

Youthwork in a System of Care: Key Challenges for Youthwork in Responding to Poverty and Social Inclusion

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The economic crash in Ireland has forced the whole society to reassess its roots and youthwork is no different. The complexity of needs of young people in Ireland experiencing poverty and social exclusion is growing and youthwork needs to continually respond. It is to be emphasised that no one profession has all the answers and no profession operates as an island. Both in a European context and internationally, there is increasing recognition of the importance of developing systems of care, involving multidisciplinary teams, to work together with young people and their families experiencing socio-economic exclusion and marginalisation. For working with marginalised young people, youthwork needs to centre itself as a key feature of such teams in a system of care.

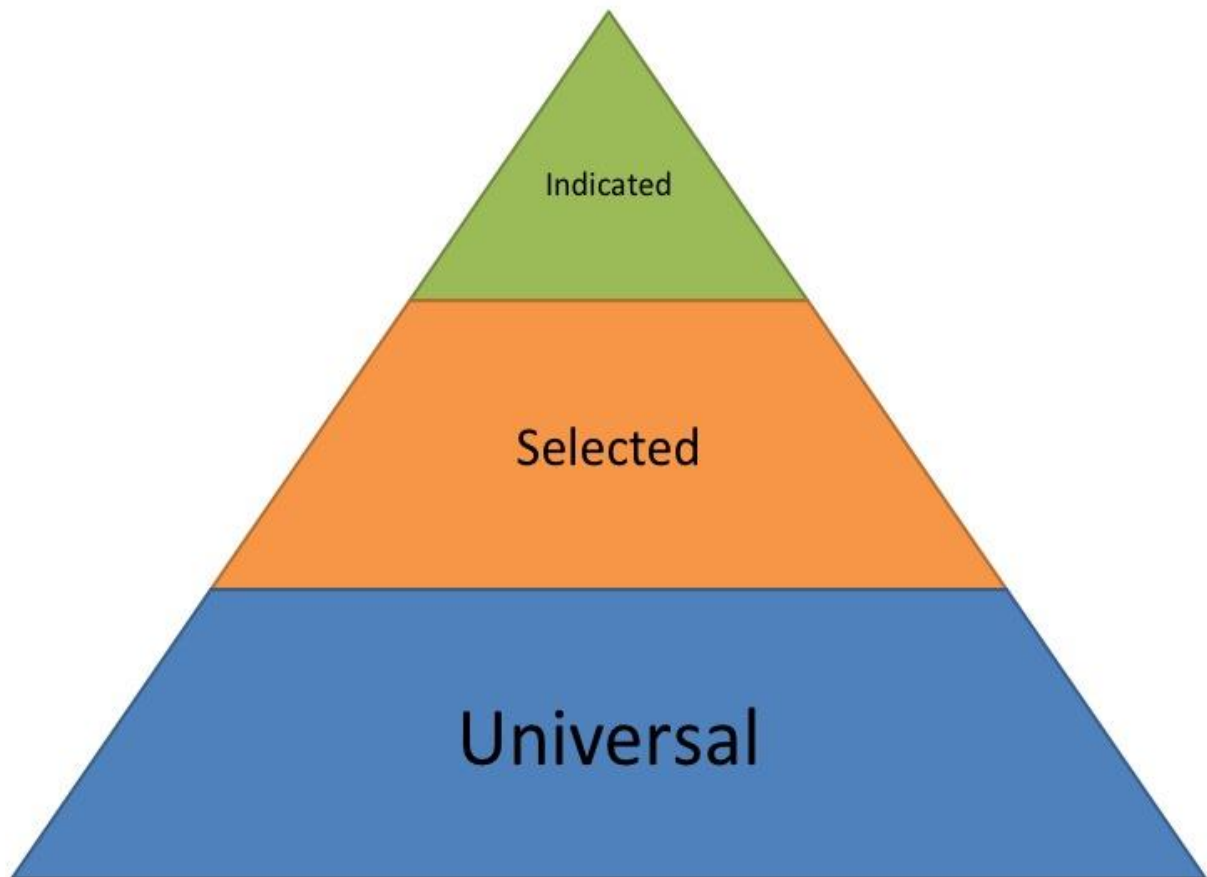
Poverty among children and young people in Ireland has accelerated dramatically by comparison with most other EU states since the economic crash. The AROPE indicator is defined as the share of the population in at least one of the following three conditions: 1) at risk of poverty, meaning below the poverty threshold, 2) in a situation of severe material deprivation, 3) living in a household with a very low work intensity. From 2008 to 2011, the AROPE for children rose in 21 EU Member States. According to Eurostat: *The largest increases in the AROPE since 2008 were in Ireland (+11.0 percentage points (pp) up to 2010) and Latvia (+10.4pp). They were closely followed by Bulgaria (+7.6pp), Hungary (+6.2pp) and Estonia (+5.4pp).*

Against the backdrop of impacts of poverty on homelessness, mental health and hunger in young people and their families, there is a need to move from multiple agencies to cohesive multidisciplinary teams for engaging marginalised youth. The *Alliances for Inclusion* report (Edwards & Downes 2013) reviewed the enabling conditions for the effectiveness of multidisciplinary teams and crosssectoral approaches for social inclusion, building on 16

examples from 10 European countries. It argues that a policy focus is needed to go beyond multiple agencies in order to minimise fragmentation across diverse services ‘passing on bits of the child’ and family (Edwards & Downes 2013). The multi-faceted nature of risk requires a multi-faceted response.

For genuine interprofessional collaboration centred on the needs of young people experiencing social exclusion, for example, between schools and multidisciplinary teams of outreach care workers, therapists/counsellors, nurses, youthworkers, speech and language therapists, social workers, occupational therapists, policy-led co-location is not sufficient. Efforts are needed to support inter-professional collaborations and overcome resistance. It is not enough just to designate a desk or centre for these services.

Young people experiencing social inclusion exist along a continuum of need and risk, and they may move up and down that continuum depending on life events and circumstances. Health psychology recognises key prevention levels, though education and arguably the community sector have been slower to respond to these distinctions. A youthwork intervention for those at chronic need level of indicated prevention requires an integrated holistic response with other professionals. Alone it will arguably have limited impact on entrenched problems, whether mental health difficulties, speech and language issues, behavioural problems etc.



Youthwork services operating at the selected prevention focuses on moderate risk and on young people in groups. An indicated prevention focus is on individuals and their families in chronic need. A universal focus is on all young people or all young people in an area that may itself be one experiencing high socio-economic exclusion. For the success of any youthwork support, it is important to clarify the precise prevention (or promotion) role of the youthwork intervention.

Whereas the DCYA national policy framework for children & young people 2014 - 2020 *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* advocates 5 key outcomes for children, any further specification of this for youthwork to move it towards an agenda of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timed) outcomes raises some concerns from a social inclusion perspective. A SMART outcomes agenda risks filtering out the hardest to work with, excluding the most marginalised from services as complex needs make it most difficult to attain outcomes needed to retain funding (see Downes 2007). It endangers a person-centred, relational approach and emotional supports that start with where people are at.

Furthermore, the person's pace of change and development may not fit with the SMART outcomes timeframe. In complex systems, one element may have only limited influence over outcomes, e.g., youthwork over wellbeing or education outcomes. Also wider system obstacles and inadequacies may block even the best interventions from showing outcome gains. A regime of SMART outcomes must not reduce youthwork to a dreary instrumentalism. Wider models of system scrutiny (Downes 2014) are possible and needed.

Downes, P. *Why SMART outcomes ain't always so smart...* pp.57-69. In *Beyond Educational Disadvantage* (2007), (P.Downes & A-L Gilligan, Eds.), Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.

Edwards, A. & Downes, P. (2013). *Alliances for Inclusion: Developing Cross-sector Synergies and Inter-Professional Collaboration in and around Education*. Commissioned Research Report, Oxford University, Department of Education and EU Commission NESET (Network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training). Foreword to report by Jan Truszczynski, Director-General of the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture.

Downes, P. (2014). *Towards a Differentiated, Holistic and Systemic Approach to Parental Involvement in Europe for Early School Leaving Prevention*. Policy Recommendations Report for the EU Urbact, PREVENT project involving 10 European City Municipalities. European Union, European Regional Development Fund, Urbact Programme, Paris.