

Draft Discussion Paper

The challenges and potential of developing a more effective Youth Work curriculum with Young Men aged 16 – 25.

Responding to the needs of Young Men

Young men today face many paradoxes, contradictions and tensions for which they are not mentally or emotionally prepared. This pervades every level of their experience. Public expectations demand that families, schools and local communities are safe environments where young people are supported, encouraged, valued, mentored and loved. In reality however, these settings are often hostile environments that leave many young men feeling marginalised, frustrated, worthless and socially excluded. It is significant that social structures such as school, supposedly established to educate, support and resource young people, are perceived by many working class young men as simply part of a system that perpetually denounces them as failures. These are important issues for those with responsibility for working with young men to consider as they help contextualise young men's lives and provide greater insight into contemporary male behaviour. Failure to effectively address the needs of young men has serious implications for their emotional, mental and sexual health. A recent study by Harland (2000) revealed that young men living in inner city interface areas were wary of other young males within their community and fearful of young men from different traditional backgrounds. Paramilitary influence was a constant threat that made them feel intimidated, suspicious and confused, particularly regarding issues surrounding law and order. Compounding this depressing scenario was extreme apathy about the lack of amenities and employment opportunities available to young men. The fact that many working class young men perceive they are unlikely to secure employment is in stark contrast to their belief that men must be the family breadwinner. This creates complex gender contradictions for many young men who believe that by withholding feelings and emotions they are demonstrating an important aspect of their masculinity – namely, that men do not need the support of others.

Young Men's Health

Health statistics within the north of Ireland increasingly reveal that being male is a risky business. Central to this is a clear link between notions of masculinity and its impact upon men's health. Stereotypical images of the 'masculine ideal' portray men as healthy, heterosexual and experienced. Therefore, men have learned to treat their bodies like machines in order to prove to themselves and others that their masculinity is intact. One outcome of this is that men, in particular young men, frequently display their masculinity in an aggressive and uncompromising manner, which can make them appear unemotional and unwilling to seek support or medical advice. Risk is a recurrent theme in young men's health statistics revealing that young men jeopardise their health by partaking in both active and passive risk taking behaviour (Men's Health Forum in Ireland, 2000). Actively, young men are more susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse; they are four times more likely than young women to commit suicide; they are more likely to suffer from heart disease and the most common cancers; they are more likely not to use a seat belt in the car and have a more serious accident on the roads or at work. Passively, young men tend to ignore symptoms when they are ill and feel shame or embarrassment at having to talk about sickness, which means they make fewer visits to their G.P. than women, and tend to internalise their problems.

The Northern Ireland Context

In Northern Ireland young men face particular pressures that impact upon their development. Throughout the troubles it is predominantly young men who have been both the victims and perpetrators of community and sectarian violence. Most grow up in polarised communities with their own specific identities and culture making it difficult for them to build friendships with those from other traditions. In particular, social problems such as crime; drug abuse; high levels of unemployment; sectarianism; community division; paramilitary influence; punishment beatings and random shootings contribute to the negative stereotyping of young men in our society. In the media, young men are alarmingly depicted as part of a deviant youth culture that has lost all of its morals and values. They are also portrayed as a threat both to themselves and others are reinforcing the image of young men as a 'social problem.' This further isolates young men from mainstream society and devalues their

contribution within local communities. Disturbing trends towards increases in suicide and attempted suicide amongst young males further highlight the insecurity and vulnerability that is evident amongst many young men. Extended and less certain transitions from school to employment further expose the vulnerability of disadvantaged young men who live in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. Crucially, for many adolescent young males, it is at this stage of their development that they discover the harsh reality of the restricted life opportunities available to them.

Participation in youth provision amongst young men aged 16+

During the past few years there have been significant trends in society for a more consultative ethos, through which young people are encouraged to become more involved in decisions affecting them (Youth Council for Northern Ireland, 1993). Terms such as participation, empowerment, citizenship, rights and responsibilities reflect recent attempts to better appreciate youth potential and embrace diversity of culture. Despite difficult social conditions, the Northern Ireland Youth Service has played a significant role in influencing the ethos and guidelines in working with young people to help them gain the skills, confidence and motivation necessary to prepare them for the future. A key characteristic of the Youth Service is that young people are involved in its delivery. Cane for example, (1999) argues that 'there is a long tradition of encouraging young people to take responsibility for their own affairs' (p23). This does not mean however, that the needs of young people are being met satisfactorily or there is room for complacency. Significant numbers of young people disengage from existing youth provision an early age. (See for example, Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, 1999.) The result is that many young people 'are not easy to contact or persuade to become involved' (p2). Whilst historically various youth initiatives have engaged many young males, primarily through sport and recreation, those aged 16 – 25 have not adequately benefited from such provision. Of further concern is the number of young people aged 16+ who have never participated in youth provision perceiving it as irrelevant and 'out of touch.' Undoubtedly, traditional approaches have struggled to respond effectively to the needs of this age group. One outcome of this is by the age of sixteen many young people who have participated on youth programmes have become disillusioned and struggle to identify

any significant benefit from their involvement (Youth Council, 1998; NIVT, 1999). As noted by Geraghty et al (1997) 'It would appear that neither the practice nor the ethos (of youth service provision) are either meaningful or relevant to them' (P104). Research into youth provision carried out by the N.E.E.L.B. (1994) found that the majority of young people aged over sixteen do not use traditional Youth Service provision perceiving it as being ill-equipped to support their health, developmental or emotional needs or effectively address their sense of alienation and powerlessness. Youth work must address the inclusion of young people, particularly those aged 16 – 25, who feel marginalised and vulnerable within our society. This presents an enormous challenge to the sector. Crucially however, it was similar challenges that formed the background to the innovative work with girls and young women that has been established in the youth sector during the past fifteen years.

Work with Boys and Young Men: Lessons from Work with Girls

From the early 1980's there was growing evidence that girls were not participating in Youth Service provision to the same extent as young men. Girls were perceived and accepted as passive in contrast to the dominant and aggressive behaviour of boys. Studies such as Trimble (1990) highlighted the need for new responses to developing work with girls and young women. Increasingly, programmes focusing on personal and skills development, health matters and other relevant issues provided young women with opportunities to articulate their views and encourage greater participation. In 1994, the Youth Council for Northern Ireland published curriculum guidelines that, for the first time, focused on gender as a possible curriculum area. 'Into the Mainstream' rightly stated that males and females do not participate on an equal basis in the majority of Youth Service provision and there is an overwhelming 'orientation towards boys and young men' (p14). Despite constraints, structures have been developed within the Youth Service that better facilitate the needs of girls and young women (Gray, 1999). Work with young women has developed firm roots in the ethos of community and become an integral part of much Youth Service provision.

Prior to the 1990's young women undoubtedly participated less in Youth Service provision than young men and there was a need to develop appropriate strategies to redress this issue. In response to the early work with girls, many boys responded initially by frustrating sessions and creating a continual aggressive counter balance. Consequently, boys were deemed 'the problem' and therefore much of work with boys at this time had an 'anti-sexist' focus. Essentially, this only served to reinforce negative masculine perceptions such as the view that boys are aggressive, violent, competitive and disruptive. As a result of the behavioural difficulties that boys portrayed, it was believed the best way to 'sort out the boys' was to involve them in physical activity. Whilst historically this approach has consistently attracted and involved young men, it has not effectively responded to their holistic needs (Lloyd, 1996). It is within this context that the need for a non-traditional approach to working with boys and young men was conceived. To date however, this has not been deemed a priority area within Youth Service Curriculum or Youth Service Policy Documents.

Work with young men: Breaking the mould

Since the formation of the Youth Service, work with boys and young men has tended to focus on their recreational needs and diversionary responses to aggressive and anti-social male behaviour. Little work has been carried out in developing more positive approaches that are concerned with young men's emotional, mental and sexual well-being. The idea that new approaches to working with boys and young men were necessary is not a recent phenomenon. As far back as 1981, Moore was already suggesting the need for change when he called for 'a re-evaluation of youth work with boys' and looked forward to a 'new definition of masculinity' (p16). Posing the question 'What does the Youth Service do for boys?' Moore contested that youth work with boys was based on two main threads of competitiveness and social education. Moore believed that competitiveness gave general approval to 'invidious comparison and aggression amongst boys' (p16). He conceived that the real challenge to youth work was rooted in the way it was delivered by practitioners. Therefore, in order to explore issues of masculinity and manhood with boys and young men, Moore argued that it was of fundamental importance that Youth Workers began to explore these issues themselves, a dimension he believed was 'largely absent from their present work' (p17).

Since 1981 there has been an ever-increasing deluge of literature identifying the need for more effective responses to working with young men. For example, Jackson & Salisbury (1996) claim that at street level in different communities there is a real problem with young men as nobody appears to know what to do with them. Writers such as (Lloyd, 1987; Davidson, 1987, 1988; Cousins, 1988; Lloyd, 1996, 1998; Harland, 1997) also argue that it is imperative that work with boys and young men is developed outside the damaging limitations of stereotypical masculinity. Despite the increasing number of practitioners who have been highlighting the need for work with boys and young men to be re-evaluated, there appears to be reluctance within the Youth Service and key funders to embrace, or take seriously this crucial area of work. It is essential that the Youth Service in Northern Ireland responds more directly to the changing needs of boys and young men and seizes the challenge to develop a more strategic approach to working with young men. The Youth Service should strive to develop a practice base that does not tolerate, perpetuate, or reinforce outdated stereotypical images of men and masculinity. Young men must be freed from their perceived need to hide behind restrictive 'masculine masks' that prevent them from recognising and accepting that they can be sensitive, caring and at times vulnerable, without believing they are somehow compromising their identity and masculine status.

Those working with young men have a responsibility to challenge such perceptions and provide young men with the support and opportunities they need to unlock their potential and make them feel valuable and worthwhile members of our society. This must include the development of a youth curriculum that addresses pertinent issues such as sexuality, gender, relationships, manhood, masculinity, homophobia, health, parenting, male roles, mental health, risk taking, suicide, employment trends and citizenship. This will in itself directly lead to increased confidence and understanding and reduce the fear, ignorance and isolation that so many young men experience.

Work with young men: The role of the Youth Worker

It is increasingly recognised that youth workers possess a unique blend of skills, knowledge and experience that is particularly effective in building meaningful relationships with young people. The uniqueness of a youth worker's role and relationship provides many opportunities for positive and healthy role modelling. Despite this, many youth workers report difficulties maintaining conversations with young men or getting them to talk about themselves (Lloyd, 1996; Harland 1997). One way to achieve this is for workers to set consistent standards of youth work practice that challenge stereotypical masculine behaviour. For example, if those working with young men learn to disclose their feelings in a more open and appropriate way, then this in itself will show young men that by disclosing certain feelings and emotions they are not compromising their manhood or masculine identity. A major difficulty with this however, is that workers, in particular male workers, may not have been given opportunities to talk about their own hurt and pain, and therefore do not deem it necessary, or see the benefit, of encouraging young men to talk more openly about the way they feel. Many men have become 'masters' at suppressing their own feelings and emotions and concealing the struggles they wrestle with in regard to their own masculinity, sexuality and identity. Therefore, although they can empathise with young men's experience, they refuse to engage in the process of change. For generations, men have learned to exist by proving their manhood through a series of overtly masculine behaviours. This is because for men to speak publicly about feeling vulnerable is to risk the threat of being perceived by others as weak or 'unmanly' –which ultimately leads to shame and embarrassment. Crucially however, the suppression of emotions such as pain, fear, hurt, anger and frustration can be damaging and detrimental to male health and well-being. This is particularly true of young men. Therefore youth workers must actively create opportunities in their work that will facilitate young men's need to talk more openly about the way they think and feel. One would imagine that this would be an integral part of all youth work with young men. Ironically it is not. The challenge therefore, is not only to find ways of enabling young men to talk, but also for those claiming to resource young men, to listen. In being prepared to take the time to listen, workers must begin not only to appreciate the things young men have to say, but also to consider how best they can respond.

Training for workers is essential if they are to find more effective ways of enabling boys and young men to become more comfortable and intimate about talking about themselves and their needs. Whilst work with young men training has recently been incorporated within community youth work courses at the University of Ulster, the majority of locally based workers do not have access to such training. Developing skills that will enable workers to engage more purposefully and effectively with young men must become mainstreamed and part of all youth work practice.

The Youth Service in Northern Ireland: The need for a strategic approach to work with young men.

A more strategic approach to working with young men must be developed by the Northern Ireland Youth Service that will inform and influence future policy development and curriculum initiatives. No longer can it be tolerated that so many young men in our society feel so marginalised, powerless, isolated, depressed, worthless and without support. The delivery of youth work must become more inclusive with a key objective to address the alienation that young men feel at every level of their experience. To do otherwise is to allow the perpetuation of a service that fails young men and keeps them jammed within the severe limitations of damaging, outdated stereotypical and unrealistic masculine aspirations. There is a clear need to develop youth work approaches through which young men can address the complexities of being young and where they are supported through the ever extending and complex transitional phase into adulthood.

These are crucial issues that the Northern Ireland Youth Service must address at the dawn of the third millennium. It can no longer be tolerated that many young men continue to exist and survive in a society where the very systems established to resource them are perceived by them as irrelevant. In a world that has changed rapidly over the past thirty years, new methods of working with young men and more effective ways of responding to their needs must be developed. This is of fundamental importance as Northern Ireland attempts to move from a dysfunctional to a more stable society. A new social and political context provides exciting opportunities for future youth work policy and curriculum to constructively shape the society in which we live. New beginnings create new possibilities. McMasters (2000) challenges the

Youth Service to 'clarify its vision for a new Northern Ireland' (p2). This is particularly important in regard to the many young men whose developmental and emotional needs remain unmet within current youth work provision. If young men are to play a more constructive role in building a peaceful society, then it is of paramount importance that the Youth Service finds more positive ways of responding to their needs.

A model for working with young men

YouthAction Northern Ireland has been developing non-traditional approaches to work with marginalised young men since 1990. Initially, this began by offering training to youth workers who were finding it increasingly difficult to engage effectively with young men, many of whom were outside traditional Youth service Provision. In 1996/97, YouthAction produced two major Publications: 'Young Men's Health – A Youth Work Concern' and 'Young Men Talking – Voices from Belfast.' This led in 1997 to the appointment of a full-time worker for three years, funded by Youthnet to develop work with young men aged 14-25 living in inner city and rural areas of Northern Ireland. This was carried out in partnership with workers in local communities and youth organisations who were experiencing difficulty engaging with young men beyond bravado and banter.

Programmes aim to help young men acquire new skills and confidence and accept greater responsibility for their own lives. Environments are created where young men can feel safe to talk about what they think and feel. The project addresses sensitive issues such as, self-esteem, relationships, masculinity, risk taking, mental health, fatherhood, citizenship, violence and sexual health. Programmes promote positive community relations underpinned by clear principles and exploration of what it means to be a young man in Northern Ireland. Importantly, young men are supported to better understand the positive role they can play in contributing to a more peaceful society.

A significant development has been the establishment of a Young Men's Forum consisting of young men aged 18 – 25 from different traditional backgrounds. This consists of young men who have participated on our programmes and demonstrated a

concern to help other young men in other communities. The Forum provides a voice for young men to share their experience and concerns whilst providing a structure for peer support.

An external evaluation report (Lloyd, 2000) of the Work with Young Men's Unit's over a three year period demonstrated its ability to work effectively with 200 young men aged 15 -25 in local communities. The evaluation identified a number of conclusions:

- Young men were provided with opportunities to reflect on their lives, to develop their ideas and views about a range of issues they say they rarely get to discuss elsewhere.
- An effective model of practice has been developed, using a mixture of activity and discussion underpinned by an understanding of masculinity.
- A broad range of exercises and approaches have been developed to engage young men around issues of masculinity, health, sex and relationships, risk-taking, violence, self-esteem and communication.
- Central to the projects strengths have been in the way it has responded to the needs of young men. A significant number of young men have used the project as a route to more active community involvement and personal development.
- The project has also developed an effective method of supporting other workers to develop their own work in this area. A support group style has begun to show rewards, but has only worked because of the substantial practice already developed by the Young Men's Unit.

Conclusions

Within definitions of traditional forms of patriarchal masculinity many young men grow up believing and accepting that they must keep their thoughts, feelings and emotions to themselves. Effective work with young men must facilitate expression of their opinions, thoughts, feelings, and expectations, as well as attempting to free them from the need to constantly prove themselves to others. This in itself will contribute to healthier lifestyles and enhanced mental health amongst young men. Within the Northern Ireland Youth Service, health education with young men has traditionally focused on their physical health through recreational activities and sport. Whilst this is undoubtedly valuable, qualitative and quantitative research has clearly demonstrated that this approach does not fulfil their overall health needs. Similarly, much of the youth work carried out with young men centres around keeping them out of trouble, reducing disruptive behaviour and anti-sexist work. This can mean that work with young men begins with a negative focus and is therefore not a sound basis on which to encourage human growth and development. Recent studies (e.g. YouthAction, 1996; Harland, 1997; 2000) reveal the extent to which the needs of young men, particularly in inner city and rural areas, are alarmingly not being met, with much youth provision perceived as ineffective and irrelevant. The complexity of young men's lives and their cry for support and understanding will not simply go away. Nor will the struggles young men experience in regard to issues such as their contradictory experience of power and powerlessness; changing male roles; extended youth transitions; male academic underachievement; unrealistic employment expectations; homophobia; sex and sexuality; relationships; fatherhood; patriarchy and extreme masculine behaviour. The list goes on. At every level of their experience many young men exist without support or direction, and subsequently, are left clinging to unattainable and unrealistic masculine aspirations that further distance them and alienate them from the reality of a world that has changed rapidly during the past thirty years. In a post-industrial era, it is not acceptable that young men continue to construct their identities whilst striving towards retaining the remnants and values of an industrial age that has largely become obsolete.

Future youth provision in Northern Ireland must address these issues and embrace the challenge that developing new approaches to the way in which work with boys and

young men offers. Innovative youth work must respond to the needs of young men, particularly those who are marginalised within society and no longer provide a service that reinforces stereotypical and restrictive forms of masculinity. Importantly however, changing male attitudes that have been prevalent for many generations is no easy task. Although this process has begun, there is much in our society that continues to promote, reward and perpetuate unattainable outdated masculine images that are so detrimental to young men's development. It is imperative therefore that funders and policy makers begin to listen and respond to the difficulties workers have in addressing the needs of young men. Resources must be made available that will equip practitioners to develop more effective approaches to meeting the needs of young men. Young men have a fundamental right to be heard, and this includes listening to their pain, hurts, hopes, aspirations and vision. Importantly, despite some good examples of youth work practice with young men, to date, there is no coherent strategic approach to responding to their needs. In a world that has changed significantly over the past thirty years, young men must be better supported to find their place and value. This presents a serious challenge, and exciting opportunity, for a Northern Ireland Youth Service of the third millennium.

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Recommendations to the Northern Ireland Youth Service for the development of a more effective response to the needs of young men aged 16+.

1. Research should be carried out into the way in which young men seek support and the effectiveness of youth agencies that claim to resource them. This would help clarify masculine contradictions and conflicts young men experience in their lives and help identify improved responses to disturbing trends in mental illness and young male suicide.
2. As young men are often reluctant to avail of medical, health and youth services, active targeting should ensure that services that are non-intimidating and male friendly.
3. Because young men do not actively seek help or emotional support, a multi-agency partnership within the Northern Ireland Youth Service should consider developing a strategic specialist support service, underpinned by an understanding and appreciation of 'masculine pressures,' whereby young men can access quality information, guidance and counselling.
4. This specialist service should be available 24-hours per day to young men (e.g. by telephone) backed up by 1-1 support (e.g. home visits, drop in.)
5. Youth work approaches with young men aged 16+ should incorporate individual work as well as groupwork. At this transitional age an individual's personal goals are likely to be of equal importance as group / peer involvement.
6. As gaining employment is of great importance to young men, more information about realistic work options needs to be available to them. In a world where substantial social and economic changes have seriously contested and challenged traditional male roles, Schools and Youth Agencies have an important role to match young men's work expectations with the realities of the work environment.
7. As transitions beyond school are becoming increasingly prolonged and complex, Youth Service curriculum should include the development of more aspects of 'life and social skills education.' For example, health, sex and relationship education should

be more formally incorporated within School and Youth Service curriculum in order that young men receive consistent standards of learning through formal and informal education initiatives.

8. Work with young men should begin with an assessment stage where workers are supported to discuss needs with young men, reflect on the setting they work in, the skills they may require to develop, and the overall outcomes of the project.

9. Work with young men should also include a reflection phase on ways in which masculinity; risk taking and health issues impact upon the construction of masculine identities.

10. Practitioners need to appreciate the importance of listening to what young men have to say.

11. Approaches to working with young men should include providing opportunities for young males to talk about their feelings and the pain they experience in their lives. This needs to be viewed as both normal and necessary for healthy human development and growth.

12. Youth workers should be aware of how their own perceptions of masculinity can influence their practice.

13. Those working with young men should have an understanding of issues affecting young men's lives, their mental health, physical health and an appreciation of links between health, masculinity and risk-taking behaviour.

14. In developing work with young men, workers should aim to create an atmosphere where young men can communicate openly and honestly without the fear of being put down or having their masculine identity threatened.

15. Workers should build up young men's self-esteem; respect them; listen to them; go beyond young men's expectations of themselves; not make judgements about young men and avoid telling them how to behave.

16. Approaches to work with young men need to be flexible and enable spontaneous, as well as strategic responses, to meeting their needs.

17. Youth Service curriculum should address issues surrounding the rights of gay young men; young fathers; fatherhood responsibility and parenting skills training for young men

18. Training in regard to working with young men should be made available for workers to increase their knowledge on issues surrounding masculinity, and through personal reflection, discover innovative ways of engaging more effectively with young men.

19. Youth agencies and individuals working with young men should record, monitor and evaluate the work in order that others may benefit and learn from their experience. This will contribute to the identification of what good practice might be, and how practitioners, and those resourcing young men, can work towards the delivery of quality youth work programmes.

20. Research should be carried out amongst young men that investigates links between violence, sectarianism and racism.

21. As young men perceive they live in a violent culture, specific youth work approaches with young men should include the development of programmes aimed at promoting non-violent responses to conflict.

22. Funding bodies need to provide financial assistance to support initiatives aiming to develop new and innovative approaches to working with young men.

23. New policy guidelines should be developed that will address the needs of young men and identify ways in which youth workers can better respond to their needs.

24. There should be greater collaboration between parents, school and statutory and voluntary youth organisations working with young men.

25. At the dawn of a new social and political context in Northern Ireland, future Youth Service strategies should aim to create a service that brings young men on the margins of society to a more inclusive, responsible and constructive role.

26. There needs to be a more strategic approach to the development of work with young men that fits within a peace and reconciliation model of youth work.