

Reflections on Activities in a Youth Club in Northern Ireland

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As a result of a comprehensive policy review, the Northern Ireland government and Minister with Responsibility for Education launched the Model for Effective Practice (Department of Education, 2000). This initiative has given youth workers in Northern Ireland the opportunity to demonstrate that informal education is open to all young people.

A Theoretical Model

The model is designed as a framework that can be adapted to meet the needs of children and young people whatever their personal circumstances may be. It provides an important vehicle for the delivery of youth work, promoting young people's involvement in programme planning and delivery so that what is being offered is relevant, and at all times seeks progression in what is being experienced and learnt. The model is based on a revision of over ten years of experience and was an important milestone in the development of Youth Services in Northern Ireland. It is also a curriculum and programme development tool which involves a cycle of actions and engagements with young people which ensured they had an active part in planning, shaping and delivery of their own programmes (Department of Education, 1997).

Three core principles are identified in the model as underpinning the personal and social development of young people:



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- Participation
- Testing Values and Beliefs
- Acceptance and Understanding of Others

Three core values are also identified:

- Equality
- Diversity
- Interdependence

This model provides guidance and leadership to youth workers and is best viewed as a framework to develop approaches best suited to the age range, contexts and issues in which young people are engaged (Youth Service Partnership, 2003).

Beginning Interests in Youth Work

My interests in youth work in Belfast emerged as a result of my participation in completing a survey about youth volunteering. The findings of this survey research were used by Young Citizens in Action to help the Belfast Voluntary Service Bureau promote voluntary participation among youth in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I also participated in focus group research carried out by Belfast Volunteer Development Agency to examine Youth Participation as the first core principle of the Model of Effective Practice. The Model of Practice (Youth Service Partnership, 2003) in Northern Ireland is built on this core value of youth involvement. This includes the belief that “youth work starts where young people are at, supports their right to make choices, to develop at their own pace and empowers them to voice their own ideas and attitudes” (p. 10).



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Making Program Changes at the Youth Club

In 2014 I began working as an Assistant Youth Worker at a youth club in Antrim, Northern Ireland where my duties were to supervise the children and youth during evening activities and guide them toward higher levels of independence and responsibility. The program was funded by the North Eastern Education and Library Board in Ballymena, Northern Ireland. The club was open from 7:00 pm to 10:00 pm every evening except Sunday. On any given day there were fifty to seventy youth who participated.

In my role I worked to introduce new activities for youth and young people as the existing activities seemed quite limited. For example, there were three snooker/English pool tables but only one was in regular use. We also had a disco/dance time but at most only two or three of the youth were interested in the music.

I was thinking about keeping only one snooker table and make use of the other two by replacing them with other activities. I was also thinking about changing the current music playlist with content more youth were interested in. I wanted to create some groups and make competitions and prizes for them. The new activities that I intended to introduce were a football team, cooking, painting, and art.

Two main factors were a part of my activity planning. First was the time limitation, as the activities were time limited and rotated. This rota allocation included the following activities:

- Disco session
- Tuck shop/snack bar session to purchase sweets, juice drink, and some other things to eat and drink
- Games area session
- Gym session
- Ice pool skating session



It felt that children came to the youth club without any idea of what they were going to do. They were crowded and there was little to no organization.

The second factor was that the Model of Effective Practice was not necessarily being applied. One reason was that there has been inability to find any time to practice the real youth work as indicated in the model, because the three hours each night were only confined to rota allocation mentioned above. The application of the Model in terms of its central theme of personal and social development of young people, its core principles and values (as noted above) were difficult to implement.

Reflections and Plans Moving Forward

Moving forward, I plan to enlist a qualified and specialized person in each activity to help the youth in their suggested activities. We want to elicit their response in terms of their goals and objectives of the specific activity, the achieving and implementing it and how they are going to evaluate their detailed programme. We will be applying the three values of the model during the three stages: (1) Identifying their goals and objectives of a specific activity, (2) Achieving and implementing the process, and (3) the evaluation process. In relation to equity, we will seek to include all the youth in the activities who want to participate. Regarding diversity, we will appreciate the differences between youth and make use of it to enrich the activities. Concerning interdependence, we will make connections between the different activities and create association between them as their success will be mutually dependent on each other and achieving a shared agenda or a vision and making fruitful social and community progress.

From the first day of my working in this youth club, I have always carried with me a notebook and pencil. I have always gone to each group of youth and asked their interests and their hobbies. I have recorded the youth names and their real interests and hobbies. I ask them: What are their goals and objectives of the specific activity? How they are going to achieve and implement it and how they are

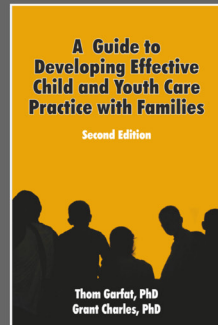
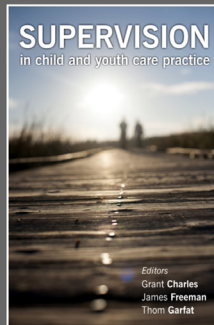
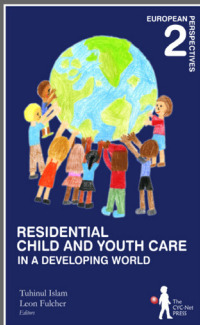


going to evaluate their detailed programme. My role is to be a guide who facilitates the process.

I now realize more developmental appropriate activities are needed and provided in a way that promotes independence and responsibility, rather than leaving the structure open to random influences. The Model of Effective Practice can help us in developing age-appropriate and developmentally-appropriate activities for those participating in the youth club.

Supporting youth effectively means, in part, engaging them in life-long learning and activities that support their development. Quality youth work also engages young people and seeks their input in the design of services that support them. These are factors that need to be included in the ongoing development of programmes and youth clubs as we work to support young people.

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