

YOUTH, YOUTH WORK AND THEIR IMPACT IN THE COMMUNITY*

A.Schwartz, C.Schwartz, S.Roman, C.Nistor

Adina SCHWARTZ,

PhD Student, West University of Timisoara

Claudiu SCHWARTZ,

Assistant Professor,"Aurel Vlaicu" University

Sorin ROMAN,

Director, SC Predict CSD Consulting SRL

Cristina NISTOR,

President, Millennium Center

Abstract: The contribution of the youth in the development of the local communities has been a well preserved asset all over the world's nations. However, the support given to this category of people and the potential of them has, and sometimes still is, not exploited to the maximum. Youth work is an old profession but the professionalization is yet a new concept, under continuous construction, in order to meet the rapid development of the youth in such a way that the youth workers can constantly be the pillars the youth can lie on and which can support and promote the impactful work the youth are conducting. In this context the present article aims to highlight both theoretical and practical aspects of youth work by presenting the development of the profession and by illustrating impactful activities of youth in their communities as best practice examples.

Key words: youth, youth work, community, development, case study

1. The youth and the youth worker

Being rather considered as a period of transition, the word "youth" stands for the not children, nor adult persons, but for the young people, usually aged between 13 – 30 years. The exact years (age limits) are difficult to establish and differ from one region or country to another

* Paper presented at The International Synposium *Research and Education in an Innovation Era*, 6th Edition, December 8th -10th 2016, Arad

(The Romanian Youth Law defines youth as people aged between 14 - 35 years, in Art. 2 (b)). as there is no real or natural border based on which a person is up to an age a child but becomes a youth by the next birthday. Youth is there for a transition period between the childhood and adulthood and it is generally situated between the period of leaving compulsory school and getting the first job.

This is the age in which the person being in the “transition period” explores himself/herself, the community and the world in which he/she is living in order for him/her to get a better understanding of him/her self and in order to develop or to obtain a series of competences and life skills, especially independent life skills, which he/she will use in the close future.

Based on the knowledge and competences developed or gained, the young adult will be able to take fundamental decisions, rooted in a solid personal and general knowledge, given the fact that he/she will understand the reaction of each action. Eventually, based on the gained knowledge he/she will be able to aim for a destination which he/she understands.

Youth work is defined in the Council resolution on a renewed framework for European co-operation in the youth field (2010-2018) as “a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people. Increasingly, such activities also include sports and services for young people.

Youth work belongs to the area of ‘out-of-school’ education as well as specific leisure time activities, managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders and is based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation.”

The youth worker is representing a trustworthy ally of the youth throughout the process of leaving childhood and welcoming adulthood.

The youth worker is the professional supporting and promoting the development of the youth in order for this to be able to reach his/her full potential, by means of especially non formal and informal education methods.

The youth worker is a very useful resource for the young people, a person who is always capable to provide young people with reliable information or advice, facilitating the connection between the young people and the community they are living in and developing a proactive attitude which will influence later on their entire existence.

The work conducted by a youth worker can either be done under the umbrella of an NGO or a state institution, but the activities are

conducted in the environment of the youth, being, as the definition states, essentially “out-of-school” activities.

If we were to make a connection between the definition of the youth worker and the youth, we could conclude that the youth worker is the person who facilitates the access of the youth to the information needed for a solid growth and for being able to pick his own path in life and start the voyage for the desired destination.

1.1. Youth work and the legal framework

Even if it is very difficult to set a pattern in terms of the governing legislation in the field of youth work, most of the EU member states, thanks to the EU strategy to promote and sustain youth work have managed to align their legislation in such a way that the youth worker – as a professional – is able to have some clear expectations in terms of what it would mean to conduct his/her work in any EU member country.

Given the fact that the youth work profession is a newly recognized profession, the place is usually not precisely settled in the eyes of the community viewers.

However, by examining the existing legislations of the EU member states, “*youth work provides both expressed and latent functions*”. (McGinley, 2014)

On one hand, one of the main “express” functions is the provision of non-formal and in-formal education to its beneficiaries – the young people/the youth – in such a way that it accomplishes the learning objectives settled by the youth worker, based on a needs assessment and in such a way that it achieves its developmental goal.

On the other hand, some of the “latent” functions would be “interpersonal friendliness based upon a dialogue through which the young person can dictate the place, time, extent and achievements of the encounter.” (McGinley, 2014)

When speaking about the legal framework with regards to the youth work/youth worker, the reference document shall be the Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010 – 2018).

This recognizes, under Art. 1 that: Young women and men have a crucial role to play in meeting the many socio-economic, demographic, cultural, environmental and technological challenges and opportunities facing the European Union and its citizens today and in the years ahead. Promoting the social and professional integration of young women and men is an essential component to reach the objectives of Europe’s Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs, at the same time as promoting personal fulfillment, social cohesion and active citizenship.

Further on, at Art. 2 this states that: The EU Youth Report 2009 shows that, although a majority of today's young Europeans enjoy good living conditions, there are still challenges to be met such as youth unemployment, young people not participating in education or training, poverty among youth, low levels of participation and representation of young people in the democratic process and various health problems. Economic downturns, such as the one which began in 2008, tend to have a significant negative impact on young people and the effects risk being long term. (Council)

Based on the above mentioned document, the member states have developed internal legislations to support the youth work and have modified and adapted the national youth policies in order to meet the requirements settled by the EU in terms of a higher recognition of voluntary activities, development of non-formal education, youth inclusion in the labor market or, generally speaking, avoidance of marginalization.

According the Commission Staff Working Document, Situation of young people in the EU, part 1/6, published by the European Commission in Brussels, on the 15.09.2015, *“non-formal learning can help release the potential of many young people by uncovering and developing their knowledge, skills and competencies and by encouraging the acquisition of new kinds of capacities.”*

The same report however highlights the fact that sadly the participation of young people in non – formal activities differs very much from one country to another. *“While at least one in five young individuals participate in non-formal education activities in Denmark, France, Cyprus, Sweden and the UK, other countries register much lower percentages; in particular, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Slovakia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Overall, in individual European countries between 2011 and 2014 only minor variations occurred in the proportions of young people undertaking non-formal learning.”*

As with regards to the Romanian legislation, Law No. 350/2006 – Young People Law -describes the general principles which are the fundament of the Romanian youth policy in Art. 4 (a) – (j) like ensuring the participation of youth in the decision making process, stimulating the mobility of the youth, stimulating volunteering, sustaining youth initiatives and economically sustaining the youth.

Also, the before mentioned law, establishes the creation and functioning of the National Youth Authority the county youth directorates, the information and counseling centers and the obligations of the local public authorities to ensure and facilitate the participation of the youth in the decision making process.

Further on, the same law, in the third chapter describes the aims and functioning of the youth NGOs and of the National Youth Council. Then, a series of economic and educational facilities are listed in chapter 4. Eventually the law foresees the areas which can be financed as youth activities.

Youth work – from past to present

The category of young people has evolved in time, especially during the last century, from a biological state of being, to a recognized and distinct biological category, further on to a distinguished social category with identified and addressed needs, rights, laws to state and protect their rights and programs to sustain and promote their developments and abilities.

After the formal recognition of this previously considered emancipated children or young adults the need of workers aimed to protect their rights, promote their needs and sustain their development was identified. This is the way the “youth worker profession” was established.

The professionalization process of the youth worker was recognized and proclaimed by means of the Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention which took place in July 2010, nine years after the European Union launched the White Paper on Youth.

The Declaration states that “Youth work is both complex and often misunderstood on account of that complexity. Put simply, however, it does two things. It provides space for association, activity, dialogue and action. And it provides support, opportunity and experience for young people as they move from childhood to adulthood. In today’s Europe, it is guided and governed by principles of participation and empowerment, values of human rights and democracy, and anti-discrimination and tolerance. It is informed by a range of policies and research knowledge. It is delivered by both volunteers and paid workers. It is established through a voluntary relationship with young people. It is financed and managed in a variety of ways. It is quintessentially a social practice, working between young people and the societies in which they live. For these reasons, it has had to accommodate and deal with a range of tensions generated by this relationship. These include reconciling youth research, policy and practice, making sense of different youth policy agendas (European, national, regional and local), establishing a position in cross-sectorial activity, dealing with issues of training, competence and recognition, as well as furthering pedagogical, relational and methodological approaches to youth work practice”.

Because youth work, as a profession, did not appear based on a certain national legislation which's best practice then rapidly spread in numerous other countries, and because this profession neither appeared because an international treaty or convention was signed, the spotting of the first spring of this concept is very difficult and leaves place to numerous debates.

Its deepest roots seem to go back to the 18th century, to the period related to the Industrial Revolution when in many European countries young men started to leave their homes and move to big, industrial cities, in search for their own path in life and for better opportunities than they had access to in their small home town and villages.

Identifying the need for offering support to this newly built social category, The Young Men's Christian Association was founded. The immediate purpose of this association was to offer low cost housing, in safe, Christian conditions, for the young people who have left their homes and moved to the industrialized cities.

In Germany the roots of the youth work started also during the Industrial Revolution, but in the school context. There, different youth movements started, approximately during the same time span, but the best known one would be the Wandervögel. The youngsters of that period who have decided to join such youth movements have done so as they were tired of the restrictions and obligations the society was imposing and they did not want to follow the footsteps of their parents.

In Italy, during the above mentioned time span children who have left school but were unemployed or were too young to be employed have started to spend their time in gangs, committing all sorts of small crimes, but especially thefts. This was the moment the youth care institutions were created in Italy. In these centres, adults worked with the youth to support and motivate them by means of prayers and lectures.

Regardless of the countries, such social movements have been felt all over the Europe. In such a situation the European countries had to find practical solutions to integrate them into the labour market the lower social class and to integrate into the society the emancipated and newly formed social category – the youth.

In Romania, the earliest roots of the expression of youth and “youth activities” organized and put together by a non-formally selected “youth worker” can be traced back some hundreds of years ago, strongly linked with the initiation rituals of young men, conducted mostly within the traditional Romanian villages. Such rituals would start a rather long, challenging and sometimes even dangerous skill development, competence gaining and educational process which would lead the way to adulthood.

Later on, during the 1848 revolution period, the youth movement had a very strong voice, as the leaders of the revolution were mainly youth. Also, amongst the most representative figures of the time many young men can be pointed out who have studied abroad and came back and dedicated their life in trying to bring a change in the communities they belonged to and many succeeded in bringing such a “fresh air” at national level. Having mostly an aristocratic background they quickly became political elites. “Their aim was to facilitate cultural development and social contact.” (Mitulescu, p. 82)

At the end of the 19th century – beginning of the 20th century the national policy was, amongst others, to promote education by means of an educational reform. During this period a significant number of youth took up higher education where the teacher started to promote informal education, supporting experiments and observations and the students were encouraged to switch from a theoretical learning to an experimental learning progress and by exploring the fields they were studying in order to be able to practically understand it. Also, even in the villages, by means of the local teachers, the young people were encouraged to get involved in the community development activities and, this way to gain civic competences. “*It can be said that the rural teacher who had to deal not only with children but also with adults (especially young adults who did not have the chance to go to school at the right time) became a kind of youth worker*”. (Mitulescu, p. 83)

After the First World War the scout was “imported” also to Romania, led by teachers and different other scholars. Both girls and boys had the possibility to be part of this organization. However, this got under the umbrella of the government later on and was transformed into the Youth Guard. Then, the Legionary Movement developed and took the lead in the field of youth movement. By means of several youth work camps in which any young person had the opportunity to enrol voluntarily many areas of the country were significantly developed as the volunteers built shelters for poor, bridges or created mountain roads.

One of the main actors in that time was Dimitrie Gusti, a sociologist who has studied for a very long time the life in the rural areas (the traditional Romanian villages) and was the author of the first rural monographic works, entering this way into the world history of sociology. Promoting the principles and values of social – pedagogy, Dimitrie Gusti has desired to introduce health education programs, cultural education programs and different other programs which would promote personal development into the Romanian schools. His endeavour was concluded in establishing the social service aimed to improve the quality of lives of those living in rural areas.

Now, the Ministry of Youth and Sport alongside with student organizations and youth organizations are working about spreading the importance of the youth work to the wide public in order to attract more and more youth involved in non – formal or informal educational activities and in order to have more and more persons professionalized in becoming a youth worker.

The impact of youth activities in the local communities

By means of different European funds, especially Erasmus+ projects, by means of funds offered by the local authorities or by means of different sponsorships from companies and private persons, youth are able to enroll in a series of “out of school” non-formal or sportive activities aimed to develop different skills and abilities.

However, by conducting the activities of which they personally are the primary beneficiaries, they support a whole range of different other beneficiaries be it their peers (by teaching foreign languages, by organizing intercultural events to promote exchange of knowledge in terms of history, culture and civilization), vulnerable persons like children, elderly, victims of violence (by means of organizing charity events or programs tailored to the need of these persons) or the community as a whole (planting trees, cleaning up the green places, organizing recycling activities, promoting a healthy lifestyle through sport activities) etc.

In these contexts a series of successful projects could be illustrated like:

- **“Meetings with Languages”** implemented by Millennium Center Arad, which is a project financed by the European Commission through Erasmus+ program. This project, which activities are implemented in 3 stages, by EVS volunteers from Italy, Spain, Turkey and Germany, has offered the possibility to increase the basic foreign language skills of tens of local children, youth, adults and elderly in English, Spanish, Turkish and German through non formal, free, language lessons offered by the volunteers. Additionally, the Language Clubs and intercultural evenings have given the possibility to hundreds of local people to get a sense of the historical, cultural and culinary aspects of the represented countries. On the other hand, such activities have led to the development of different skills and competences on behalf of the foreign volunteers too. Besides of learning Romanian culture and civilization, they have learned how to be non-formal language teachers, they have gained strong knowledge in the field of youth work by means of trainings organized by the association;

they have organized the lessons, the activities and events with tens of participants which have contributed to the development of organizational skills, they have prepared and translated materials which has led to the development of digital competences and, overall, by means of their dedication, effort and commitment they have set an example to their local volunteer peers and to the local persons they came in touch with, leading the way as door openers to multiculturalism.

- **“Many faces of the bicycle”** implemented by Experienta Multisport Arad, a project financed by the European Commission through the Erasmus+ program, is also a very good example of contributing to the development of the local community from a healthy life perspective. By promoting biking, the EVS volunteers have succeeded in promoting sport activities to other local youth and the wide public and have also raised awareness about it’s benefits as a cheap transport, road safety, ecology, recreation activity and, overall, health). By organizing major sport activities like the Duathlon, Marathon and Triathlon of Arad, the volunteers have developed very strong organization skills but also digital skills, promotion skills, awareness rising competences and, naturally, foreign language skills. Driven by their very strong motivation, the volunteers have capacitated hundreds of other local volunteers and hundreds of local participants to the organized events, thus contributing to the healthy development of the local community.
- **“The suitcase, the map and the voyage of a youth worker”** is a cofounded project by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, on Key Action 2 - Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices. It is implemented by 9 partners: Predict CSD Consulting, Millennium Center, “Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad, SC Schultz Development SRL – from Romania alongside of 5 partners from 5 different EU countries - Dacorum Council for Voluntary Service from the United Kingdom, Asociacion Cultural Integra from Spain, Organization for Promotion of European Issues from Cyprus, Fundacja Centrum Aktywności Tworzej from Poland and Euro-Net from Italy. The objectives of the 24-month project (1st September 2015-31st August 2017) are: to prepare 3 necessary tools for youth workers; to build and test an online training course for 50 people interested in becoming youth workers; to allow 200 young people to test a full range of innovative tools in order to develop their personal and professional life plan with the support of youth

workers; to create and have 200 young people test an online training course for one key competence from the Reference Framework; to certify 14 people interested in becoming youth workers on the Romanian Occupational Standard; to build an international partnership network of 9 structures, in the field of youth work. This way the project consistently contributes to the professionalization of youth work and to the development of young people who conduct the free on-line courses from Romania and all over the Europe.

The examples above are just a few from a very large and diverse field of activities carried out by the young persons in their local communities with a major impact on the community members, on the environment and ultimately on themselves.

Conclusions

The attempts to define and conceptualize youth work as a profession have led to the development of different theories among which the positive development theory to which, by means of the previously shown examples, we concur. The theory aims to focus on the strengths of adolescents, being conceptually similar to the fundamentals of positive psychology. It supports the idea that the youth work profession was not created because the society has left the need to educate the youth, based on several negative experiences but due to the identification of enormous resources recognized within this category and based on the positive aspects and features this category has demonstrated over the time. This theory was well deepened by Lerner, in 1999, sustaining that the youth, in order to be able to reach the targets set by the society as a whole need to be involved in all sort of educational and developmental activities which should be conducted in clearly set up safe places, specially designed for such activities. (Dunne, Ulicna, Murphy, & Golubeva, 2014)

References

- Council conclusions on the contribution of quality youth work to the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people, published in the *Official Journal of the European Union*, 2013/C 168/03
- Council, E. (n.d.). eur-lex.europa.eu. Retrieved November 2016, from Access to European Union Law: [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX %3A32009 G1219 \(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32009G1219(01))
- Dunne, A., Ulicna, D., Murphy, I., Golubeva, M. (2014, February), Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union. Retrieved November 2016, from ec.europa.eu:

http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf

European Commission, (2014), Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union, *Country Report Romania*, 2014, Brussels http://www.youthpolicy.org/library/wp-content/uploads/library/_EU_Youth_Work_Study_Country_Report_Romania.pdf

McGinley, B.P., (2014), *Understanding Youth Work Law*, SAGE Publications Ltd.

Mitulescu, S. (n.d.), (2016), *The history of youth work in Romania*, Retrieved November 2016, from pip-eu.coe.int: http://pip-eu.coe.int/documents/1017981/8437152/H4_Romania.Pdf/799b0d1d-6fe5-4a9e-97a4-2bf8f8e1f996

Romanian Youth Law, No. 350 din 21/07/2006, published in *Monitorul Oficial, Part I, No. 648* from 27/07/2006 Youth Worker Professional Standard, approved on 31.10.2012