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Author(s)	Brady, Bernadine; Forkan, Cormac; Moran, Lisa
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Spaces of connection and belonging: young people's perspectives on the role of youth cafes in their lives

Abstract

A youth café is a relaxed, drug and alcohol free meeting space for young people. The youth café model has become a prominent form of policy provision for young people in Ireland over the past decade, with in excess of 160 youth cafes now in operation. While the youth cafe model is not unique to Ireland, there has been little published research internationally on the perspectives of young people regarding the role of youth cafes in their lives. Drawing on qualitative research with 102 young people in ten youth cafes in Ireland, this article presents findings in relation to six thematic areas; feeling supported, belonging and connection, personal and identity development, safety, alcohol and drugs and education. The findings indicate that the attraction of the model for young people is that it respects their individualised preferences for engagement, whilst providing them with a sense of ownership and connection. It is argued that the values and principles underpinning the model are instrumental in creating 'care-full' spaces that enhance the well-being of children and young people.

Key words: youth work, youth café, youth spaces, qualitative, belonging.

Introduction

The youth phase is a time of transition and growth, one that is marked by significant biological, psychological and social changes. It is argued that the experience of youth has been made more challenging by the changing nature of society in recent decades (Cote, 2014). Young people in

late modern society have heightened choice, are free to question established beliefs and certainties, and can enjoy a plurality of social worlds (Furlong, 2013). While many of these trends can be seen as positive, it is argued that young people can also be negatively affected by the uncertainty and lack of collective security that prevails in modern society (Cote, 2014; Beck, 1992). Individualisation, materialism and pressure on people to be reflexive can lead to self-doubt, anxiety and depression (Farrugia, 2013).

Issues regarding the mental health and well-being of young people have been identified in research. For example, a large scale Irish study of mental health among young people found that one in three young people aged 12-25 years had elevated levels of emotional distress (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2013), while Ireland has one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the European Union (PISA, 2015). Rates of alcohol and drug consumption by youth and physical obesity are also high and shown to have effects on emotional well-being (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2013). There has been a significant expansion in policy provision in Ireland over the past two decades which aims to ensure the best possible outcomes for children and young people in all aspects of their lives (For example, the National Children's Strategy (DOHC, 2000) and Better Outcomes Brighter Futures, (DCYA 2014)). Policy is underpinned by an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), recognising the fact that children and young people's well-being is influenced positively or negatively by a multiplicity of factors, often inter-related, within their social ecology. The current policy framework for young people explicitly aims to 'strengthen the support system around each child or young person' as a means of working towards the realisation of five national outcomes for children – these are active and healthy; achieving in all areas of learning and development; safe and protected from harm; economic security and opportunity; and connected, respected and contributing (DCYA, 2014, p.vi).

Traditionally, government support for young people in communities has taken the form of youth work projects and clubs; these services are generally run by staff or volunteers and involve a mix of structured and unstructured activities. Nolas (2014, p.27) points out that youth policy has tended to favour 'structured' programmes over the 'riskier and messier sounding language of relationships, identity and belonging' associated with more informal youth work approaches. During the consultations for *Teenspace* (OMC, 2007), Ireland's national recreation policy, however, young people said that they also needed recreational spaces in which they can 'hang out' and that are warm, safe, affordable and free from alcohol and drugs. *Teenspace* recognised the significance of non-formal recreational activities for young people's social development, as opposed to more structured activities involving a group leader. The policy acknowledged that simply 'hanging out' can be very valuable for building confidence and enhancing peer support networks among young people (OMC, 2007). As a result, the State committed to the development of youth cafés on a phased basis across the country.

A youth café is generally understood as a safe, relaxed, friendly and inclusive meeting space for young people ranging in age from 10 to 25 years (though users are typically in the 12-17 age range). Cafés are drug and alcohol free environments, designed for relaxation, recreation, entertainment, and where appropriate, as a site for information, advice or direct service provision. The youth café space is generally seen as one where young people from all social and cultural backgrounds can develop quality relationships with their peers and adults (Teenspace, 2007; Forkan et al, 2010). Youth cafes are run according to core youth work principles, such as equality, respect and inclusion, but differ from more mainstream youth provision in two key ways. Firstly, the youth café model, while it can involve some structured activities, is essentially about facilitating social interaction between young people in a relaxed,

unstructured manner. Secondly, while youth participation and ownership is also important in youth work, it is considered an intrinsic element of the youth café model.

The first youth cafe was established in Galway in 2000 and following significant funding and policy support in recent years, in excess of 160 Cafés are now in operation nationwide (Forkan and others, 2015). A national survey of youth cafes undertaken by Forkan and others' (2015) found that youth cafes operate at different scales, ranging from large scale integrated provision in urban areas to small scale drop-in activities typically found in rural areas. The majority of youth cafes are run under the auspices of national youth work organisations (such as Foróige or Youth Work Ireland), but approximately one third are independent entities, meaning that they are operated on a local basis without links to a 'parent' youth organisation. Three out of four youth cafés were in receipt of public funding from a range of central and local government departments, while the remaining 22% (typically small-scale independent cafes) were resourced in full through local fund-raising and in-kind support from organisations in their area. The average annual income for a youth café was €21,683. Issues of funding sustainability were raised as critical issues by youth café managers in survey responses. The majority of youth cafes (79%) are located in areas of below average levels of affluence (see Forkan et al, 2015 for an operational profile of youth cafes in Ireland).

While the youth cafe model is not unique to Ireland, there has been little published research internationally on the perspectives of young people regarding the youth cafe model. This paper aims to address this gap by outlining the findings of qualitative research with young people regarding the role they see the youth cafe as playing in their lives. The theoretical basis for youth café provision is now outlined, followed by methodology and findings.

Theoretical context

Research has emphasised the role played by youth spaces, such as youth cafes and clubs, in providing young people with social and recreational outlets, opportunities for non-formal learning and arenas in which relationships with others can be developed and maintained (Bright, 2015; Furlong, 2013). Values of inclusion, anti-oppressive practice and participation are critical to youth work, as are the development of authentic relationships between youth workers and young people. As highlighted earlier, youth cafes are different from youth clubs or projects in that the emphasis is primarily on unstructured activities, rather than structured provision. The youth café model is very much perceived as a relational space, in which young people can form and develop relationships with peers and adults. Nolas (2014, p.38), in her study of an English youth club, found that young people were ‘far less preoccupied with the activities on offer at the club and more interested in the opportunities offered by these activities to relate to each other and the youth workers’. Research has shown that such relationships remain critical to the well-being and transitions of young people (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2013; Thomson, 2007). Nolas (2014), like Hendry and others (1993, p.2) argues for the protection of those ‘liminal spaces’ in which young people can interact freely and ‘truly become themselves’.

Youth cafes can also be seen as facilitating young people to feel a collective sense of belonging and to connect with their communities. The importance of young people having a connection to the community of which they are a part is emphasised by youth development theories (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2006), ecological models of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and social capital theory (Billet, 2014; Putnam, 2000). Whitlock (2007, p.500) asserts that ‘there remains little doubt that healthy development and wellbeing are intrinsically linked to a sense of belonging and meaning within larger social and community groups’. Some

have argued that, in an increasingly urbanised and globalised society, opportunities for young people to develop a sense of place or belonging are reducing (Inglis and Donnelly, 2011).

A key concern of children and young people's policy is how best to support young people to be resilient in the face of adversity. Masten (2001, p. 228) defines resilience as '*good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development*'. The literature on resilience has demonstrated how 'protective factors' (such as supportive relationships, a sense of community and opportunities for participation) can help young people to be resilient to risks in their lives (Gilligan, 2000). For example, Billet (2014) found that bonding forms of social capital are valuable coping mechanisms for vulnerable youth. Cheng et al's (2014) study of young people in economically deprived areas found that young people who felt a sense of connection to their neighbourhoods were less likely to be depressed than peers who lacked such connection. They recommend that social support in home and community should be improved in order to alleviate distress and foster hope among young people. It could be argued that youth cafés have the potential to act as a 'protective factor' for young people exposed to adversity – for example, by providing a safe and relaxing environment that allows them to get relief from or avoid risky or stressful situations in their home or community environments and by facilitating the emergence of supportive relationships (or 'bonding social capital'), hobbies and leadership skills.

As highlighted earlier, the youth café model is based on the principle of youth participation and ownership, emphasising the importance of young people playing an active role in the management and operations of the café. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), to which Ireland is a signatory, upholds the participation rights of children and young people – including freedom to express opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their own lives.

The UNCRC states that, as they get older, children should have increasing opportunity to participate in the activities of society, in preparation for adulthood. It is argued that, when young people are afforded the opportunity to participate in community or other contexts, it draws on their expertise and contributes to a more democratic society (DCYA, 2015). Participation has also been found to promote personal development, substantive knowledge, self-efficacy and practical skills among young people (Checkoway, 2011, p. 340). Furthermore, Sherrod and others (2002, p. 267) argue that having some form of responsibility or leadership can help young people to feel part of something bigger than themselves, making them feel 'at home rather than out of place' in their communities. Thus, the youth café model has the potential to contribute to the democratic inclusion of young people, facilitate personal and skills development, and enable young people to contribute to and shape the lives of their communities.

Methods

In 2012, the authors were awarded funding from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) via the Irish Research Council to conduct research into the operations and perceived benefits of youth cafés in Ireland. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' institution. An initial mapping of youth cafes identified 163 cafes in operation in Ireland in 2013. From this, a purposive sample of 10 youth cafés was selected, to ensure a range of urban / rural areas, scale, independent or integrated, etc. The 10 cafés selected were contacted by letter and telephone and all agreed to participate in the study. The café staff and volunteers were asked to recruit a group of young people from different age groups who they felt would represent typical café users. A total of 102 (55 males, 47 females) young people took part in focus groups across the 10 cafés. Participants ranged in age from 10

to 19 years, with just over two thirds (68%) aged between 14 and 17 years. A variety of methods were used, including post-its and small group discussions, to explore young people's views regarding the youth café and their reasons for attending.

Focus group data was transcribed in full and analysed inductively using qualitative software (QSR N-vivo) and a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A large set of codes were identified based on initial analysis of the focus group transcripts and these codes were grouped together to form initial themes. For example, the word 'safe' was used frequently by young people to refer to how they felt in the youth café space and thus safety became one of the themes. These themes were then subjected to further analysis and grouped into higher order categories. Six separate yet inter-related thematic areas emerged in relation to benefits arising from youth café attendance; feeling supported, belonging and connection, personal and identity development, safety, alcohol and drugs and formal and informal education. The qualitative findings are presented according to these broad headings.

In terms of limitations to the study, it should be noted that all participants were regular attenders of youth cafes and were asked by youth café staff and volunteers to take part in the study. Thus, the perspectives presented are not representative of all young people in communities; merely those who attend youth cafes. Socio-economic and educational profile of youth café users was not gathered as part of the study; this would be a valuable area for future research.

Findings

The six core themes identified in relation to the benefits that young people attributed to their attendance at the youth café are now reviewed in turn.

Feeling supported

Young people perceive youth cafes as providing them with support to cope with challenges in their lives, be they minor or major. Many young people alluded to the friendships that they forged with other young people in the youth café space and they felt that these bonds were a great source of support to them. Many young people also referred to the trusting relationships that they have with staff and volunteers are integral to why they continue to socialise at the café:

'The staff and my friends really helped me when I was down' (Café 5)

'We are all like a family here and we support each other'. (Café 7)

It's definitely one of the reasons why we come here... He's (youth worker) good fun and he knows all of us and we trust him. I know I can tell the youth workers here things about my life that I can't tell anyone else and this is why I keep coming here. We know we can trust the people here, the youth workers and our friends and that's why we keep coming back. (café 10)

While not all young people attending youth cafes are facing adversity in their lives, a small number of young people identified the social support from staff, volunteers and peers in the youth cafe as a key factor in helping them to cope with adversity. For example, one young man talked about conflict that he experienced at home with his parents and siblings and how the friends he met in the youth café and the café staff helped him to make better choices about how to deal with arguments:

It has made me much calmer because it's sometimes hard at home. I find it hard to get along with my parents and my brothers and sisters... Coming here and talking to the youth worker and to my friends... It calms me down and I feel better so I walk away from arguments more and more. (café 6)

In another example, a young person who was bullied in school said that he felt the support of youth workers and friends from the café enabled him to get on with his life and socialise more with others:

It got to the point that I couldn't go out for about a year and a half and I'd come home from school and go to my room and not do much else because I couldn't talk to anyone. But coming to the café now and then really helped because people weren't judging me and I was able to start going out again and talk to people. (café 5)

Young people spoke of the youth cafés as somewhere they can relax and escape from stresses they may be experiencing in other areas of their lives, conceptualising the café as the opposite or 'removed' from many of the stresses that they regularly experience at school and in the home. The word '*relaxing*' was used very frequently among respondents to describe their feelings about the youth café, as were concepts associated with positive mental health such as '*fun*', '*happy*', '*belonging*' and '*having a laugh*'.

Belonging and connection

The themes of belonging and connection emerged strongly from this research, with majority of young people taking part referring to the sense of 'connection' and 'belonging' that they feel in relation to the youth café. Some participants were of the view that young people are often

not included in communities, an issue that the youth café is seen to address. Young people spoke of the youth café as being like a community and of enhancing their connection to the community in which they live.

There's a real sense of belonging here. We feel like we belong here and sometimes young people don't belong anywhere. We're sometimes seen as the 'dirty little teenagers'. (café 2)

Youth cafes are designed to encourage young people to have an influence and to feel a connection to and sense of ownership of the space. Some of the young people taking part in the research are part of committees who were directly responsible for founding the youth café and decorating the space. Many of them talked about the role they played in painting, choosing furniture and making decisions about the everyday life of the café; experiences which seemed to deepen young people's sense of connection to the café. One respondent described how she feels she is contributing to her community and to future generations of young people by founding a youth café and by making decisions about how it is run:

You feel like you are part of something bigger here. It's to do with the community now but also the young people who will come here into the future. (café 3)

Personal and identity development

A key developmental task of adolescence is the development of a coherent sense of identity that is distinct from those of parents or peers is (Lalor et al, 2007). Youth cafés were seen by young people taking part in this research as facilitating their personal and identity development. The fact that youth cafes are relaxed, give you space to 'do your own thing' and encourage

acceptance of people 'for who they are' were cited by young people as supporting them to develop their sense of identity. For example, one young woman described the role of the youth café as providing the time and space for personal growth, which contrasts to what she perceived to be the role of school.

The main difference between here and school is that in school, you have to do it now whereas here, it's a lot more relaxed. You learn in your own time. You're given a lot of time to progress and basically develop as a person. In school, you're just expected to write stuff down and learn it. (café 2)

You can be yourself here. You can't really be yourself at home or at school. Here, you can completely let go and it doesn't matter. You can be a boy or a girl, you can be from a rich family or a poor family or you can be good in school or not good in school. You could be gay and finding it hard to come out... Everyone is the same here and people just accept you for who you are. (café 5)

Some young people spoke of having greater confidence in who they were as a person, while others said that they got to know more people in the youth café and became more confident talking to people and talking in groups. As well as the atmosphere of the café, the feedback from young people suggests that taking responsibility for managing the café and organising events is an important 'confidence booster' for young people. Some research participants spoke of learning to take responsibility for themselves and to make more responsible choices. They were of the view that, because they are respected and treated as individuals with the capacity to make informed choices by staff and volunteers, it helps them to see themselves in that light.

It has taught me that I have to be responsible for my actions and face the consequences.

(café 1)

Safety

The concept of safety was used by respondents in a number of different ways. Firstly, young people, particularly young men from disadvantaged urban areas spoke of how young people's safety was "a big issue" in their areas. They saw youth café as helping to 'keep them safe' by providing safe space where they could come to get off the streets. On the streets, they risked getting into fights and other trouble, while bullying and peer pressure among young people often led to inappropriate and risky behaviour. In this context, the young people particularly valued having the youth café as a safe place to socialise:

There are loads of fights in the area. Yeah, we feel safe here. (café 9)

Secondly, some young people referred to the youth café as a place of respite where they could 'escape' the pressures they felt at home and / or at school.

It's away from the drama at home and it's a safe place to come to when you feel lost.

(café 1)

'It's completely our place and we are off the streets and with our friends and we feel safe here.' [Café 7]

Thirdly, the concept of safety was also used to refer to how young people feel when in the youth café, due to the fact that everyone is accepted for who they are and because bullying of any form is not accepted.

I feel safe coming to the youth café. I also feel accepted and like everyone here is a family. (café 1)

Fourthly, young people identified that they learned key skills and knowledge in the café. Girls in two urban cafes spoke of having undertaken a relationships and sexuality programme through the youth café, which they felt helped them to understand issues related to sexual consent. Furthermore, a group of boys aged 16 to 19 years commented that their experiences in the youth café had taught them new ways of managing conflict. They remarked that in the past, they regularly engaged in conflict with other young people in their community but their experiences in the café has taught them that it is sometimes important to walk away from arguments:

Coming here has taught me a lot about respect. Before this, I'd go downtown and I always knew the guy that would pick a fight with me or I'd pick a fight with him and we'd really go for it. We'd kick and punch and curse and the whole lot. But now I walk away. I've learned a lot from the staff here about respecting people. (café 1)

It keeps us out of trouble and we know what is right and wrong from coming here. (café 5)

Alcohol and drugs

Some young people, particularly from older age groups, participating in the research spoke about the role of alcohol in their lives and how their friends relate to alcohol in everyday life.

Others talked about the role of the youth café in helping them to curb their own drink and drug taking. For example, one female participant said that the youth café helped her to control her own patterns of substance abuse because she does not feel under pressure to try alcohol and drugs when in the youth café space.

... when I started to come here, I started to feel differently about myself... I didn't feel under pressure to be anything other than myself and I definitely smoked and drank less because I didn't feel that I had to do it, you know. (café 7)

A group of male participants also attributed positive changes to their smoking, drinking and drug taking habits, because of their involvement in the youth café:

Definitely it's because of here... It gives us something to do and if we were outside, to be honest, we'd be drinking now and getting into trouble and I know I definitely drink and smoke less because I'm here and because it isn't allowed. (café 9)

Formal and Informal Education

A number of young people also stated that the youth café had supported them with their formal schooling, which took the form of helping with study and exam preparation, supporting young people to deal with the stress associated with exams and school and talking to the school about problems they may be having. There were also testimonies in relation to the youth café helping young people with their non-formal education, teaching life skills such as cooking, computer coding, music and personal development. References to efforts by the café to promote physical health, through good nutrition and exercise were made by young people in the course of the research.

Discussion

The significant growth in youth cafés in Ireland over recent years illustrates the obvious appeal this model has for young people. Although underpinned by youth work principles, the drop-in, less structured, dedicated youth friendly space, with an *a la carte* approach to involvement in activities and programmes, differentiate youth cafés from the traditional youth club or project model of engagement. It can be argued that the popularity of the youth café approach illustrates that it is a model of its time, meeting specific needs of young people in a more creative, perhaps sophisticated way than traditional youth work provision heretofore. While young people value the informality of youth cafe provision for the space it offers them to relax and be themselves, the findings of this research suggest that the social relationships and sense of community experienced in the youth cafe is also a strong attraction for young people. It can be argued, therefore, that the unique selling point of the youth cafe model lies in its capacity to respect and encourage individualised preferences for engagement, whilst providing young people with a sense of ownership and connection.

Young people taking part in this research spoke of how they had developed and consolidated friendships with peers, staff and volunteers through the youth café, which in turn made them feel supported. It has been found that social support reduces the amount of stress that people feel because support networks act as a 'buffer' to stressful events that happen throughout the life course (Frey and Röthlisberger, 1996). Studies have also shown that social support can positively affect people's self-confidence, improve social integration (Agneessens *et al*, 2006) and promote a sense of 'connection' to others (Andrews and Ben-Arieh, 1999). In line with these studies, the relationships they experienced in the youth café were described by young

people as enhancing their quality of life, promoting positive mental health and helping them to deal with the normative and non-normative challenges they faced in their lives (Cutrona, 2000).

A recurring theme across the ten youth cafes studied was the role of the youth cafe and the relationships developed therein in providing a sense of belonging or connection. Schaefer McDaniel (2004) understands a sense of belonging as consisting of two components - membership (sense of feeling a part of a group or environment) and influence (believing that the individual matters to the group) (MacMillan and Chavis 1986). Having a sense of belonging can result in a feeling of “rootedness or centeredness” or of attachment to the place and group (Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff 1983, 60) and has been shown to positively influence identity development in children and young people (Spencer and Woolley 1998). The emphasis on youth ownership of the cafe space (i.e. having an influence) appears to have contributed to the sense of belonging that young people felt. The findings support the contention of Percy-Smith (2010) that efforts to encourage children and young people’s participation should focus on creating spaces that are relevant and meaningful in terms of their everyday interactions and which enhance their quality of life.

Young people also saw this supportive context as helping them to develop their sense of identity, build confidence and develop valuable life skills, reflecting previous findings that informal settings can help young people to engage in ‘identity work’ (Nolas, 2014; Hall, Coffey and Williamson, 2009). While not all young people attending youth cafes have experienced adversity in their lives, the findings of this research indicate that youth cafe has functioned as a ‘protective factor’ for young people exposed to adversity by providing a safe and relaxing environment that allows them to get relief from or avoid risky or stressful situations in their home or community environments. [From this perspective, the youth café model can be viewed](#)

as a model of prevention or early intervention, whereby issues or problems are addressed before they escalate (Harvey, 2014 . The ground rules of the cafés which emphasise equality, acceptance and zero tolerance for bullying mean that young people of all backgrounds are welcome and it is clear from the testimonies of young people that this has a significant impact on their feeling about the space.

While the benefits identified by young people as associated with their attendance at youth cafes have been separated out for the purposes of analysis, it can be argued that they are clearly inter-related and consistent with the holistic concept of well-being. There are many definitions of well-being, most of which emphasise psychological, social, educational, economic and safety dimensions (see for example, Andrews and Ben-Arieh, 1999). The social geography literature draws our attention to the role played by place in shaping or undermining well-being. Based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that the values and principles underpinning the youth café model have led to the development of ‘care-full spaces’ (Parr, 2006) which are conducive to promoting the well-being of young people. In this context, well-being clearly can be understood as having collective and relational dimensions, which are of particular importance to young people (Pain and Smith, 2010).

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