

THE RURAL YOUTH WORKER AS A CONNECTOR

By Tara McHugh Logan

Rural youth work is all I have ever known; coming from a community that is rural and as a rural youth worker – this is the practice I have grown up with. There have been changes in the structure and funding of rural youth work over the years, with more targeted provision taking the place of universal services. The stereotype of rural youth work is of Young Farmers Clubs and provision delivered by volunteers but the landscape is now very different. We see statutory area-based workers, working to needs identified in area-based plans; but it is over simplistic to state that this is the only driving force. To understand and appreciate rural youth work, workers need to understand issues of rural living, working and communities, but above all the needs of rural young people.

Rural poverty and social isolation are viewed hand-in-hand in the most recent DARD framework for action (2016); recognising that additional costs of living for transport, heat and fuel impact on those with the lowest income and restrict access to health, education and employment opportunities. This is also the case for young people:

‘young people living in rural areas face a number of uniquely rural barriers, particularly concerning access to transport, careers advice, employment and training support and youth services’ (EANI, 2019:3).

The role for a youth worker within this context is as a connector. For communities that are disparate with low density populations, the youth worker can bring young people from these communities together. For resources that are sparse and spread out, a rural youth worker can share information to improve access for young people and open up opportunities. They can act as a pivot point for communities and young people to come together. They can connect young people to others, thus mitigating the social isolation felt by rural youth.

The skill of the worker lies in first having to convince the young people to work with them; but the real skill comes whenever they are trying to convince young people to work with each other – young people often think they have nothing in common; they don’t want to work with each other. This requires tenacity and creativity to come up with engaging hooks. The youth worker connects young people with other peers from their own and new communities.

Next, the rural youth worker works with young people and listens to hear their vision for themselves and their own communities. The role here is to connect young people to their own vision and to the wider world. The vision they begin with is not necessarily where they will end up and it is rarely easy to pinpoint. The journey might look like a straight-line from the outside, but it is not; with delivery of different parts of programmes in parallel or the process jumping forwards and backwards. The group might start with one idea and the worker needs to move forwards and backwards as the young people shift and change into new directions.

The Youth Council project from the Glens District Electoral Area is an example of the non-linear journey that young people and youth work can take. A group, made up of ten

young people, signed up for an OCNNI qualification (on understanding the roles and responsibilities in a youth council; and planning and organising an event for others). So although the group began with a qualification, this overlapped with 'The Three C's project' which stands for: "Consider, the good. Communicate this and then Campaign." In the meantime, there was research skills training to prepare the young people for the peer research project that they took on with 400+ young people from Year 11 & 12 on issues of mental health. Along the way, the group created a documentary film examining 'What's good about living in a Rural area' and on a trip to London the young people had the opportunity to step outside their own communities and look back in. It was the combination of these complimentary programmes and how they overlapped that made this busy, messy but effective. The group purpose was driven by the 3C's and the gift of time assigned to participative structures like youth councils that made the difference.

What started as a targeted programme with one specific target blossoms to meet several ideas, programmes and targets that are developed through listening to and working with young people. The rural worker adapts and shifts constantly. In adapting, the growth of the young people can be matched by the changing nature of projects with greater youth participation and chances for social action. This takes time, which is often the missing piece in targeted work. The role of the rural youth worker is in offering consistency, commitment and creativity to draw young people together.

The rural youth worker connects communities to young people and young people to community. The needs of the young people are often different to that of the community. Often young people are engaged in street-activity as their leisure pursuits, with a need for stimulation to kill the boredom and connection to others. The priority for some communities is to 'get these young people off the streets'. The role of the youth worker in these instances is not necessarily to bow to the community concerns, but to hold the young people at the centre of their practice. Through listening, representing the young people's views and acting as a broker between these parties, the rural youth worker can connect these groups that can be at odds with one another. In this way our role is in bringing communities of young people and communities of rural adults together not just for activities but for building understanding of each other.

And in these connections, we see the true nature of rural youth work.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2016, Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation – A New Framework, DARD, Belfast.

Education Authority for Northern Ireland (2019) Youth Service Research: Needs of Young People.