curriculum which exclusively focuses on prescribed content is contradictory to this person-centred, process-based practice. A point echoed by the NYA's National curriculum

Youth Work takes a holistic approach with young people. It starts where they are... [and it] seeks to promote young people's personal and social development and enable them to have a voice influence and place in the communities and society.

(NYA, 2022)

Curriculum as product

Many curriculum commentators in youth work, including Merton and Wylie (2002) have fallen into the trap of conceiving of the curriculum in terms of what Grundy (1987) describes as the 'gospel of curriculum'—curriculum as a product. This is a view of curriculum which is so dominant that it often precludes all alternatives. In essence, this approach defines curriculum in instrumental terms of desired outcomes and forms much of the UK National Curriculum with its standards and attainment targets. It is the kind of curriculum that Howarth originally tried to impose on youth work in the late 80s and early 90s. It was resisted at that time and has largely been resisted since (Ord, 2016) not least because it is anathema to prescribe outcomes for a person-centred practice which negotiates the focus of its practice—participatively—with the young people it is working with.

Curriculum as process

The process-based curriculum is founded on: ‘the development of understanding rather than the acquisition of knowledge’ (Kelly, 2009, p. 78). The context of the young people who are being educated is paramount. With an appreciation of this context prespecified content or outcomes become irrelevant and meaningless because the educator develops a curriculum: ‘according to what we discover about them’ (Kelly, 2009, p. 78). The process-based curriculum provides a viable theory for a youth work curriculum given youth work’s essentially person-centred, dynamic, unfolding, informal educational practice (Jefferies & Smith, 2005; Ord, 2004a, 2004b, 2016). Youth work engages with young people on their terms (Batsleer, 2008; Davies, 2015) the curriculum can establish the processes by which youth workers engage with young people—such as the importance of building trusting relationships (Ord, 2016) conversation (Jefferies & Smith, 2005) participation and empowerment (Fitzsimons et al., 2011)—and provides a framework for communicating the educational approach. But at anything other than the local level to do this in advance is putting the cart before the horse.

YOUTH WORK CURRICULUM IN THE UK

The emergence of an ‘explicit’ curriculum

The first recorded mention of curriculum in youth work was by Ewen who proposed that the idea of curriculum could be used to address the question: ‘What are we doing in the youth club?’ (Ewen, 1975, p. 1). This was however largely ignored. The significant change occurred after the introduction of the National Curriculum in schools following the Education Reform Act of 1988 when Minister Alan Howarth MP convened the first of three conferences to discuss the establishment of a: ‘core curriculum—that is the priority outcomes which the youth service should seek to provide’ (NYB, 1990, 34). This was seen as a top-down imposition and the field resisted Howarth’s attempts to agree on a core curriculum. Not least because as Davies, commenting on the conferences, observed the field was far from unified (Davies, 1999a). Subsequent conferences followed (NYB, 1991, NYA, 1992). The second did produce a statement of purpose which included commitments to ‘address inequality’, promote ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘support young people in their transition to adulthood’ (NYB, 1991). The second ministerial conference also agreed on what later became known as the cornerstones of youth work, below. These were also incorporated into the National Curriculum for Youth Work in 2020 (NYA, 2020)

- Offer opportunities which are ‘educative’
- Promote ‘equality of opportunity’
- Be ‘participative and empowering’

(NYB, 1991)

It would be premature however to think that the ‘ministerial bandwagon’ as Davies (1999b) described it, had achieved nothing. A significant consequence was the delegation of responsibility to local youth services throughout England to produce their own youth work curriculum documents and these would be reviewed by the new Ofsted inspection framework for youth services. The result may have been far from what Alan Howarth MP, and the Dept for Education and Skills at the time had aspired to, but the notion of curriculum had arrived in youth work.

A review of this implementation of the curriculum in youth work in the subsequent years (Ord, 2016) demonstrated considerable variation in both the interpretation and application of

the concept of curriculum to youth work. Perhaps, this was to be expected given the guidance from the NYA, who were tasked with supporting this process, was that:

The concept of a core curriculum for the service as a result [of the ministerial conferences] shifted to a framework for fundamental principles in order to facilitate flexibility and to take account of the social factors which have an impact on young people at the local level. The importance of local determination and the freedom for each organisation to define its own values, goals, and priorities was a major feature.

(NYA, 1995, pp. 6–7)

Despite the widespread application of curriculum youth work since 1995, not everyone accepted it. For example, Jeffs and Smith (2005) continued to argue it was the absence of a curriculum that defined youth work. However, for a great many practitioners, it was not a curriculum per se that was problematic but the type or form of curriculum that was the issue. Youth work is essentially a ‘person/youth-centred practice’ (Council of Europe, 2024). Youth work ‘start[s] where young people are’ (Davies, Davies, 2005), and responds to their interests, concerns, and issues. If youth workers are able to retain the authority to establish the priorities of their practice in response to, and in negotiation with the young people they are working with, the notion of curriculum was and continues to be unproblematic (Newman & Ingram, 1989). There remains an apparent conundrum at the heart of this period of curriculum development in youth work. That for around 150 years youth workers operated without recourse to the concept of curriculum and then in a relatively short period of time, youth workers incorporated the concept relatively unproblematically into their practice. Davies resolves this by explaining that was a shift from an implicit to an explicit curriculum. Arguing that: ‘from its early days the practice of youth work has been explained, justified and shaped by implicit notions of curriculum [and that] they are no less powerful for being implicit’ (Davies, 2005, p. 87).

The national youth work curriculum (nya, 2020)

In 2020, the National Youth Agency (NYA) published the new National Curriculum for Youth Work. It was funded by the DCMS and claimed that: it sets out what [youth work] is and how to apply the principles and values that underpin it (NYA, 2020, p. 4). It also claims the: ‘Curriculum begins with young people as a starting point and builds our support and youth work practice around them, their peers and their communities’ (NYA, 2020, p. 4). It also at times acknowledges the process of youth work, that it is person-centred (, 2020, p. 5), and for example that it: ‘is a distinct educational process adapted across a variety of settings’ (, 2020, p. 12). Much of the curriculum is consistent with embedded principles and practices such as the cornerstones—originally devised as part of the ministerial conferences in the 90s (NYB, 1991). It also rightly describes the values of youth work as embedded in the curriculum. For example, the centrality of voluntary participation (Davies, 2005; Jeffs & Smith, 2005), the importance of participation and decision-making (Fitzsimons et al., 2011), and equality, diversity, and inclusion (Batsleer, 2008).

The problem is however, whilst much of this may resonate with youth work and appear to define the resulting curriculum in terms of its process, the majority of the curriculum document is concerned with specifying ‘content’. In a 35-page document—a substantive portion articulates detailed content. The first eight pages are introductory and explanatory and offer no substantive insights, the next six pages introduce the values, cornerstones, and the process of youth work, and then there is a page that presents the overarching model. However,

there are 12 pages—the bulk of the document—dedicated to a discussion of content. These are introduced as themes and there are 10 in total:

1. Identity and belonging
2. Health and Well-being
3. Leadership, Civic Engagement, and Participation
4. Economic and Financial Well-being
5. Creativity and Fun
6. Global Citizenship
7. Skills Development
8. Environmental and Sustainability
9. Health and Safe Relationships
10. Art, Culture and Heritage

(NYA, 2020)

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed critique of the National Curriculum (see Ord, 2020). Suffice it to say that it could be argued it has suffered from similar problems as the previous attempts to introduce a top-down curriculum and the lessons have not been learned from the attempted imposition of the curriculum during the ministerial conferences, nor those from the successful curriculum development in the English Youth Services. There also remains an open question whether it is guilty of giving with one hand and taking away with the other—claiming to lay the foundations of a being process-based curriculum whilst at the same time prescribing the kinds of content youth workers should be focusing on. Some of these points will however be returned to later in the discussion.

YOUTH WORK CURRICULUM IN FINLAND

The context for the development of the Finnish youth work curriculum

To understand the development of the youth work curriculum in Finland three factors are relevant. These factors are based on interwoven ‘social, cultural and historical traditions’ (Wahlström et al., 2018, p. 655) in Finland, in the fields of youth work, education, and society in general. Firstly, youth work governance in Finland emphasizes the role of municipalities in setting youth policy goals and in organizing youth work in general. Due to this, municipalities are required to be able to explicate their goals, methods, and content of youth work. Secondly, the national view of curriculum in educational policy, in general, emphasizes the role of local schools and places a lot of trust in local decision-making by educational professionals. There are no strict national standards or content descriptions (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 88). Third, youth work in Finland is seen as being part of education. Put together, these three factors explain why the idea of a youth work curriculum is grasped as an opportunity to express the voice of the community of practice by youth workers and was not seen as a threat like it has been at times in the UK (NYB, 1990). Importantly, the development of youth work curriculum in Finland has been created as a bottom-up rather than a top-down process.

Finland has had a statutory basis for youth work since 1972 when the legislation on municipal youth work boards was passed (Nieminen, 2007, p. 46). Since the 70s, the role of municipalities in youth work has steadily grown. The role of municipalities is central in the Nordic countries in general, which results in the delegation of decision-making on the provision of services to local levels. The current Youth Work Act which sets statutory guidelines for youth work highlights this stating that:

The responsibility for youth work and policy rests with the local government... [and that] local governments are obligated, with due consideration to local conditions, to create the necessary preconditions for local youth work and activities by providing services and premises for young people and supporting their civic engagement

(Youth Act, 2016, §8)

Since municipalities are required to provide youth work and are mandated to create their own youth policies, the decisions regarding the resources allocated to youth work, such as how many youth workers there are, as well as what the goals of Finnish youth work should be rest in the hands of local officials and local youth work communities. This however has led to claims that the role of youth work is unclear and that youth work is not documented sufficiently well (Cederlöf, 2004; Kiilakoski et al., 2018; Kivijärvi, 2015). The development of the first local youth work curriculum created in Finland in 2012–2014 was specifically in this context.

Another important context for curriculum development in Finland is that the education policy in general in Finland has emphasized the pedagogical freedom of well-trained educational professionals since the 19th century, when the leading educational philosophers, such as Cleve (1886), emphasized that all the important decisions on schools have to be made at the local level because only the local educators have the knowledge of the children and their own the local context. This has also meant that there are no national evaluation schemes nor are there strict external quality assurance mechanisms.

As Sahlberg (2011, p. 126) points out:

Finnish schools have been systematically encouraged by educational authorities to explore their own conceptions of learning, develop teaching methods to match their own learning theories-in-action, and craft pedagogical environments to meet the needs of all their students.

This ethos of putting trust in local professionals is highlighted in the National Core Curriculum in formal education. It emphasizes that the local curriculum is of central importance in balancing the national, regional as well as local goals (Erss, 2018). It also notes that the local curriculum connects schools to other local ways of supporting children and the young's learning as well as their general well-being. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, p. 9) In Finland, the municipal authorities, and the schools draw up their own curricula within the framework of the national core curriculum, emphasizing locally significant and profile-related content and regional points of emphasis.

Across Europe in policy terms, education is always central to youth work, for example, it is defined within the Council of Europe as being: 'based on non-formal and informal learning processes focused on young people' (CoE, 2023). In Finland, youth work has always been rooted in education (Nieminen, 2007; Kiilakoski, 2021). Youth work is placed within the Ministry of Education and Culture. The official title of youth workers graduating from universities of applied sciences is 'Community Pedagogue'. The Youth Act also emphasizes supporting growth instead of tackling the social problems of the young: 'youth work means the efforts to support the growth, independence and social inclusion of young people in society' (Youth Act, 2016, §3).

Put together, these contextualizing factors explain why the Finnish youth work curriculum has evolved the way it has. Both educational policy and youth work policy emphasize the role of local decision-making. Given this, it is understandable that municipalities embraced the need to create their own programme and strategies. Since youth work in Finland is seen as essentially educational, the idea of creating a local curriculum was not regarded as

alien—in the same way, formal educators translate national policies to local priorities, youth workers embraced this bottom-up opportunity.

The development of the youth work curriculum in Finland

The development of the youth work curriculum in Finland has evolved over the last 10 years in a series of stages, facilitated by the Finnish Youth Research Society. The project has been based on a practice-based action research project, led by the Finnish co-author of this article. The time span of the project has been as follows:

- Cycle 1 (2012) Creating concepts for local youth work in the town of Kokkola.
- Cycle 2 (2012–2014) Using the conceptual tools developed in the 1st cycle to create a youth work curriculum in Kokkola. The curriculum was approved by the city council of Kokkola.
- Cycle 3 (2014–2016) Scaling up the process by working with Kokkola and four other municipalities in Finland (Hämeenlinna, Kouvola, Oulu, Tornio). Testing the applicability of the tools and methods developed in the 1st and 2nd cycles. Creating the local curricula in Hämeenlinna, Kouvola, Oulu, Tornio.
- Cycle 4. (2017–2020) Further development of curricula. Two regional youth work curricula were developed in Lapland (Muonio, 2020) and Southern Karelia, prepared by regional networks. Action research in the city of Helsinki, also emphasized the managerial aspects of using the curriculum, including an evaluation (Helsinki, 2021).
- Cycle 5. (2021–) The centre of expertise on municipal youth work has created a network of smaller municipalities preparing their curricula, and a network for bigger towns. The aim is to help more cities in creating their network. In 2024, at least 26 municipalities have finalized their curriculum, 10 of which are in the 20 biggest towns in Finland by population.

Cycles 1 and 2 in the youth clubs and projects in the small town of Kokkola, located on the west coast of Finland (with 47,000 inhabitants), consistent with the Finnish context explained above, were premised on the need to explicate the nature of youth work in the local context. The aim was not to make practitioners conform to external theories, but instead to engage in: ‘a practice-changing practice [which for the youth work community is] a self-reflective process by which they remake their practice for themselves’ (Kemmis, 2009, p. 468).

The motivation to create a curriculum was to find a solution to the perennial youth work problem: explicating what youth work is. In Kokkola this project was initially seen by local youth workers as a problem about justifying youth work externally, to other professionals. This need was intensified by the increasing multi-professional cooperation between youth work and other public services at the time. As one local youth worker made clear:

I think that even with the most sceptical people of our gang, there is a willingness to develop and the need to be proud of one's own work. And willingness to be able to explain the work better. I think that every one of us, has been frustrated with not being able to explain one's own work and always having to defend why I just play pool.

(Youth worker in Kokkola)

This encapsulates the context of creating the youth work curriculum. There was a motivation to explain youth work. From the start, there was an agreement amongst youth workers that youth work is not only about providing entertainment or organizing services. Instead, it was about promoting growth, bringing about positive changes, and helping young people

to fulfil their own goals. Therefore, the starting point was seeing youth work as education. Explicating youth work as education was the goal set for themselves, and as a community, they worked towards that goal in the production of the local youth work curriculum (Kauppinen et al., 2021). It is important to emphasize that all the relevant decisions were taken on the local level, by the youth work community itself, with no governmental supervision or financial support (Kiilakoski et al., 2018). In cycles 2 and 3, the state regional authorities provided financial support but exercised no control. The town of Kokkola financed a practice-based study that worked closely with the community for a period of 4 years. This autonomy of youth work communities was also visible in 4 cycles, during which the city of Helsinki financed its curriculum project and a practice-based study that enabled a youth researcher to work on the project for 2 years.

Principles of youth work curriculum development in Finland

Analysis of the 10-year action research project developing youth work curriculum in seven locations in Finland led the researchers to devise five fundamental principles of the process of curriculum development (Kauppinen et al., 2021, pp. 304–306).

1. Youth work is fundamentally an educational as well as goal-oriented activity, focusing on personal and social learning.
2. Youth work can only be authentically described by the local youth work community itself. The curriculum development process therefore needs to be grounded in this local 'practice architecture' (see Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018). It must reflect what youth workers 'do'.
3. The youth work curriculum needs to describe the state of youth work, not an idealized picture of youth work (Forkby & Kiilakoski 2014). It must describe the current context (Hunter-Lynch et al., 2023). As a result of this, there is a connection with youth research within the Finnish youth work curriculum.
4. The youth work curriculum primarily describes the process of youth work, not the outcomes or goals. It is a form of emergent curriculum out of which outcomes emerge (Biesta, 2014).
5. Youth work curriculum production is an action research project, which bridges the fields of research and practice.

As can be seen, the theoretical foundations of the youth work curriculum in Finland are various. They are influenced by curriculum studies in the field of educational sciences and the tradition emphasizing the importance of local communities in Finland; by practice theories that emphasize the ontological importance of social and shared practices and the meaning-making connected to them; Nordic pedagogical thinking; British discourse on youth work curriculum and on the process-oriented nature of youth work (Ord, 2016), and the methodologies of participatory action research and practice-based research. However, the most important feature is relying on the shared tacit knowledge of the youth work community. Therefore, the key ethos of the action can be summarized by quoting William Doll: 'No one owns the truth, and everyone has the right to be understood' (Doll, 2012, p. 231). Based on this the curriculum process from a Finnish perspective needs to be inclusive and democratic, and it must be given time—a long enough time span—to enable an authentic process of engagement with youth workers. In Finland, this usually ranges from 18 months, up to 3 years, depending on the size of the organization.

Finally, it should perhaps be noted that many, but by no means all, of the youth work practitioners in this study involved in the curriculum reflection, development, and production are beneficiaries of a university-level education programme in youth work or related fields.

However, the point is not about individual abilities, it is about the way rising educational level affects the practice architectures (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018) of the Finnish youth work field. Professional autonomy, participation, and trust are not created in a vacuum but are rooted in a community of practice in no small part generated through the formal education and training pathway. It is an open question whether this process could be undertaken successfully in a context that does not have this level of competency in its workforce.

The content of the Finnish youth work curriculum

In the early cycles of the action research project in the city of Kokkola basic categories and methodologies were created that informed the development of the youth work curriculum. Curriculum development was centred on basic questions which included: what type of education youth work is; how do youth workers see their work and what are the different tools used in the process. Since the project was committed to explicating the socio-cultural knowledge of the youth work community and analysing the locally created perspectives on youth work a lot of attention was paid to creating a vocabulary that would reflect what the workers actually did (Kiilakoski et al., 2018; Kauppinen et al., 2021).

The Finnish youth work community has used the phrases 'form of work' (työmuoto) and 'work method' (työmenetelmä) synonymously. In the first stages of the project, the challenge was to create conceptual tools that would help in differentiating the larger processes of youth work from singular methods. This had to be done in a way that would not downplay any of the youth work delivered but would also help in adopting a critical perspective. In the process, the concept of 'form of work' was used for describing what youth work does. It was also stated that this is something that is done by more than one youth worker from within the local youth work community. Therefore, the emphasis is on what is being done. This resulted in a process-based curriculum, which is based on the idea that the aims are reflected in the processes and consequently, the processes are embedded in the aims (Kelly, 2009). Since there was not a pre-defined list of the processes, they needed to be created in a dialogical process.

'Forms of work' described processes of youth work as understood by the work community. The concept of method was used to answer the question of how youth workers do their work. This solution enabled the community of Kokkola to say that for example, club-based youth work was a method for contributing to a larger process, which they termed communal youth work. Other methods for this form of cultural youth work were school-based youth work and organizing youth cultural events in the area. The city of Kokkola specified five forms of youth work within its youth work curriculum. The terms are described by the community as:

1. Communal youth work
2. Societal youth work
3. Participation activities
4. Cultural youth work
5. Focused [targeted] youth work'

(Kiilakoski et al., 2018, p. 603)

In Helsinki, the three key questions for the youth work curriculum were asked. These questions emphasized the inter-connectedness of aims and processes: what do we do in the youth service, and what are our target groups; What are the goals and why?; What are the methods used and why are they used? In the process which lasted for 2 years and included 104 individual and group research interviews, four forms of work were identified. These four forms of work were based on existing projects and networks. The terms

differed from the curricula of other Finnish cities, which highlights the need to create local solutions.

1. Enhancing the agency of the young person
2. Community work
3. Encouraging youth participation and activism
4. Advocating of young people's rights and influencing their living conditions
(City of Helsinki, 2021)

There are clearly marked differences in the curricula from different localities. For example, the Kokkola youth work curriculum emphasized targeted youth work, a specialized form of often 1–1 youth work, whereas the city of Helsinki refers to a broader process enhancing the agency of young people. This exemplifies how the Finnish youth work curriculum is based on the local context, relies on the expertise of the workers themselves, reflects current reality, and describes how the youth workers themselves consider how they contribute to the educational process.

The contents of the youth work curriculum are created by the workers themselves. A possible critique might argue this process lacks the views of young people, and that therefore it is not sufficiently participatory. Whilst there is an argument to be had about the role of young people, the general principle of this method of curriculum development is based on the youth workers' ability to describe what the youth work community sees as valuable and to explicate this process to others. Since the final stage of the youth work curriculum development process is ratification by the municipalities, it serves as an official document that can be used when prioritizing youth work services. According to the interviews in Kokkola, which has been in development the longest, it is seen as raising the image of youth work and helping to convince others about the professionalism of youth work. As one youth worker exemplifies:

If you think about the city organization [of a youth work curriculum], it has tremendously increased the professional profile of youth work. I mean than in organisations that more or less laughed at youth work, that okay they are playing a little with young people, have started to value youth work.

(Youth worker, Kokkola)

DISCUSSION

This article is premised on the research questions: 'What is a youth work curriculum for? Who is it designed to benefit?' And, how can a curriculum best reflect the process-based practice of youth work? The analysis of the different approaches taken in the UK which has culminated in the new National Youth Work Curriculum and the localized approach taken in Finland raises important questions on a variety of levels, including questions about the type of youth work curriculum that is produced, the degree of practitioner involvement in the development and production of the curriculum, the relative merits of a national versus local curriculum as well as the relationship to and importance of the policy context within which the curriculum is produced.

Since the implementation of an explicit curriculum in the early 90s youth work curricula were developed locally in England within each local authority (municipal) youth services. The extent to which those documents were produced democratically involving the majority of youth workers in local youth service organizations is debatable, but each local

government youth service was able to establish its own priorities (NYA, 1995), and this did at least provide for the possibility of local ownership and control of the curriculum produced. The process of democratic engagement where workers are central in the production of the curriculum has been exemplified by the development process utilized in Finland. During this process, Finnish youth work communities have adopted a process-based view about the curriculum. However, with the implementation of the National Curriculum for Youth Work (NYA, 2020) youth worker input—apart from a select few who took part in the small steering group—is absent. As a result, youth workers now have their previously established local agendas set within clear national priorities. It is debatable to what extent these priorities remain broad and open to local interpretation. For example, the theme of ‘economic and financial well-being’ is very specific and has the potentially absurd consequences of youth workers working in impoverished communities who are accessing food banks (Ord & Monks 2021) being expected to address aspects of: ‘Financial literacy education, for example, access to learning about credit, interest rates and how to work out if a deal is as good as it looks’ (NYA, 2020, p. 19). The extent to which the National Curriculum has ownership within the community of practice is yet to be seen.

No doubt the Finns would argue that their approach establishes a more authentic implementation of a youth work curriculum (Kauppinen et al., 2021). This is partly based on the educational traditions of Finland, which emphasize the local context and the expertise held by education in general. They have taken an inclusive, participative, and democratic approach clearly structured within a theoretical framework of a process-based approach. It has also committed to the time necessary for the authentic engagement of staff, which a democratic process requires. The local leaders, managers, and politicians have also empowered youth workers to establish their own local priorities within a culture of respect and trust. This mirrors the professional trust embedded in the Finnish system (Malinen et al., 2012). This is in marked contrast with how public services are delivered and managed in the UK which is marked by an absence of trust (Eruat, 1994). There is much that England and the wider UK could learn from the implementation of a curriculum in youth work from the Finnish model which would enable a representative model of practice which genuinely engages staff and builds rather than undermines a ‘community of practice’.

Policy context and the development of curriculum

Davies (2020) reminds us however of the fraught process of curriculum development in the UK and how: ‘policy developments... intruded into the debate in significant ways’, Youth work [in the UK] has rarely if ever been afforded the autonomy to define its own curriculum. The relative merits of its content, processes, and outcomes (or products) have always been variously highlighted by the dominant policy perspectives both locally and nationally. The emergence of the National Curriculum for Youth Work needs to be seen in this policy context. Finnish youth workers have high level of professional autonomy, which UK youth workers do not and never have had. Given this context, the new national curriculum can be seen as an attempt to put a marker down to define youth work practice, on ground that is forever shifting. No doubt there have been compromises, given its funding by the UK government's Department for Culture Media & Sport. For example, it is doubtful whether the NYA would have included ‘economic well-being’ as one of the themes (or context areas), one suspects that this was a steer from within the DCMS. However, it should be remembered that youth work has experienced severe buffeting over the last decade. It has suffered the loss of—especially open access—youth

work provision through austerity cuts (Davies, 2018). This has returned the youth work sector to something resembling the 1950s (Wyllie, 2015). There has been the rise of targeted provision, and the perceived priorities of the need to combat youth anti-social behaviour, where young people are perceived as either 'users, victims, or thugs' (Jefferies & Smith, 1998/99). The results of this have seen the emergence of an increasingly individualized practice bordering on casework (Smith, 2003). There have also been increasing demands to demonstrate its outcomes (House of Commons Education Committee, 2011).

All this places a significant challenge for youth work in the UK and pressure mounts on the sector to attempt to draw a line in the sand and define and delineate its unique educational practice (IDYW, 2009). This may not be an ideal youth work process-based curriculum (Ord, 2020) but given the state of England's youth work services and the limited advocacy and support from any national political party and the erosion of support at municipal/local government level. The National Youth Work Curriculum must be seen in this context, and it provides the field with a potentially powerful marker in the shifting sands of the 'policy churn', and for many this no doubt is a welcome sight. For others (Davies, 2020; Ord 2020), it will still be seen as a missed opportunity to stake a claim once and for all for a distinctly process-based curriculum. Perhaps at worst, the National Youth Work curriculum should be regarded as a glass half full rather than half empty given the policy stakes at play.

Potential problems with devolvement and autonomy

Interestingly Vitikka and Rissanen (2019) note in their evaluation of the formal education system in Finland that given the freedom to design the local curricula in the 309 local municipal authorities, national goals might not be consistently met throughout Finland. This at least begs the question of how national youth work goals or priorities are coordinated or delivered in an equally dispersed and devolved policy context. Local autonomy clearly does not necessarily ensure quality provision. As Sinnema (2015) points out in her evaluation of curricular autonomy internationally, local autonomy may well be ideal, but the reality is that many countries do not have the quality of teachers to deliver high-quality curricula when given so much freedom. The result is often that students miss out on learning opportunities, as local delivery becomes ad hoc. The tension between local autonomy and national strategic priorities is clearly not the preserve of youth work and mirrors similar processes in formal education such as those identified by Priestley and Sinnema, in Scotland and NZ (Priestley & Sinnema, 2014) and Wood and Sheehan (2021).

At the very least as acknowledged from the Finnish experience devolved autonomy requires a highly trained and well-qualified workforce. The Finnish youth work curriculum has also been developed in cooperation with youth research and youth work. Therefore, it might be argued that besides a qualified workforce, a certain level of already existing body of knowledge might be required. It remains questionable whether this process could be undertaken successfully in a context that does not have this level of competency in its workforce and does not have a tradition of explicating youth work with the research. These requirements are obviously not common in youth work across Europe or the wider world.

CONCLUSION

The Finnish experience confirms that youth workers can produce a curriculum which both articulates and communicates their practice to each other, fellow professionals, and young people. There are clear advantages to this in terms of ownership and the development

of the community of practice as it is an authentic expression of the practice architectures (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018) of youth work in the local context (Kiilakoski et al., 2018). Alternatively, the National Curriculum is of a different order and whilst it only provides broad guidance and principles, it does set strategic policy directions. Its priorities must be open to negotiation and adaptation at a local level it is perhaps best articulated as a framework – indeed, the NYA acknowledges this: ‘the document sets out the curriculum framework for England’ (NYA, 2020, p. 7). It would also have been made more consistent with youth work principles if it had been made more explicit that content needs to be interpreted at a local level. The balance between content and process is also out of kilter. Although given the policy climate in the UK for many, this is perhaps, a glass half full rather than half empty. The advantage of the National Curriculum is that it provides a clear steer with national government endorsement something which youth work practitioners buffeted by policy demands are no doubt grateful for.

This article highlights the tension at the heart of youth work curriculum production between the relative merits of local versus national priorities. Whilst many youth workers would no doubt argue for local autonomy this is not necessarily a silver bullet. It also highlights the tension between whether a curriculum should reflect current practice—its practice architecture—or provide a means of setting strategic direction and establishing broader—national—priorities and setting new directions.

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