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Youth work in the Netherlands – History and future direction

→ Introduction

Youth work in the Netherlands goes back a long way and since the 1970s has taken on a rather strong professional image. During the last decades, it went through some hard times, but recently it has undergone a revival and reevaluation. (Griensven & Smeets, 2003). The first section of this paper is about how the characteristics of the Dutch affect social work and youth work concepts. The second part discusses the Dutch framework for youth work: definition, fields of activities, core tasks and the ambiguous relationship between youth work and social work. The third section deals with the history of youth work. The paper concludes with a reflection on the future directions that youth work could take. The article is based on Dutch historical research, some by the author, and the author's involvement in youth work, both as a youth worker and editor-in-chief of the semi-scientific journal *Jeugd en samenleving*.

→ Typical Dutch

In Simon Schama's study of the Netherlands in its Golden Age (17th century), he refers to the amazement expressed by foreign visitors over the tenderness

with which children were treated. The Dutch were highly focused on their children, apparently much more so than in the United Kingdom (Schama, 1997). Schama also reports that humanist educators discussed how children could be educated without losing their innocence. Apparently thinking of children as different beings with their own special development was an early practice in the Netherlands. Recently, international comparative research has revealed that Dutch youth is among the happiest on our globe (Unicef, 2007; Adamson, 2008) but the research is too hypothetical to see a causal relationship between Schama's observations and their own results.

Pillars and pacification

Since the 19th century, Dutch social policy history has been characterised by its different "pillars": Catholic, all kinds of Protestants denominations, socialist, humanist and the "generics" or "publics", highly comparable with Belgium and the German-speaking countries. Most of the pillars had their own associations, foundations, schools – even universities, housing corporations, care institutions, broadcasting companies and political parties. Having so many religions and ideologies on one cushion called for pacifying strategies (Liphart, 1968). All the pillars had an interest in having their own institutions and sovereignty in a non-intervening state. This created a very strong civil society that provided social services for its people. It also implied a slow start in building up the welfare state, because the big five – education, health, housing, personal services and social security (Beveridge, 1942) – were left predominantly up to civil society with its well-organised pillars.

Professionalisation in youth work

The Netherlands was the first country to open a school for social work (1899) (Linde, 2007) and in the 1970s youth work became more or less a professionalised sector (Ewijk, 1985). Nowadays youth work in the Netherlands is mainly associated with professional youth work. Since the 1970s youth workers have been trained professionals, thus volunteer youth organisations are no longer at the forefront. They are in the same corner as sport clubs and art activities for youth.

Instrumental thinking

The Dutch are often seen as merchants and pragmatists. A small country with big neighbours – leaving out Belgium – should be opportunistic and liberal. Since the 1970s the youth work debate has been mainly in the hands of policy makers and not scientist or researchers because they are not the ones who will pay for it. Legitimising youth work should to be done in the political arena, more so than in the scientific or pedagogical one. This political instrumental approach became even stronger after the universities closed their institutes of social pedagogy, agogy and andragogy, all newly constructed disciplines aiming at social processes of change. Over the last decades, the traditional universities showed a clear lack of interest in the work of social professionals.

The innovation velocity and fragmentation

The Dutch love to change structures and concepts. They have built the largest number in the world of different churches and they have effected what might be the highest number of changes in structures and organisations in the societal arena. It is popular among politicians and social managers to change infrastructures and their own departments every few years. Apart from this high speed structure and

steering principle change, we find an impressive number of programmes, projects and innovations that have been implemented – or at least are trying to be – in schools, communities and the social services.

Localisation and market

Dutch social work and youth work has been mainly left to civil society, but since the 1980s the localisation of social services – including youth work – has become popular, and since the 1970s, privatisation of the market a new trend. The nation state is decentralising its social responsibilities to civil society, the market and the local communities (Ewijk, 2009). Youth work is an interplay between municipalities (financiers), NGOs (provision) and a market that is growing through tendering procedures and an increase in profit providers, in particular in childcare.

→ The Dutch framework

Definition

Youth work is more or less an undefined field of activities. There is no legal basis for social work – let alone the youth worker as a professional. Neither is there a legal basis for youth work as such, or its definition and description. Localisation, privatisation and civil society approaches are hindering the development of a national, recognised framework even more. I once defined – and it is still a quite popular definition – youth work as “the non-profit oriented effort by adults to offer recreation, informal education and support to age-defined organisations of leisure time” (Ewijk, 1985; Coussée, 2006). I emphasise “adults” because in this definition, youth organisations that are fully run by young people themselves – youth cultures, youth groups, gangs, youth actions – do not belong to the realm of youth work. The three core tasks of youth work are recreation, informal education and support, such as counselling, providing information, referring the young to agencies (Fabri, 2009). The estimated number of youth workers is 1 700 (Noorda & Veenbaas, 2001).

Fields of activities

One of the problems with youth work is that there are endless ways of categorising it, all based on different criteria. A dominant one is by age group, thus 0-4 is pre-school, 4-12 children in primary school, 12-15 teenagers and from 16 on, young people with flexible maximum ages (18, 21, 23, 27 even sometimes up to 30). A certain shift to earlier transitions in age groups is going on, thus being a teenager starts at 10, and a young person at 15 on. A second system is target-group oriented, based on gender, ethnicity, social-economic standards or specific problems. A third categorisation system is based on field of activity, such as youth organisations, open youth work, outreach youth work, sports and so forth. Yet a fourth mechanism is to distinguish between core tasks, such as counselling, recreation, community building, participation, protection, correction. One can find all those categorisations and different combinations of them in the youth work literature.

The last one, field of activity, is the main divide between professional youth work and youth organisations. Youth organisations are volunteer organisations, supervised and counselled by adults with professional staff at national or regional level. Scouting, most religious youth work, political youth work (trade unions, political parties, national and local youth parliaments or platforms) and special interest groups belong to this category. Professional youth work is youth work carried

out by professionals together with volunteers, and includes open youth work and street-corner work.

Ambiguous relationships

Youth work and in particular youth workers are often perceived as being very singular and different from other services and professionals. A tense relationship exists between social work and youth work. In the Netherlands most youth work has been integrated into generic local social services (welfare organisations), combining youth work, community building, care for the vulnerable, multicultural and integration projects, child care and social case work. On the inside of these organisations, youth workers like to see themselves as different from social workers, and as expressing their own social pedagogical approach and having fully different target groups and specific methods. A second ambiguous relationship exists between youth work and youth care. There are more or less open borders between the two but most youth workers prefer not to be in the therapeutic or youth care corner, let alone in the disciplining corner from the justice point of view. A third problematic relationship exists between the youth worker on one hand and local social policy and its policy makers on the other. Youth workers often see themselves as exploited by politicians eager for short-term successes, and as being used to respond more to incidents than participating in long-term strategies. Perhaps this tension has eased up a bit over the last years, as we will discuss later.

→ A short history of youth work

Prehistory

We have already learned that the Dutch were quite gentle with their children and that they recognised children's need for a protected education. Orphanages and houses of correction existed from the Middle Ages on (Linde, 2007) and the painter Jan Steen depicts a rich world of children playing all kind of games. In the 19th century youth work materialised. In 1853 the predecessor of the Young Men's Christian Association (Nederlands Jongelingen Verbond) came onto the scene and in 1897 the first fenced playground appeared (Boon, 1947; Brentjens, 1978; Ewijk, 1992; Linde, 2007). Clubs started by students or *fröbelschools* popped up everywhere and in 1919 a national committee was appointed to research the development of young people between ages 13 and 18 (Hazekamp & Zande, 1987). Stuart Hall (United States) in *Adolescence* (1904), presented the first theoretical reflection on youth as a separate category, characterised by common features. Spranger published *Psychologie des Jugendalters* in 1924, however, most youth work in those days was more ideological than socio-psychological (Welten et. al., 1973). Civilising the working classes, keeping youth inside their own pillar and in complacency with the very poor and excluded seemed to be its driving motives (Bank, 1979; Selten, 1979; Linde, 2007). Industrial society's interest in having a better equipped work force, socially minded and liberal citizens' commitment to the poor and the pillars' interest in strengthening their constituency all went hand in hand.

Within the own vestment: youth organisations and club work – 1920-50

Youth work took its first steps inside the different pillars. Socialists, Catholics and Protestants organised their own youth groups behind banners, in pre-organised activities, non-formal learning and recreation. However, this was all

relative. Even during its best periods, youth organisations, led by “strong” men and women, never reached more than 25% of young people (Brentjens, 1978; Weterman, 1957). Besides well-organised youth organisations, churches had their recreational activities and a number of clubhouses (De Arend in 1922 and De Zeemeeuw some years later) were established in poor, urban neighbourhoods, starting with Rotterdam (Nijenhuis, 1987). The first Scouting group dates from 1910, the AJC (workers’ youth movement) from 1921, youth hostel organisations from 1927 and the so-called “open door work” started by the Dutch Reformed Church as early as 1920 (Brentjens, 1978; Selten, 1979; Linde, 2007). Three main roots of youth work had their foundations laid in the first two decades of the 20th century: youth organisations mainly for middle class and emancipated working-class youth, club houses for the poor and deprived, and open door work for the in-betweens. Youth movements – fully driven by youth – hardly existed (Brentjens, 1978).

Non-organised youth, being young together: 1950-65

The Second World War was a shock for Western society. Also many youth organisations were traumatised. The rather disciplinary way of organising youth, its walking behind banners and uncritical acceptance of ideology were seen as a hotbed for recruitment by totalitarian organisations. Similarly, the great numbers of young people, in particular the less educated, that had not been reached were also at risk of totalitarian tendencies. A third consideration was the socio-psychological effect of the world war on the post-war youth, such as traumas, cynical attitudes, the loss of families and friends and the loss of trust (Selten, 1979; Ewijk, 1979). From this point on, more socio-psychological approaches became popular and the idea that youth work had to gear to the context of young people rather than bring young people into youth organisation became more dominant. In the Netherlands open youth centres opened their doors (Rex Mundi and Lex Mundi in Rotterdam in 1945) and a range of youth centres were set up in the county, as in the poor, south-east part of Drenthe in the early 1950s (Brentjens, 1978; Nijenhuis, 1987). On the other hand, the socialist AJC (young labourers) decided to disband their organisation in 1959 and most religion-based youth organisations were experiencing a sharp decrease in membership (Brentjens, 1978). Youth work became supportive, creating room for young people and “their growth into adulthood”. Creating a stimulating atmosphere and recognition of the Third Milieu (“not family, not school”) were the basic issues of those years (Hazekamp & Zande, 1987). A new and special branch of youth work was institutional non-formal training for working boys and girls. Young people between 14 and 21 who had already worked in industry or agriculture at low-skilled jobs were trained in social and educational skills. In this same period new schools for youth workers were started, or the so-called social pedagogical schools – Brieneroord, Middeloo, Jelburg and Kopse Hof, one Catholic, one Protestant, two generic (Ewijk, 1979). In those years the tension between youth organisations and professional youth work was felt, though it had smoothed out a bit. However, most experts gradually switched to a more professional youth work perspective. By far the most recognised youth journal then, *DUX*, fully endorsed open youth work and non-formal-education. The well-known editor-in-chief Han Fortmann wrote an editorial about “a fair full of quite idiosyncratic hobby horses”, with reference to youth organisation leaders (Fortmann 1958). In 1969 Protestant youth worker Jacq Roos compared youth organisations and youth work.

Open youth work	Youth organisations
Activity centred	Ideal centred
Participants	Members
No traditional youth	Traditional youth
Over age 15	Mainly under 15
Modern lifestyle	Traditional life style
Context centred	Method centred
Professionals	Volunteers
No national umbrellas	National umbrella

(Roos, 1969)

From then on youth organisations kept up operations, but they were no longer part of mainstream youth work and youth policy. The government decided that those youth organisations reaching out to decent middle-class boys and girls could perfectly organise themselves. Governmental support should be aimed at those organisations reaching out to marginal, low educated boys and girls. In the 1980s they did lose their structural financial support from the state. Opinion was that they could and should live from their membership and local social policy support if needed. The national ministry could finance projects, for example to recruit more members from immigrant groups.

1965-80: professionalisation and emancipation

The 1960s and 1970s greatly affected youth work in the Netherlands. Some of the open youth centres were fully geared to the protest generation and the “revolution” going on in the universities, and strongly supported the growing squatter groups. My own youth centre became a meeting point for alternative and protesting young people, from squatters to gays, from the Dolle Mina’s (women’s liberation) to the (soft) drug adepts (Ewijk, 1974). Many youth centres and youth workers felt they were part of a new youth movement together with alternative youth care (JAC, Social Units) and the critical non-formal education centres (Vormingswerk Jonge Volwassenen) (Ewijk, 1975).

This radical turn in youth work connected to new insights in psychology about the youth moratorium as an expanded stage in human development. A stage where one could explore freedom and experience limits and limitations, and find and construct a full identity (Erikson, 1968). The programme planning document (1974) of my own youth centre called for the centre to be a breeding ground for new ways of living, a shelter from a cold, one-dimensional world, and a place to relax, meet and take action.

In the more mainstream youth policy and youth work development, there was a gradual shift from pedagogy and creating a stimulating atmosphere to emancipation. Emancipation did not imply full integration into adulthood but on the contrary, a recognition that being young was equal to other life stages (Welten et al., 1973). However, at the same time, emancipation called for fighting against age discrimination and exercising full socio-economic rights in society, in the field of employment, benefits, social assistance, legal rights and responsibilities (Welten et al., 1973). Socio-cultural recognition of being different, and a socio-economic recognition of being equal – that was the key message. Youth work should support

young people to create and construct their own youth phase and help them gain access to all aspects of society. Youth work was the enabler and the mediator in this emancipation process. A prominent scholar in those days, Wil van Stegeren, defined social pedagogy as “contributing to a pedagogical emancipation process of young people in society, aiming at acquiring freedom and self destination for themselves and others, by promoting support to a generation growing up and concretised in systems regarding youth [meaning schools, labour, social services, housing]” (Stegeren and Hazekamp, 1974).

In 1969, the first minister of social work, Marga Klompé, produced the first youth policy document. It called for the young to participate in policy making. It also called for the provision of meeting places for young people. Protest and left wing radicalisation, and emancipation were the dominant perspectives. The third was a gradual shift in youth work towards helping the youth that was the most marginalised. My own centre, as many open youth centres, was forced by local authorities to reach out more to underclass youth than to alternative youth. Youth from Suriname and Moluccan backgrounds needed attention because of their increasing criminality. My youth centre closed because we were not able to manage those groups in an open youth centre setting.

→ **Commoditisation and work, work, work: 1980-2000**

In the early 1980s, a serious economic recession set in and unemployment became the big issue. In the meanwhile, the protest generation had dispersed into hippies, radical socialistic splinter parties, radicalising squatters, feminists, radical therapists, back-to-normals and so on. Ideas about full personal development and full emancipation became interchangeable with getting young people to work, improving education and connecting social rights to social duties. Activating young people moved to the forefront, mainly activating for the labour market (Ewijk, 1994). Youth work was swimming in trouble waters. It was being asked to integrate unemployed youth, discipline youth, carry out more targeted work, be effective, and focus on realistic, quantifiable actions instead of processes, ideals and intentions. In the youth policy document of 1995-96, the ministry asked for effective solutions to social problems, early alerts in risk cases, an integrated approach, better and stronger directed youth care and for promoting the self-organisation of young people (VWS, 1995). Cees Schuyt's study “Kwetsbare jongeren en hun toekomst” (vulnerable youth and their future) was a major influence, calling for the productive contribution of young people to society and space for developing a strong identity (Schuyt, 1995). He suggested focusing youth policy and youth work on the links in the chains of the social systems, such as transition from school to the labour market, primary school to secondary school, living at home to independent living. The task of youth work was to help young people make these transitions smoothly and integrate into new systems such as the labour market. In 1983 a workgroup of youth workers and youth experts published the pamphlet *Bundeling van krachten* (pooling of powers), in which they called for an overall youth welfare strategy and moving from: a free activity approach to a focused activity approach, a breeding place to a working place, isolated youth work to partnerships. They also called for better knowledge and analysis, stronger youth work organisations, and professionalisation and innovation. Youth work as a skilled profession with clear targets, forming partnerships, focusing on helping young people to access social services and express social competences (Werkgroep Bundeling van krachten, 1986). Overall, this period is often seen as one which attacked youth work, continually cut budgets and transformed youth work into an extended arm of the school, labour market policies and the police.

→ Youth work back on the agenda: 2000

During the “work, work, work” period a lot was said about the youth work crisis: burnt out youth workers, further fragmentation and short-term projects (Werkgroep Bondeling van krachten, 1986). Youth, youth policy, youth care and youth work found their way back onto the agenda thanks to a series of incidents in youth care, a growing fear of radicalism and criminality with regard to Muslim Moroccan migrant youth, ever longer waiting lists for youth care and political debates about the fragmentation and alignment problems in the whole chain of youth provisions. Operatie Jong, chaired by van Eyk, a former secretary of state, was set up to be a national breakthrough project in the youth field. Its reports focused on sorting out the hindrances facing young people and youth care systems. Enlarging opportunities for young people, fighting against exclusion and derailment were the leading objectives (Operatie Jong, 2003). The public sector, families and civil society (schools, youth work, sport, etc.) should work together to enable consistency in growing up. Youth policy was divided into the preventive, the curative and the restorative, and the focus was on the links in the chain of services and interventions.

The report from Operatie Jong (2003) concluded: not enough consistency, inadequate information and knowledge sharing, a lack of conceptualisation and support, vaguely defined responsibilities, an inadequate alignment of regulations and actions, and a lack of cultural specific approaches. The report ended with a plea for local centres for youth and families, a minister for youth and a re-evaluation of preventive youth policies, including youth work.

At about the same moment a large survey among municipalities concluded with a growing positive evaluation of youth work, the need for more youth workers, a focus on professionalisation and more continuity (Griensven & Smeets, 2003).

A review report of youth work in the city of Utrecht discussed youth work with youth workers, users, politicians, youth work partners and managers, and concluded with an unexpected, positive image of youth work in Utrecht. Young people were very positive about youth work, and indicated that they wanted to learn to organise and find solutions to their own problems. Girls and children definitely were asking for more youth work responding to their needs and wishes. In the same Utrecht report youth workers were deliberately legitimating their work with the concept of prevention. That was exactly what politicians expected them to do. Youth work was assumed to become an integral part of the intervention chain: connecting and bridging, looking for solutions for problems, promoting social development, facilitating access to youth provisions. Youth workers had to deliver a mix of activities on demand. Quite often it was stressed that youth work should be more on the side of developing talent and social dispositions, creating opportunities and eliminating blocking mechanisms and hindering structures, rather than focusing on the restorative and discipline corner. The Utrecht report stated that “society expects youth workers to contribute to finding answers to complex societal problems” (Visitatiecommissie, 2009).

In Amsterdam, youth work has turned to talent development, implicating that youth work should be a challenging, positive power in the communities and young people should be approached from a positive and empowering perspective. Rotterdam stated “Young people need the chances to do it. If they are willing, they get full opportunity. If they cannot manage, we support them. If they are really unwilling, then we will be strict and take actions” (Bestuursakkoord 2005).

Another positive action is the strategy to set up professorships (lectoren) and research centres in the Hogescholen (polytechnics) and then to turn them into universities of applied sciences (Fabri, 2009). Equally positive is the national infrastructure's (National Youth Institute) renewed interest in preventive youth work, including setting up a database for evidence based work and the creating a national profile for the youth worker profession (Dam and Zwikken, 2008). The profile introduces youth work as an easy accessible service for all young people from 12 to 23 years old. Changing behaviour, preventing youth from sliding downwards, neighbourhood learning centres, self organisation and promoting social resilience are summed up as important objectives. Youth participation, informal learning and social education, information, meeting and recreation are also on the list. The profile document also summarises core tasks, competencies and trends, and sets up a workable framework for improving and strengthening youth work.

Conclusion: at a time when youth work is being reinvented by local authorities, there is a move from loosely defined projects and innovations to a more consistent, sustainable approach. There is a shift from a problem-oriented approach to positive prevention and support of development of young people's talents, but in the mean time the promise to be tough on those young people who are unwilling to integrate. Although it still has not proved its effectiveness, the prevention approach has gained more recognition. Youth work has become an integral part of the social intervention chain, together with the family, school, leisure time provisions, youth care, mental health institutions, police and justice, labour market agencies and local social policy (Ginkel, Noorda & Veenbaas, 2007). As such, youth work and youth policy are more individualised. The focus is on young people in their context and on the planning of pathways for young people's development and offering challenging talent developing events and activities.

→ Reflection and future direction

A separate youth phase?

A well-known Dutch author, Guus Kuijer, said cynically "The true appearance of human kind is adulthood", referring to approaching children as non-adults (Kuijer 1980). Childhood and being young are seen as preparation for becoming a true adult, apparently the highest phase of life. From Kuijer's point of view, the process of becoming an adult destroys the child in ourselves. Diderot (1751) emphasised, in his *Encyclopedia*, the greatness of the (late) adolescence period: "malgré les écarts de la jeunesse ... c'est toujours l'âge le plus aimable et le plus brillant de la vie; ... car les imperfections de la vieillesse sont assurément en plus grand nombre et plus incurables que celles de la jeunesse"¹ (Kreutz and Heyt, 1974). And Musgrove has observed that young people are much more positive about adults than the other way round (Musgrove, 1964). The question to consider is to what extent young people are different, need different services and different teaching methods and to what extent youth work is a categorising and labelling provision. Was Locke correct in stating: "The sooner you treat him as a man, the sooner he will be one" or not, forgiving him for only referring to the male elements in society (Musgrove, 1964). What is the difference between adults and young people and do we want to enlarge the difference or bridge it? It is said that adolescence is a transition phase, which is true but our whole lifespan is full of rather individualised

1. "Despite the imperfections of youth ... it remains the fondest and most outstanding part of life ... because the imperfections of old age are most certainly greater in number and more incurable than those of youth."

transitions. We are not moving from instability to stability or from “not integrated” to integrated; we live in a society, in contexts and age phases that are in permanent states of transition. Age is one of the multifaceted characteristics of life, next to gender, class, ethnicity, (dis)ability, cultural background and so on. It is important to be careful when extending the definition of youth to ages as old as 23 or even 30. It seems better to focus on early adolescence as a phase of protection (10-15 years) and late adolescence (15-19 years) as early adulthood, combining education with the first work experience, combining family life with building up intimate relationships outside the family, and taking part in all the joys life has to offer. As many vulnerable adults, some young people need support in late adolescence, sometimes protection and sometimes correction.

Secondly, in my opinion, youth work is and should be a fully recognised and integrated field of social work. It belongs to the family, not as an outsider but as a real insider. Where possible, generic social work should be open to youth and where needed, specific youth interventions, youth accommodations, and youth workers, should be available. Thirdly, youth work cannot be separated from the youth chain: family, school, leisure time, labour market, youth care, justice, mental health and so on. It is even one of the connecting and bridging powers in this chain, in particular in the links between systems and the link of young people to the systems.

The youth social model

We all recognise the medical model, the education model, the justice model and even an economic model. The social model seems less explicit and less recognised because of its fragmentation and underdeveloped social perspective (Smith, 2008; Ewijk, 2009). I would like to bring in some elements for the social (youth) model.

1. Social work aims at supporting, promoting, improving social competences, social behaviour, social relationships and social contexts. It is not part of the cure department, nor of the therapeutic corner nor of the free market system. Social work is an effort to include people in social life, in communities and society, in labour, education, housing, health and social security. This is the case for youth as well.

2. The core concept could be found in active citizenship, bringing together personal responsibility, social responsibility and the implementation of social rights. This is the European Union’s overall conceptualisation of social citizenship. People should be responsible for their own living and working conditions and their social behaviour. People should be socially responsible in their families, social networks and communities. The state guarantees access to social systems (education, health and so forth). The concept of citizenship should be adjusted to relative or contextual citizenship – each citizen to his or her capacities and capabilities – and to relational citizenship as a common “project” for society and communities. It is not a pure, personal thing but an inter-personal concept as well. In youth work, the threefold approach of self reliance, social responsibilities and social rights can be a strong perspective, calling for people to be treated as equally as possible in society, but with room for relative and relational citizenship (specific situation of young people, personal competences and the common participative project in strengthening social citizenship in society and the role of young people in it). It transforms young people into producers instead of consumers or objects of intervention.

3. An interesting development in social work is the re-invention of the basic front-line worker or lead professional. In restorative social work, youth care and social care, a new professional is emerging, for example in the method of “wrapping around”. This is a one-to-one relationship between users and professionals who as partners try to change context more than the assumed personal deficit. The lead professional assists the user or citizen to access his or her social rights and the social support and interventions he or she needs and wants. Together, they work to modify all the links in the chain, the back offices and institutions to the personal context; they try to pull down the barriers and to create opportunities. According to the United Kingdom youth policy:

The lead professional, who would act as the coordinator, negotiator and advocate of young people with multiple support needs could come from different backgrounds and

- act as a single point of contact, to trust by young people and families, able to support them in making choices and in navigating through the system;
- ensure that children and families will get appropriate interventions when needed;
- reduce overlap and inconsistency among other practitioners;
- ensure that where the young person requires more specialist services ... the young person is involved in an effective hand-over. (DfES 2005: 59)

The question arises, however, if such a lead professional should be or could be part of youth work. Youth workers, more than anyone else, are possibly closer to the contexts that young people live in and are therefore in a position of professional leadership, even in more individualised trajectories. Social work basically could be divided into:

- this leadership or front line work;
- a range of activities and specific interventions in the field of recreation, non-formal education and support;
- specialised services, back offices and institutions in youth care, mental health, disabilities, homes for the elderly and so on.

4. Participation is perhaps most thought of as participation in democratic political processes, in the labour market and civil society. A specific area is participation in social work (services) itself. Quite interesting is the conceptualisation and implementation used in the United Kingdom to combine the user-service approach and basic children’s rights: “The primary determinant of their interest should be children and young people themselves and intervention should be based on this principle ... To promote the active participation of young people across differing aspects of their lives” (Smith 2008). The basic principle behind the UK approach is that social work has more impact if the user is part of the assessment, planning (pathways), implementation (realising the plans) and evaluation. There is a lot of evidence to support the observation that social workers – and perhaps youth workers – do not try hard enough to involve their users in the heart of the process of problem definition and in finding and realising solutions. There is also evidence that a motivated user and a committed competent professional together determine 80% of the success of intervention or support process (Hermans and Menger, 2008).

Concluding remarks

The report of the first Blankenberge workshop (Verschelden et al., 2009) discusses a youth work paradox: "Youth work that works is not accessible, accessible youth work does not work." This may be true for youth organisations but from the standpoint of the current situation of Dutch professional youth work, it is highly debatable. A number of investigations and policy documents on youth work consider that youth work is capable of connecting to unorganised youth and preventing it from "slipping down", and improving youth contexts. At least, it seems to be valued as an essential link in the youth social work chain.

The same report also presented the dilemma of whether youth work answers to the social question or to the youth question. Is its primary focus on strengthening "being young" or on solving social problems and improving the social economic status of the excluded and/or undervalued groups? Partly, the answer lies in recognising that "being young" is one of the highly valued transition phases in life (Diderot) and cannot be made separate by a one-faceted categorisation process. Nor can we deny that social positions, social problems and social potentials are amongst the main things to focus on in youth work.

In this last section of this article I sketched a framework for developing consistent and recognised youth work as part of and partner to social work and local social policies. In my opinion, the framework connects to the re-evaluation of youth work in my country, not denying other dominant and contradictory trends in Dutch social work and youth work, such as bringing social work onto the consumer market (privatisation), formalising and prescribing what social workers should do, and focusing on discipline and correction. My optimism is based on a number of current policy documents and new research findings, the creation of the "BV Jong" (an association of professional youth workers), the national youth work profile document and the future research centres in the Hogescholen (universities of applied sciences). However, it has recently become clear that due to the recession and budget problems affecting local authorities, there will be some serious cutbacks in social work. As it did in the early 1980s, economic recession affects ideas on youth and social work, and may once again caused it to be used as an instrument in labour market policies and to keep control over the communities and their residents, in particular the younger ones.

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