



National Youth Council of Ireland

Youth Arts Position Paper

Comhairle Náisiúnta na nÓg

National Youth Council of Ireland

3 Montague Street

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Youth Arts Position Paper 2009-2012

Introduction

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. NYCI functions to represent the interests of young people and youth organisations. NYCI's role is recognised in legislation (Youth Work Act 2001) and as a Social Partner. NYCI aims through its member organisations and its representative role to empower young people to participate in society as fulfilled, confident individuals. The work of NYCI is based on principles of equality, social justice and equal participation for all. In achieving these aims NYCI seeks the emergence of a society in which young people are valued citizens who can make a meaningful contribution to their community.

Context

For many years NYCI has prioritised youth arts as a key medium to engage and communicate with children and young people. We have achieved this through NYCI's Youth Arts Programme, which is a partnership between NYCI, the Arts Council and the Youth Affairs Unit of the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. NYCI is dedicated to the development and advancement of youth arts in Ireland across all arts contexts which promote youth-centred practice. It aims specifically to realise the potential of young people through good quality arts practice within youth work organisations and to develop appropriate policies and activities at local, regional and national level. NYCI aims to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to participate in and engage with arts and cultural practice in Ireland as an intrinsic right (Article 27 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights) as well as for its value and efficacy as an educational medium. NYCI provides strategic support for arts practice in youth work, encouraging the creation of safe and supportive environments that value imagination, originality, daring and experimentation.

An energised, growing and sustainable youth arts community which spans all art forms and delivers quality outcomes for young people is vital to ensure the future cultural, social and economic well being of Ireland. A vibrant arts sector, of which engaged, creative, vocal young people are a part, underpins a healthy contemporary society.

While NYCI's area of particular expertise is within the youth work sector, arts practices developed there can be shared and are of value and relevance to the wider arts environment as part of a reciprocal relationship.

Background

This position paper has been produced following a decision by the Board of NYCI to set out the key issues and proposals on youth arts from an NYCI perspective. The primary focus of this position paper is an area within youth arts which we will describe as 'arts practice in youth work'.

It is informed by the consultation process and subsequent recommendations undertaken by NYCI in 2008. Following the completion of its Strategic Plan 2003-2006, the National Youth Council of Ireland's Arts programme sought to consult regionally to inform and direct its work over the next five years with relevant stakeholders in the youth work sector and the arts sectors whose work engages young people. This process was in line with NYCI's Strategic Plan (2008-2012) which identifies arts and culture as an important priority for the organisation. Four regional meetings were held in 2008 (Dublin, Cork, Offaly, and Sligo). Participants had the opportunity to input into discussions on the following topics: policy development and advocacy, practical supports, co-operation between the youth and arts sectors, research and evaluation data, and the identity of the arts programme at NYCI. The consultation process was led by Jim Cathcart, an independent arts consultant contracted by NYCI.

Aims

The ultimate aims of this position paper are:

- to promote access to the arts, so that more young people have the opportunity to experience arts in a non formal educational setting as makers, creators, participants, audience members and critics.
- To ensure that these experiences are high quality
- To promote best practice for working with young people developed by the youth work sector and how this can influence and contribute to arts practice in Ireland.

The position paper outlines our proposals for further developing, promoting and supporting youth arts in youth and in voluntary organisations in the youth work sector, in particular by supporting arts in youth work practice in member organisations and the youth work sector.

Definitions of Youth Arts

While there are varied definitions and meanings of youth arts across many perspectives, the definition of youth arts in **Arts in Their Lives (NYCI's Youth Arts Policy 2003-2007)** is that youth arts

'can be broadly defined as young people taking part voluntarily in creative, cultural or expressive activity outside of the formal education process. It can encompass participation and appreciation, as well as engagement with arts work specifically created by with or for young people'.

As can be seen from this definition, there is scope within this spectrum of engagement for contributions from many points across the youth and arts sectors. Within this definition, this position paper is particularly focused on arts in youth work contexts, however, the learning, practice and values are transferable to wider contexts.

Given the depth and scope of young people's involvement and engagement with the arts, it is important to define our understanding of what constitutes arts in youth work contexts. NYCI determines that arts in youth work demonstrate the following principles; explanation has been given to expand on these principles where necessary:

- **Artistic and youth work processes are as important as any final outcome or product.**
- **The process will be steered by youth arts practice/specialism**
The specialism can be provided equally by a youth work and arts practice partnership providing the complementary skills and support necessary to deliver a high quality project. It can also be led by a youth arts practitioner. A youth arts practitioner or specialist can be broadly described as either a youth worker with

an arts specialism, an artist with a youth specialism, or, as described above, can be the partnership of these skill sets.

- **The processes and outcomes are a collaboration between arts and youth work practice and between the practitioners/leaders and the young people.**
- **The development observable in the young person throughout the process includes both creative/artistic development and personal development.**
- **Authentic engagement and exploration of the art form is an objective of the project as well as a methodology through which youth work objectives may be achieved.**
- **High Quality Throughout.** Young people are entitled to the best quality practice, time, space, support and materials available within the resources of an organisation.
- **Young people centred**
The focus of the work and activity should reflect the needs, abilities, interests and ambitions of the young people involved. The starting point for any activity or process should be what is in the best interests of the young people involved, This is described in 'Work in Progress: Case Studies in Participatory Arts with Young People' (ed Maurice Devlin and Deirdre Healy, NYCI 2007) as 'sensitivity to context. However, this context will also encourage and inspire new ideas, perspectives, experiences and ambitions.
- **Young people's participation in planning and decision making**
The active participation of young people in planning and deciding on the nature of projects and how they should be organized should be intrinsic to the work. Also systems should be in place to ensure the voice of young people can provide formative evaluation on an ongoing basis. Young people should have access points into projects at all levels of planning and decision making and the right to participate at the level at which they are most comfortable – not all young people want to sit on boards or project design meetings, but the scope to involve those who do should be built in. This is very effectively modeled by the National Association for Youth Drama, and the many access points provided by their programme and practice for young people to be involved in decision making.¹

¹ NAYD promotes youth participation at all levels of a youth theatres activity. Specifically it encourages youth theatres to ensure that the members are involved in the day-to-day running and in the artistic programming. Members are encouraged to develop a members committee with one group representative on the overall youth theatre board/committee.

This members committee is also often charged with developing fundraising ideas and leading on this with a number of leaders. NAYD encourages leaders to actively canvass the ideas of the group in a formal manner, particularly senior members, in developing the

The Shadowing Scheme by Children's Books Ireland is an example of how youth centred processes are informing arts organisations.²

I went there the first night and I absolutely loved it to bits because it's not about showing off how good you are and all it's about team work and team effort. (M, 11)

- **Planned programme as outlined in the Youth Work Act 2001**

The Youth Work Act defines youth work “as a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young person’s through their voluntary participation”. Arts practice in youth work should therefore conform to the legislative definition in that it is planned and purposeful, educational and developmental.

I think it teaches people to, like use their own heads and not just like go with the crowd, decide their own opinions for things, and confident enough to give their own opinions and think their ideas are going to be valued. (F, 15)

- **Voluntary participation.**

A key principle underpinning the work will be the voluntary participation of young people in all activities.

- **Inclusive of all young people:**

Any work or activity must be inclusive of all young people who want to participate. There may be some projects (for example a play, band or film) which will require auditioning or decision making about roles and responsibilities, but the wider programme around a particular project will encourage and value the unique contribution of each young person.

I'm the missing piece of the jigsaw... if I'm not in it the picture's ruined'. (M, 11)

- **Mutual trust and respect between young people and workers/artists.**

artistic programme. It also advises youth theatres to encourage annual members' one-acts where the young people write, direct and act in their own work. It creates a great sense of ownership of the youth theatre and also of the complete artistic process.

² The Bisto Book of the Year Awards, in partnership with Children's Books Ireland, are the leading annual Children's Book Awards in Ireland. CBI established the Bisto Shadowing Scheme in 2004 to help encourage young readers to actively engage with the awards shortlist. Shadowing is a programme designed to encourage classroom or library groups to read, analyse and debate the short-listed titles for Bisto Book of the Year Awards. Using specially devised activities supplied by CBI, shadowing groups are encouraged to work in a similar way to the official judges and to feel that their work is equally important. At the end of this process each group is asked to collectively choose the book they think is the best. CBI then collects together all nominations from across the country and announces a shadowing winner

- **Run by organisations with a youth (rather than commercial or competitive) ethos**

Young people have a wide variety of opportunities to explore and engage in the arts organised by a variety of providers. In some cases the participation of young people depends on their prowess in the particular field or the capacity of their parents to pay the costs involved. Often, therefore, voluntary and not-for-profit organisations are uniquely placed to provide young people with opportunities to achieve their full potential which do not depend on the criteria above.

- **Ensemble or group process**

The activity or project is an ensemble or group process which creates opportunities for group interaction, team building, collaboration etc as well as for artistic exploration.

Like everyone has an important part in the dance, so you know that you must do this certain thing, to help the dance get on its way to get to the next stage. You realise that you're valued, you must do this, or this can't happen. (M, 12)

- **Espouses child protection guidelines**

All those working with children and young people must have adopted child protection policies and must ensure these are fully implemented in the best interests of children and those working with them.

- **Takes place in an out-of-school context.**

Many young people engage in arts activities in a school or formal education environment; however youth work is non-formal education. This creates a different and complementary context in that the work is not part of a curriculum. This can facilitate great creativity, innovation and personal and social development of the young people involved.

"I love everything about it really. I love acting, meeting so many like-minded people, and all the opportunities you get from it, the leading on stuff, the directing, the workshops, the Critics thing, there's so many aspects to it that you don't think of unless you're involved in it. And it gives you so much more self-confidence, you know, and just not care, walk out onto the stage and just not care what people think of what you're doing... I can't really say anything bad about it." (Niamh, 17)

Other Key Issues to be addressed:

Quality Outcomes

We believe that young people are entitled to experiences, practitioners and practices that are authentic and high quality, and to participate in, enjoy and be proud of the resulting outcomes. NYCI defines best arts practice with young people as espousing of both the process, and the outcomes of this process and which could include

performances, exhibitions, publications etc. These outcomes afford the young person the opportunity to participate in a public forum and to experience the self confidence, team building and positive memories which can result from this experience. Playing a match is the logical conclusion to regular sports training, and an inherent and inextricable part of the experience. Likewise, the creation of an exhibition, theatre piece, film, choral work, musical performance etc is the ultimate conclusion of a sustained period of engagement or creative endeavour and should be valued.

Oh, it's brilliant because then you see the look on people's faces when you're actually entertaining them... you feel so proud to have created something that people can watch and be entertained by, it's just, you feel so, enlightened, that you have enlightened people. (F, 14)

Young people as more than participants:

NYCI recognises that youth arts is a broader concept than the participation of young people in an arts project and that implicit in the definition 'youth arts' in 'Arts in Their Lives' is the entitlement of all young people to be viewed as audience, critics, participants and contributors to the spectrum of youth arts practice in Ireland.

This can be achieved through the promotion of a range of arts experiences which can be termed youth arts experiences, beyond the engagement in participative processes – for example theatre visits which allow space for critical reflection of the work seen or engagement and collaboration with the education departments of the Council of National Cultural Institutions.

When you look closer, it's a blend of hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of shades of red, like the amount of precision needed to blend all those colours together to get something that looks like that, I can't figure out who'd do it.... (M, 17)

There's just so much to look at, like you know, I'll never look at a performance in the same way again. (F, 18)

Supporting young people with fewer opportunities

There is a strong correlation between a person's socio-economic background and the number of activities in which they partake – the higher the socio-economic status, the more the person engages³ These findings demonstrate a gap between the artistic forms typically on offer to young people for participatory practice and the forms in which they are most interested – this constitutes an unrecognised barrier to participation. Research shows that the main barriers to arts participation by young people are cost (50%) and a

³ Dr. Áine de Róiste and Ms. Joan Dinneen, *Young People's Views about Opportunities, Barriers and Supports to Recreation and Leisure*, National Children's Office, Dublin, 2005

perceived absence of facilities locally (65%). Only a quarter of young people surveyed in Dublin were aware of publicly funded cultural venues. The lack of transport for both structured and unstructured recreation (i.e. organised activities and free time) is an issue that is particularly acute for young people living in rural areas and for young people with disabilities. All of these practical issues need to be adequately addressed by practitioners and youth organisations working with young people. It is also true that disadvantaged young people sometimes have more access to youth arts because organisations in areas of disadvantage can access the necessary funds. NYCI promotes the right of all young people to participate in artistic activity and expression. Also, much cultural activity in Ireland (such as access to National Cultural Institutions, municipal galleries, programmes of publicly funded arts organisations and local authority programmes etc) is free so it is possible that some barriers are around *perceptions* of the arts and around creating networks and relationships between relevant personnel in arts and youth organisations.

The contribution of arts practice:

Arts practice creates a psychic, emotional, intellectual space whereby young people can reflect on themes, issues and ideas in order to explore articulate and share them creatively. It is both the space for creativity and the medium (via various art forms) through which this creativity can find expression and shape. It requires skill, technique and also individual talent and creativity. Arts practice affords young people the opportunity to express their ideas and find their voice. It gives shape to their dreams, ambitions and imagination. Arts practice challenges, stimulates and connects young people, to their own creativity, to each other and to the cultural life of their society. Young people are entitled to arts experiences first and foremost, as outlined earlier in this document, as a right enshrined by the United Nations; also as part of a holistic education, and as an effective medium via which other educational objectives are delivered. Arts practitioners will have within their skill sets, many of the tools and techniques through which a young person's interest and exploration of an art form can find expression.

I think that doing things like this, from watching other people and things being taught to you, it helps you think about things in different ways, and you get more ideas from just looking at things around you. I would never have thought of how something like putting on a shoe could be made into a whole dance... but now you can just think of one simple task and make it into a dance. (F, 14)

The contribution of youth work

Youth work provides on-going relationships with each young person involved in a project, meets the needs, challenges, personal circumstances, dreams and ambitions of

each young person individually. Youth work charts the personal and social development of that participant and ensures that the holistic development of the young person is a priority in all activities undertaken and that that development takes place in a safe, structured, welcoming and voluntary environment. Youth work implies skill, technique, knowledge and expertise in issues pertaining to young people, their development and their non formal education. Youth workers have within their skill set the tools and techniques through which a young person's personal development can be nurtured.

It is the intersection of these two areas of skill and expertise described above, where the art and the youth work are held equally (sometimes possible in the same person or organisation) which results in high quality arts practice in youth work

I feel more confident, and I feel satisfied, I've done my best and I can't do any better now. (M, 11)

Aim:

To promote access to the arts so that more young people have the opportunity to experience arts in a non formal educational setting as makers, creators, participants, audience members and critics.

Recommendations:

1. NYCI will provide support for youth workers through a range of measures and practice sharing resources by the arts programme (manuals, publications, and web based materials).
2. NYCI is committed to investing in the creativity and artistry of youth workers and arts practitioners for its own sake, so that they are supported and nurtured in exploring their own creativity in order to fertilise and nurture their own practice.
3. NYCI recognises that arts practice in youth work organisations is a spectrum of experience, skill level, ambition and possibility, influenced by management infrastructure, personnel, environment, resources (both time and money), interest and needs of the young people and youth workers involved. NYCI will endeavour to nurture and support organisations, through a programme which reflects whatever stage of the spectrum they inhabit, and the different needs and requirements inherent in this.
4. NYCI is committed to helping youth organisations to network, share practice, and also broker relationships with organisations such as The Arts Council, the Council of National Cultural Institutions, professional arts organisations and

- other relevant parties. Two key relationships identified by the consultation process are the VEC Youth Officers and Local Authority Arts Officers.
5. NYCI will lobby for support of youth arts at all levels of government, other funding agencies, the private sector and key stakeholders.

Aim:

To ensure that arts experiences are high quality experiences.

Recommendations:

1. NYCI will advocate and promote understanding (within the sector) for the professional recognition of youth arts practice demonstrated with proper rates of pay, working conditions, supports etc that reflect this specialised area of expertise.
2. NYCI recognises and will promote that it is the *principles* of good practice outlined earlier in the document which characterise a high quality youth arts project.
3. NYCI will provide ongoing support for youth work organisations through a range of actions and resources by the arts programme: this support will be provided such as practice sharing resources (manuals, publications, and web based materials).
4. NYCI will organise training and up-skilling through workshops, in-service and longer term initiatives such as the Certificate in Youth Arts.⁴
5. NYCI will advocate for the maintenance of the existing funding provided to youth arts projects, schemes and initiatives in the sector.

Aim:

To promote best practice for working with young people developed by the youth work sector and how this can influence and contribute to arts practice in Ireland.

⁴ Developed and delivered by NYCI, the Certificate in Youth Arts is a part time, year long university accredited course of study in Irish Youth Arts Practice and Policy (Accrediting body: NUI Maynooth, Dept of Applied Social Studies). The Certificate in Youth Arts aims to introduce those working in the non-formal education sector to the concept, principles and practice of youth arts using a context and practice approach.

Recommendations:

1. NYCI will continue to encourage, promote and celebrate best practice that ensures quality experiences for young people.
2. NYCI will provide professional support programmes which support organisations in sharing their best practice, possibilities and innovation.
3. NYCI will research and develop an annual youth arts award to celebrate and profile best practice and creative achievement. This will provide recognition, support and celebration of exemplary youth arts projects. The implicit additional benefits will be practice sharing, peer support, a quality mark for exemplary youth arts projects, celebration and profile raising of all involved, a validation for organisations which will hopefully enable them to continue to fund projects or seek additional funding for other endeavours.
4. NYCI will provide advice and mentoring via ongoing open and supportive dialogue. An example of this is the supportive relationship engendered with organisations in receipt of the Artist in Youth Work grant, to provide in-kind support (master classes, workshops etc) and high quality of project delivery and of experience by the young people can be engendered.
5. NYCI will support organisations to develop and enhance the participation of young people in decision making in their youth arts projects and will endeavour to find avenues through which young people can meaningfully inform the Arts Programme.

It's something that makes you happy, so if something makes you happy you have more energy to do other stuff. (F, 17)

*Quotes from young people regarding youth arts participation taken from “**Young People, Creative Action and Social Change: A Report on the Value of Participation in the Arts for Young People**” by Anna Fiona Keogh, commissioned by National Youth Council of Ireland.