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**‘Bring on the zombie apocalypse – we are ready!’**

‘Bring on the Zombie apocalypse - we are ready!’ The statement made by a participant taking part in research into the response of youth workers during the Covid-19 global pandemic was said ‘half in jest, whole in earnest’ and revealed the range of emotions at the initial stages of the pandemic and the public health restrictions imposed by the two Governments in Northern Ireland and Ireland. The phrase captured a sense of shock, strength during a difficult time and preparedness for what comes next.

**A consistent message**

Breda Friel (2021) outlined how practice is ahead of policy in relation to this pandemic and shared how an acute problem has turned into chronic endurance. So, while much of this article will highlight the formidable work that was carried out by youth workers, their endeavours have not been without a cost to each person across a spectrum of physical, emotional and psychological strains.

This article draws on the insights gained from research ‘At the Threshold: youth work in a time of Covid-19’ carried out with 43 youth workers in the Peace4Youth[[1]](#footnote-1) programme delivering youth programmes throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic. The research was conducted through observation of staff meetings and semi-structured interviews. It resonates with research and insights shared at several youth work conferences and events in the Spring and Summer 2021 including, What’s the Story? NUIM (24th and 25th June 2021) and Ulster University’s ‘COVID and the aftermath: What did we learn and what must we learn?’ (10 June 2021), Youthpact’s ‘Unfolding Narrative from Covid-19: personal and professional wellness in practice.’  (23 March 2021). A consistent message has emerged from these events about the efforts and practice of youth workers during the Covid-19 global pandemic. The core message was abundantly clear: the global youth work community stepped up within hours of ‘lockdowns’ and the introduction of public health restrictions to meet the needs of young people.

**Rooted in ancient wisdom**

At the recent online presentation, Susan Morgan (2021) reminded us that youth work as a discipline is in its infancy, which it absolutely is. However, its skills and values are rooted in ancient wisdom and practices. Two words come to mind, firstly, agape; secondly, phronesis. Agape, mostly, but not exclusively used in a religious context is a love of choice, not out of attraction or obligation, agape leads a person to take action for the benefit of the other. Jean Spence (2008) writes of how we don’t use the word love any more when we talk about young people in the context of our work and we all understand at a personal and societal level why that is the case – however, is there a better way to describe the actions of the youth workers during the global pandemic?

The other ancient term is phronesis – one of Aristotle’s three domains of knowledge, best translated as practical wisdom. Phronesis is a moral and ethical term (Stanton et al, 2018:42) which guides youth workers to ‘respond to variable situations in ways that exhibit context-sensitive virtues, such as ‘courage, fortitude, endurance, generosity, and humility [and care?]’ Bessant (2009: 434)

For all that changed in the practice of youth work during the restrictions brought about by the global pandemic, the core of the work remained the same. The research demonstrated that the values and principles around which youth work takes place are strong enough to withstand significant upheaval and practical changes. One youth worker articulated this succinctly,

*‘There are certain ways of doing things, but the core element of the programme never changed.’*

Values which underpinned the response include a concern for all young people, especially the most vulnerable; young people as partners in the learning process; creating a safe space; starting where young people are at; providing a service to young people; and the primacy of relationship.

Another worker shared how young people recognised the presence of youth workers during the pandemic.

*‘Young people have seen the value of the work. Through the lockdown we were there for them.’*

*‘We always made a conscious effort to ask “how can we really build a relationship with these young people?” “How can we connect online?”’*

In addition to the demonstration of their core values and principles, youth workers maintained the provision of meaningful and purposeful programmes that excited, challenged and met the needs of young people.

*‘We had a wobble about the programme, but we talked about it, we looked at our programme and we believed that the content was good enough to be adapted to the online space.’*

Even with the ‘wobbles’ amid unprecedented changes to everyday life, workers provided routine, purpose, practical help and support along with a respect for and regard for each young person they were working with. Judgements were made as to when to encourage a young person to get involved and when to hold back and leave the door open for another time. Reflective and reflexive practice was essential for these judgements to be made, workers drew on their own self-awareness and their relationship with co-workers to assess their practice in terms of ethics and effectiveness. The joy of working with young people was a sustaining factor, alongside a sense of making a difference.

*‘They have a lot of other stuff going on in their lives, but I really felt that the young person would have benefited. But I persisted and offered support…I would never give up if there was somebody not able to take part this time…. I always have them on a waiting list for the next year.’*

As the restrictions continued over the weeks and months, relevant and useful programmes continued. Collegiality among youth workers was demonstrated through their willingness to share programme ideas, offer support by listening and empathising with others.

**Agility, flexibility and creativity**

The agility, flexibility and creativity among workers was evident in the response to the Covid-19 restrictions. Workers displayed the ability and willingness to make the changes required to provide a quality programme for and with young people. Many workers demonstrated how they brought an energy to the task and enjoyed the challenge and stretch in their knowledge and skills.

*‘I remember me and another co-worker were talking, and it was like we got a different job, like the principles - the voluntary participation of it all, all stayed the same but the admin side of it, the delivery side of it was like a whole new world.’*

*‘Well, [I have] personally a greater confidence in myself in terms of online…’*

Flipping the programme to an online world with some face to face interaction in line with public health guidelines was not easy, but people made the effort. Workers exemplified reflective and reflexive practice, that resulted in the continuation of a programme for young people.

*‘Some staff have struggled with the tech – we have been learning as we have gone along.’*

Supportive teamwork was vital for the delivery of the work. Workers were coping with personal and professional challenges that are wide and varied depending on individual circumstances.

*‘I have mammy guilt – trying to be a teacher and work and finding it all difficult.’*

*‘It is important to take the advice that we give to young people; when your cup is empty, you cannot give. This is about authenticity and self-awareness.’*

Rightly there was an acknowledgment of the difficulties of home schooling and childcare that were thrust onto workers but often unspoken was the pressure on practitioners working from their family (parental) home and the challenges they faced regarding space and expectations of family members.

Fellowship, compassion and humour helped sustain working relationships. New ways of using apps such as WhatsApp aided workers communication while they were in groups and throughout the day. Increased staff meetings in the first few months of the restrictions built a sense of common purpose. Workers at times were ambivalent about the meetings as it was extra work in what had become a very time-consuming job, but they enjoyed the time with each other and the support of their organisation. Sharing resources across teams and projects took place in recognition of the need to provide support to young people and workers alike.

**Self and organisational care**

The importance of self-care and organisational support was stressed in the research; there was an immediate recognition that the only way to maintain personal wellbeing was if there was an element of self-care in the working week. This took a number of forms:

* Personal actions
* Support from colleagues
* Support from the organisation

Where organisations were proactive in stating what they could offer in terms of flexibility this seemed to work well for staff. The team and/or organisational culture needed to reflect the words that were being spoken; in other words, where an offer of flexible working was made then expectations of staff availability needed to change. Reciprocally staff recognised when their organisation was under pressure to achieve targets and wanted to continue to work to meet the project goals. Clear unambiguous communication went a long way to supporting people to stay motivated. Low cost and no cost activities support self-care, including well timed team meeting, daily walks built into work time and flexible working patterns. As the research interviews spanned across 2 months, motivation was ebbing and flowing. It is clear that a one size fits all approach to self-care and staff wellbeing is not sufficient or desirable, therefore managers and organisations need to give consideration to the three areas highlighted above in order to sustain the workforce in the months and perhaps years to come.

**Looking to the future**

The pandemic has created the circumstances where the valuable contribution that youth workers and youth work have as life enhancing and, in some cases, life changing experiences has become more apparent than at any other time. It was evident that youth work has much to contribute in its own right, as well as across the multi-disciplinary spectrum:

*‘It made me think we are more important than ever in terms of having to respond where other services were skeleton.’*

The skills and values demonstrated throughout the pandemic will be crucial in ensuring young people flourish as we move out of the pandemic and the needs of young people, their families and wider society become more apparent. The landscape has deteriorated with the impact of poverty on the life chances and well-being of young people which has been further aggravated during the COVID-19 pandemic (McArdle & McConville, 2021; Rikala, 2020:1025; OECD 2020). Youth work can act as a mitigating factor in tackling poverty and educational disadvantage in bringing unique approaches and skills to multi-disciplinary settings and situations (Hirsch, 2007).

The distinct role of youth workers should be recognised and used as we move to ‘build back better’. Starting where young people are at, along with the varied skills, attitudes and values of the ‘generalist’youth worker, have acted as a glue for many young people negotiating their way through a global pandemic. Youth workers have been instrumental in helping to maintain connections with family, friends and service providers. Youth work has much to contribute to facilitate bridging and linking capital (Putnam 2000), especially important for young people who experience difficult socio-economic realities. Smyth (2014:8) states,

*‘Youth workers are normally particularly good at this as we have to mediate on behalf of young people between different worlds…the youth worker can be a trusted individual by a number of groups simultaneously. Whilst the groups might not trust each other…each group trusts the bridge builder.’*

In addition to the bridging capital youth workers also build ‘linking capital’, whereby young people become part of a network of trusting relationship. In this role, workers can create or open a network (or a relationship/connection) to young people that they would not usually have access to.

Youth workers are the trusted ‘other’ who can move easily between professions and ages and this aptitude for bridging and linking could be utilised as we move through and beyond the impact of the global pandemic.

**Conclusion**

The continuation of the work was arduous at times. One research participant shared,

*‘A challenge has been being able to manage the personal turmoil of uncertainty.’*

The research demonstrates that youth workers made huge changes to their work and their homelives to continue to provide a meaningful, quality programme for and with young people. This was at a great personal cost to workers in terms of their time, energy, homelife and emotional life. The commitment to young people was a driving force behind the speed and agility of youth workers in responding to the needs of the young people. Youth workers understood tacitly that the primacy of relationship is the necessary and sustaining element for holding connection in the hours and days following the introduction of the public health guidelines. While these changes were taking place, youth workers along with their managers were having conversations and making decisions that adhered to an ethical framework, ensuring integrity, congruence and familiarity for young people in the strangest of circumstances. The standout feature is that their pre-existing values, principles and skills enabled a speedy and authentic response. Youth workers brought the best of themselves and the profession to the Covid-19 response, working with young people to provide help to them and also to support young people to determine their own contribution to wider society. Youth workers along with young people have a valuable contribution to building a fairer and more inclusive society as we move beyond through and beyond Covid-19.

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1. The Peace4Youth programme is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), and supported by the Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth (RoI) and the Department for the Economy (NI). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)