Building capacity in youth work: Perspectives and practice in youth clubs in Finland and Sweden

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Thinking Space:
[1] The Value of Youth Services towards Child and Adolescent mental health
[3] Racism as Islamaphobia

Review article:
Independence at risk: the state, the market and the voluntary youth sector

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How do detached youth workers spend their time? Considerations from a time study in Gothenburg, Sweden

Björn Andersson

Abstract

Detached Youth Work has been on the agenda in Sweden since the late 1950s. Since then the number of workers overall has increased, though there have also been periods of cutbacks and uncertainty about job conditions. For many youth workers documentation is a recurrent problem. This has to do both with the demand to account for the job in relation to management demands and with the need to use work experience for methodological reflection and development. The article describes a documentation project undertaken among detached youth workers in Gothenburg. Data was collected regarding how the youth work teams distributed their time on different work tasks. The result shows that the youth workers spent a lot of their work-time in direct interaction with user groups. Also a number of patterns developed, indicating differences among youth work teams regarding which work-tasks were emphasized.

Key words: detached youth work, documentation, time-use research.

COMMUNICATING and being accountable for what they do in their work has long been a central concern of detached youth workers in Sweden. Firstly, this reflects the knowledge and experience to be conveyed from their encounter with young people. Youth work meets young people at the crossroads of individual circumstances and structural conditions. Seeing young people as both subjects with individual life-stories and as members of collectives with different access to social resources, gives youth workers an opportunity to contribute to a wider understanding of young people’s life conditions and to say something about social problems and possibilities for change. In this context ‘youth work stories’ (Davies, 2011:23) are often used. Written reports, photos and films are means by which this kind of experience can come to light.

Secondly, the importance of reporting work-based knowledge is connected to professional self-reflection and methodological development. Processes of mentoring have always played a crucial role in professionalising detached youth work; you learn the job from more experienced colleagues (Henningsen and Gotaas, 2008:58). However, there is also a long tradition of gathering quantitative data and presenting statistics. Such development in Sweden, as in so many other countries (Spence and Wood, 2012:2; Hansen and Crawford, 2012:71), has seen an increasing value placed on quantitative ‘facts’. Detached youth workers are asked to present their knowledge
and observations in figures and numbers, and to produce ‘evidence’ for the effectiveness of their interventions.

There is a connection here to a third aspect of the importance of job communication: getting resources. The organization of detached youth work in Sweden has always been a responsibility of the public welfare sector. This makes the situation quite different from ‘the funding lottery’ which faces street-based youth workers in the UK (Crimmens et al, 2004:71) or the American dependency on ‘individuals, businesses and non-profit agencies’ (Hansen and Crawford, 2012:72-73). Nevertheless, short-term employment and temporary projects are also realities for public welfare organizations. In periods of cutbacks in public expenditure, detached youth work has often been seen as a voluntary commitment on the part of the municipality and thereby a possible saving measure. Thus, the existence of an insecure work situation and pressure to give grounds for the value of your own job, is part of Swedish youth work history.

From this it follows that managers and politicians from the local social welfare board are focal recipients of the job documentation that the detached youth workers bring forward. This can illuminate the issues of leadership and management of youth work. Typically, detached youth work is what Lipsky has labelled ‘street-level bureaucracy’ (1980). This is an intervention in the frontline of a welfare organization with a large amount of discretion when it comes to the design and content of job activities and professional relations (pp.13-23). This can cause problems of control at managerial level, which often translates into a challenge for better communication and transparency on the part of the youth workers. They are enjoined to provide the information that the managerial and political level wants in order to understand what the job is about and thus to keep the effort going.

The outcome of this communication is to a large degree dependent on the overall relationship between the parties involved and this varies a lot. Sometimes there is mutual trust and the workers feel that they are really listened to. On other occasions the relationship is strained and the workers’ reports are treated with a lack of interest or judged irrelevant.

Such experiences were highlighted in a series of seminars that we arranged at the Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, during 2008-2009, in co-operation with detached youth workers in the Gothenburg area. The general aim of the seminars was to create an informal forum where theoretical and methodological issues in detached youth work could be explored. It showed that questions concerning documentation, communication and evaluation of the job were major concerns. As a result, a small project with a focus on job documentation was designed and carried through. The project resulted in both anticipated and unexpected outcomes that will be presented and discussed below. A significant argument to emerge from the project is that the description and analysis of youth work with an emphasis on quantitative measures should not involve large-scale efforts in the hands of research teams. There are quite a few things that can be done by the youth
workers themselves with just a little help from outside. However, before describing this project a brief account of the history of detached youth work in Sweden and its present condition will help to set the context.

How it started

The first appointment of a detached youth worker by the city of Gothenburg was made in 1958. The background was that local politicians and officials felt worried by a perceived increase in social problems connected to the lives of young people. To some extent the discussion was about long-established signs of youth marginalisation: criminality, drugs and prostitution. However, there were also reports of a range of newer problematic issues connected to cultural identities and large assemblies of youth in the city centre (Brange, 1982: 89-90). Among these groups the ‘greasers’ were perhaps the most significant. With their huge American cars, their greasy hair, leather jackets and their taste for American rock music, they were easily seen and heard and got a substantial amount of attention in the local press.

A former leader of one of the Youth Clubs in the city was employed to the detached youth work position and he spent a lot of time on outreach work in order to get an overview of the local conditions for young people. He also engaged in individual ‘treatment’ and group work. Contact was established with many of the greasers. About 200 of them were organised in a club of their own, ‘the Road Jolly Rogers’, and gained access to a centrally located meeting-place through their contact with the worker.

The idea of detached youth work was not new at the time. In youth clubs and local settlements the ‘open line’ had been practised for many years. Some years earlier the police had started a project where plain-clothes policemen roamed the streets of the city-centre in search for runaways, vagrants or otherwise wanted persons. They faced legal restrictions in their work with under aged people and therefore drew the attention of the social authorities to the need for a social worker who could work in the same way with young people. There was also some inspiration from Stockholm, Sweden’s largest city, where detached youth workers had been employed two years earlier. The history behind these appointments was in many ways similar to the circumstances in Gothenburg. However, the idea of doing outreach work in Stockholm was mediated through contacts with youth workers from Cleveland, USA. Through this, the beginnings of outreach work in Sweden were in some sense connected to the American tradition of street-based youth work, emanating from the Chicago Area Project. This influence should not be exaggerated, but informal youth organisation was initially understood in terms of ‘gangs’ and so detached youth work in Sweden was for a long time labelled ‘gang-work’ (Andersson, 2005: 25-31).

On another level, the introduction of detached youth work was part of an increasing public
engagement in the social conditions and problems of young people. It was based on an idea of the active state taking responsibility for the social situation of vulnerable groups in society. This responsibility had both supporting and controlling effects. Detached youth work was seen as a method for intervening in acute problematic situations, as with the greasers, but was also understood as a preventative measure. It was a way to get in contact with young people and to start a supportive process to young people in need at an early stage (Olson, 1992:21-23).

**Present situation**

Starting from these first endeavours in the 1950s, detached youth work soon spread nation-wide. In the mid 1970s an investigation showed that 83 out of 278 local municipalities in Sweden employed detached youth workers. Ten years later this had increased to about 100 municipalities and the number of detached youth workers was estimated to 400 (Calissendorff et al, 1986: 39). Today the estimate is that there are about 500 detached youth workers employed all over the country (RiF, 2010:3). In a fifty-year perspective this development may suggest a linear increase in the number of detached youth workers. However, in fact it has rather been a history of ups and downs. Due to cutbacks, short-term employment and temporary projects the number of detached youth workers has been in constant flux.

Traditionally, detached youth workers in Sweden have been organised within two different sections of the local administration. Probably most common is employment within the social services. In this context detached youth work is seen as part of a preventative social work strategy to get in touch with risk-taking young people. The second option is to be employed by the leisure and recreation department. In this case, the outreach effort is often closely connected to youth clubs and leisure-time activities. On the whole, the organisational body tends to recruit detached youth workers from different educational backgrounds. The social services employ people with a three and a half year university degree in social work, while leisure departments engage persons who have undertaken a two-year course organised by the folk high schools. This difference in professional formation means that people bring with them quite different understandings of, and training in youth work. Level and length of education also have consequences for terms of employment including salary and the possibilities of advancement. This divergence is counterbalanced by feelings of professional togetherness amongst the detached youth workers themselves. Commonly workers stay for a substantial number of years in the position, though there are no reliable statistics concerning turnover. In larger cities with several youth work teams it is not unusual to move from one team to another. Detached youth workers tend to be young. One reason for quitting the job is having problems in combining family life with late working hours. Quite often youth workers try to find jobs in the social sector where they continue to work with young people and their families. The educational background is of importance when it comes to what kinds of jobs that are available. Workers with a university degree definitely have more options to choose from.
Detached youth work is not an expensive intervention; costs are mainly connected to staffing. Aside from that, most teams have at their disposal a budget for minor activities.

Since 1974 detached youth workers in Sweden have managed to sustain a professional organisation. This organisation arranges a national conference every year and supports regional meetings. In the Gothenburg area, for example, detached youth workers meet four to five times a year to discuss common matters. During the autumn of 2008 and spring 2009 this group had a couple of extra meetings in which this author participated to strengthen the discussion on methodological issues.

**The documentation project**

One topic much discussed during these meetings was the documenting of work content. This discussion had at least three sub-questions. The first was about what information should be recorded. The second was how the documentation should be designed. Thirdly, the discussion was to whom the documentation should be directed. This discussion ended up in a decision to carry through a documentation project where all detached youth workers would record their daily work using the same template. The goal was to achieve an overview of how the youth workers spent their working hours and to identify differences and similarities in how the work was performed.

I constructed a template for the documentation, which consisted of six different forms. One of them was designed to summarize the whole working day and was labelled: ‘Time distribution of tasks’. Here the worker reported how the working hours of each day had been divided between different tasks. The worker filled in the form individually. However, if two or more workers had carried out a task together, this could be recorded collectively. There were five categories of tasks to be used: ‘outreach work’, ‘activities’, ‘co-operation’, ‘internal work’ and ‘other tasks’. For each of these classifications there was an additional form.

The category ‘outreach work’ was intended to cover outside-oriented and contact-making approaches to reach members of the target group. This was both about making new contacts and keeping up old ones. On the form the worker should report where the outreach work had been done, how many people they had met, their sex, age and if it was a new or old contact. ‘Activity’ was about efforts to help and support. Often these have an organised and prepared character, but not necessarily. On the form the workers could report activities on different levels: individual, group or overriding/community. ‘Co-operation’ covers collaboration with other units and organisations. It is common for detached youth workers to participate in regular ‘co-operation-groups’ consisting of representatives from local bodies such as schools, youth clubs, the police and the social authorities. But co-operation can also mean working together on certain occasions and projects. On the form it was possible to report the kind of collaboration; its purpose, participants and kind of activity. ‘Internal work’ covered what is often referred to as ‘office work’. Three
different types were distinguished: planning/preparation, supervision/managerial contact/collegial
talk and documentation/reporting. The category ‘other tasks’ was intended to cover everything that
did not fit into any of the other categories.

The collection and processing of data

The documentation project was carried out during the period from 25th of May to the 7th of June
2009. In all, thirty individual detached youth workers participated, representing ten different teams.
Of these, eight belonged to different district councils in the city of Gothenburg, one team was set
up by a non-governmental organisation and the final team represented a municipality located just
outside Gothenburg. The vast majority of the then currently active detached youth workers in
Gothenburg participated in the study. One district did not take part, due to being recently set up.

During the two-week period, the teams filled in the forms and afterwards sent them to me for
processing. Together with the forms, each team received a written explanation on how to use them.
Most of the participating workers had been taking part in the process of discussing and planning
the project, so they were well aware of the purpose of the study. There were few questions from
the youth workers during the documentation period.

The method of data collection makes it possible to map how each individual detached youth worker
spends his or her time. However, the presentation and analysis of data is carried out collectively. So
each account for daily working hours in a team was added together in order to identify a pattern of
time-use for the whole group. This was calculated in three steps. First all working hours have been
summed up in a total for the team. Then the individually reported hours for each task category has
been added together and, finally, the sum for each category related to the group total and computed
in percentages. That is, if one team reported a total of 100 working hours for the two-week period
and spent in all 32 hours on outreach work, then the team used 32% of its working hours on
outreach work.

One consequence of this way of counting is that differences between individual workers are
evened out. If one worker spend a lot of hours on one task category and another worker very few,
the result on the group level is medium. This kind of calculation does not separate what is done
single-handedly or by two or more. If two workers during one day spend two hours on ‘activities’,
the effect on the group level will be the same no matter if they work together on the same activity
or if they work individually on two different ones.

The main reason for putting this emphasis on the team-level is that detached youth workers often
act and present themselves as members of a team. In general, there is a feeling of togetherness
between group members and detached youth workers are often understood and identified as a
team from the outside. However, since data is reported individually it is possible to give general comments on specific group patterns. I will briefly come back to this later in the text.

Results in general

One of the ideas behind the study was to get a picture of how detached youth workers in general allocate their time between different work tasks. The underlying assumption here was that the strong sense of coherence, often expressed by detached youth workers, would result in quite similar ways of spending their working hours. However, the general conclusion of the study is rather that there are substantial differences between the teams. From the material it is possible to recognize a number of different ‘orientations’, when it comes to how the hours are employed. These diverging patterns are presented below, but first a few observations about the general picture.

In all there were 1,722 working hours reported during the two week research period. Adding the work done by detached youth workers not participating in the study, a total of some 1,000 working hours is spent on professional detached youth work every week in the Gothenburg area. Obviously, this represents a substantial effort and offers a real possibility of making a contribution to the welfare of young people in Gothenburg. At the same time, it should be noted that there are about 55,000 young people aged 13-20 years, living in the area. So, of course, there are many to share the offer.

The reported working hours distributed between the different task categories are shown in chart no 1:

Chart 1

![Chart showing task categories and percentage of working hours](image-url)
What we can see is that two categories dominate: ‘internal’ and ‘outreach’. Considering the construction of the categories this outcome is to be expected. The specific job actions contained in these two categories are greater in number and take more time to pursue. To a large extent ‘activity’ and ‘co-operation’ covers organized endeavours and these are not so time-consuming. Also, all preparation work was coded as internal work.

One question that is illuminated by the figures is the relation between time spent in direct contact with target groups and time used for administrative work. This has long been an issue among groups involved in social work and there is a general feeling that paper work and internal meetings tend to take too much time away from direct work with user groups. In a Swedish context, the concept of ‘user-time’ has been introduced by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL, 2007). This is seen as a possible tool for measuring the quality of social service at the local level with the presumption that it is in the meeting between staff members and users that quality can be achieved (p. 11). In a project where user-time was measured among a number of social service units, the share of user-time shifted between 16% and 37% of the working hours (p. 22). One important factor that influenced the result was the character of the job. In general, units with high demands to carry out investigations and produce documentation spent less time in direct contact with users. Since this is not something that characterizes detached youth work, the expectation would be that this kind of method has a high level of direct work in relation to users. To get an estimation of this from the figures presented above, it seems reasonable to add the two categories ‘outreach’ and ‘activities’. The result is a calculated user-time of 41.5%, which is high in comparison to the examples we have from other social work units. Now, it should be remembered that the study presented here was small and experimental in design, so figures should be considered critically. Still, it is an indication of a methodological user-orientation by the detached youth workers in the Gothenburg area.

The outreach work

The form used for reporting hours spent on outreach work was constructed in order to achieve a quantification of how many young people that the youth workers met during a week. There were also questions about age and sex of the young people involved, and if the workers had met them before. It turned out, however, that these data were difficult to register in a uniform way. For example, it was sometimes difficult to decide with whom they had made a ‘contact’, especially on occasions where a large number of young people were present.

What one can see from the information gathered is that the outreach work is carried out in a variety of settings. For one part the youth workers visit specific local places that are known to be hang-outs of young people. Here the youth workers, to a large extent, meet young people with whom they already have a contact. The outreach work is a way of keeping the contact going and the workers
are sometimes looking for encounters with certain individuals or groups. During such encounters the verbal exchanges often have a conversational and informal character, just confirming the existing relationship. However, sometimes more serious matters are dealt with and what seem to be an almost treatment-oriented dialogue occurs.

Sometimes the outreach work is directed to places where the youth workers expect to meet many young people, as well as those who are unknown to them. This could, for example involve a visit to public youth events or the city centre during weekends. Encounters with earlier unknown young people are of course more frequent on these occasions. Other arenas for outreach work are institutionalized settings such as youth clubs. Visits to local schools are also regular. The youth workers then concentrate on the semi-public space of schools: corridors, leisure-time spaces and the schoolyard. One benefit of this kind of outreach is that in schools the youth workers can make themselves visible to a large number of the young people in the area. This facilitates later contacts and is also a way to present themselves to young people who seldom make use of other public meeting-places.

One impression from the documentation is that the local public life of young people varies a lot between different residential areas. In some areas there are lots of young people outdoors and the youth workers can make contacts by just moving around in the neighbourhood. In other areas the public life seems restricted, less vivid and everyone that the youth workers come across is someone they already know. To a certain extent this may of course be related to how the youth workers perform the outreach work, but it is probably also connected to differentiated patterns of local social relations.

**Internal work**

The largest category was ‘internal’ work. This is often understood as the opposite of outreach work and other user-oriented activities. However, what becomes very clear in the documentation is the strong connection between administrative and organizational tasks on the one hand and direct work with youth and their families on the other. The outreach sessions often produce a large need to do follow-up work. A lot has to do with communication: people to be contacted, emails to be written and phone-calls to be made. Another part of the internal work has to do with planning, especially in connection with organized activities.

A lot of internal work is caused by the fact that the youth workers belong to a larger organization. There are unit meetings, information sessions and different kinds of educational gatherings. Most teams have professional tutoring by an external supervisor with regular meetings once or twice a month.

Finally, internal work includes a lot of documentation and writing reports.
Activities

As defined here, ‘activities’ covers all kinds of planned and organized work that is done in direct relation to young people and their families. According to the documentation from this study, a large part of this work is centred on the young person as an individual. The youth workers often have individual contacts, sometimes occasional, sometimes recurrent, where they talk things through with the young person and try to find ways to deal with problems and support sustainable solutions. This work sometimes includes contacts with the young person’s family. Some teams structure the individual work by using generalized methods like ‘rePULSE’, which is a method for training social skills and impulse-control developed out from Aggression Replacement Training (ART).

There are also examples of group-work in the documentation. These include both temporary activities such as canoeing with a school-class as well as regular meetings in a girls group or playing football with a group of boys. Sometimes the work is directed to bigger groups. One team works with information on alcohol and drugs in a school and another team is planning activities with young people on neighbourhood-base.

The clear impression from this study is that the individual work enjoys a substantially larger proportion of the working hours, than does the group work. This is a change because traditionally, especially since the ‘gang-work’ era, detached youth work had been strongly associated with group activities. To some extent the outcome may be due to the fact that the collection of data was undertaken at the end of the spring. This is a period when some of the regular group work has been just concluded. However, this can only partly explain the difference. The study here probably reflects an actual shift in how detached youth work is carried out; a change that has also been identified among British youth workers (Crimmens et al, 2004:18).

Co-operation

All teams were involved in some kind of organized co-operation. All but one of those working for the city or a municipality are required to form a group with regular meetings. Participants are usually local schools, youth clubs in the area, the social services and the police. These groups may organize joint activities outside the group meetings.

Aside from this, the teams had quite a large network of contacts to a number of actors and organizations, often on a local basis. Every now and then they were doing things together. During data collection, it was sometimes complicated to decide whether an undertaking should be classified as ‘co-operation’ or as ‘activity’. I decided to use a restricted definition of ‘co-operation’: tasks classified in that category are where co-operation was an obvious and independent goal of the activity.
The different orientations

So far, the general outcomes of the study have been described with emphasis on the common traits of detached youth work. Some teams have a distribution of work hours similar to the general one but there are also some interesting variations and these are presented below.

Chart 2

First, there is a team with a pattern that can be labelled ‘outreach-orientation’. This team has the largest proportion of hours spent on outreach work. At the same time, the unit also spends a lot of time on internal tasks, while the activity category is low. As mentioned earlier, in the everyday understanding of detached youth work, outreach and internal work are often constructed as the opposites of one another. In meetings with managers and politicians in the field of social work, the belief is often encountered that many hours on the street and few in the office characterize good detached youth work. This idea is common among youth workers also. What the result here indicates is that the relationship between the two categories is more complex; sometimes they don’t seem to substitute for one another, rather they belong together. Now, the unit behind these figures differs in two ways from the other units in the study. First, it is a mobile team with the whole city as its target-area. The team has a quite large bus at its disposition, which functions as a rolling meeting-place. The bus makes stops at both regular and occasional places and is well known to many young people in Gothenburg. The team also do outreach work by foot with the bus as a starting point. The second difference has to do with organization: the team is set up by a Christian foundation. This foundation carries out a lot of social work in different areas and combines professional and volunteer efforts. The youth work team is, however, purely professional and the members are employed because of their education and work experience. They collaborate
with the municipal detached youth workers and take part in its regular meetings.

What seems to characterize the work of the team is that they have a huge number of contacts with young people, spread over a large area of the city. They visit both suburbs and central parts of Gothenburg. In relation to the young people they meet, they have a lot of in-depth talks, individually or in small groups. However, it seems difficult for the team to transform these contacts into organised efforts, such as regular groups or community activities. Since they work all over the city, there is no particular neighbourhood where they can form long-term relations and work in co-operation with other local actors. It is hard for the team to form the generative relationship between outreach work and social change efforts that is typical of much detached youth work (Andersson, 2011:11).

It is interesting to compare this work-pattern with another one, labelled ‘activity-orientation’, that is shown in chart 3:

**Chart 3**

The team in question here has a work pattern where ‘activity’ is the most time-consuming task category. This is a striking contrast to the other teams and again it has to do with working conditions and how different work tasks are structured. It is not uncommon in Sweden that detached youth work units, especially when organized within the social services, are given responsibility for work tasks that are only loosely connected to the role as a detached youth worker. This may be about such control-oriented measures as checking how local retailers comply with age limits when selling tobacco and beer, or handling short-term treatment programmes for young people with a criminal record. For the team with the ‘activity-orientation’ these kinds of responsibilities have been developed significantly and hence it functions as a support-unit to which other organized
actors, such as social workers or schools, can refer young people in need. Mainly it is about providing individual support, in the form of counselling and practical assistance.

The result of this situation is that the detached youth work is only a part-time occupation. As we can see, the team still manages to maintain a quite substantial outreach effort. One consequence of the work design is, however, that there is little connection between the outreach work and the activities that the team carries out. This is mainly due to the circumstance that the young persons, to whom the team is giving individual support, are not the same people that the youth workers meet during outreach sessions. Thus there is a tendency that the result of the outreach work is limited to superficial contacts with young people and does not function as the basis for relationship-building and further activity-formation.

When the ‘outreach-oriented’ team is set side by side with the ‘activity-oriented’ one, we can see resemblances, but also differences. Both share the problem with developing outreach contact-making into organized activities, but for quite different reasons. In the first case the work is diffused in too many settings and, in the second case, the work tasks are separated by different organizational rationales.

A third variation of time-use can be extracted from the collected data. This is shown in chart 4 and called ‘co-operation-orientation’. What characterizes the work of this team is a comparatively high degree of co-operation. As mentioned, the most common task in the co-operation category is regular meetings with a local group of public sector actors: police, schools, social services and youth clubs. The co-operation-oriented team also participates in such a group, but the difference is that the members of the group don’t restrict their joint activities to meetings. The activities that the detached youth workers do together with others are not of a different kind. The same kind of individual and group work can be found among all the teams.

Chart 4
But what happens here is that a lot of the work is, in practice, carried out with other professionals.

There is a possible explanation for this situation. The neighbourhood where this team works had a very troublesome period some months before the study was made. Groups of young people protested against what they experienced as police harassment and a general sense of being excluded. There were lots of incidents and massive attention in the media. One response from actors working with young people in the area was to try to co-operate and to use existing resources in a productive way. The high level of co-operation in the work of these detached youth workers is a part of this. It can be seen as an indication of the flexibility of detached youth work.

Finally, a fourth pattern of how the working hours were used can be seen in chart 5. Here the internal work dominates and it is actually a picture of a non-functioning detached youth work. The team presented in the chart consisted of two youth workers. However, one of them had recently quit and moved to another job. So when the study was carried out, the process of recruiting a new team-member was going on and the remaining worker was engaged in this. This took a lot of time and it was also difficult for the sole youth worker to carry out several of the customary work tasks alone. So this is a detached youth work project whose engine is idling.

Chart 5

Two more teams were in a somewhat similar condition. For one of them this was due to cutbacks in budget and a possibility of being closed down. For the other it was a temporary situation connected to several members being involved in an extensive educational programme.

The general conclusion to be drawn from this time-pattern is that detached youth work can be quite
vulnerable to changes. The teams are often small and a lot of the work is preferably done in pairs. So if someone is missing, this can have huge impact on the whole work situation.

The calculation of working hours has been made at team-level. One question is whether all members of a team perform the same work tasks or if there is any internal differentiation. The general answer to this question is that in most cases the team functions as a collective; all duties are shared. However, there are a couple of exceptions to this rule. In two teams there was a worker with a specialized role. This worker was responsible for certain tasks or subjects and worked alone quite a lot. In one case it was a part-time worker.

Conclusion

What can be concluded from this small study of detached youth workers in Gothenburg? One thing it shows is that quantitative studies need not be huge in scope and can be carried through in co-operation between the academy and professionals in the field. This study was planned together and the youth workers took responsibility for the collection of data, while I have carried out the processing. The outcome was then discussed in seminars. It also shows that quantitative data can be used as a basis for qualitative understanding of job conditions and characteristics. This can give important information about what is happening in the field and add to better methodological and theoretical understanding of detached youth work.

The study indicates that in general, detached youth work in Gothenburg fulfils one important goal: in comparison to other types of social work it contains a lot of work-time spent in direct interaction with user groups. At the same time the notion of a ‘general’ detached youth work is questioned. When the use made by participating teams of their working hours were put together, several variations became apparent. Detached youth workers often act as a collective, but it seems to be the case that there are differences in how the job is performed. Some of these differences are connected to basic, often organizational, job conditions and have a stable character. The ‘outreach-orientation’ and the ‘activity-orientation’ are examples of this. Other variations are rather occasional: the ‘co-operation-orientation’, and the ‘internal orientation’. Here temporary circumstances shape conditions that affect the work and when things go back to ‘normal’, these variations will disappear. They show two important traits of detached youth work. One is the flexibility that marks the method. Detached youth work can adapt to sporadic changes and develop temporal strategies. The other characteristic is that detached youth work units can be quite vulnerable to changes in work conditions and number of staff.

There is a link here to the question discussed in the beginning of the article: the possibilities which politicians and managers have to direct the work. To a large extent, it was the workers’ experience that they selected interventions in relation to the situations they faced during the outreach work.
It is, however, clear that there is a regulating force emanating from other factors decided at the political and managerial level, that frame the work. In particular, this is obvious in the two patterns that I have called the ‘outreach-oriented’ and the ‘activity-oriented’. Perhaps this type of steering has a greater impact in practice, than what is generally assumed among detached youth workers.

In their study, Crimmens et al (2004) identified a process of ‘erosion’ when it comes to the specificity of ‘detached’ and ‘outreach’ youth work in the UK and therefore decided to use the more general term ‘street-based youth work’ (p 47). Does the identification of the different ‘orientations’ in this study signal that a similar process is on its way in Sweden? ‘Detached youth work’ still functions as a label and symbol of professional identity to youth workers in Sweden. The comparatively privileged and protected position inside the welfare system is probably one reason for this. The long tradition of collective organization and methodological reflection is another. However, there is always a risk that conventional thinking and the support of collective identification actually disguise important changes. This must be investigated with the help of further research and the collection of experiences from the field.

References


