
How adult volunteers contribute to positive youth development in the twenty-first century

Denis O'Brien

denis.obrien@foroige.ie

Abstract

This article reflects on the importance of adult volunteers in Foróige, a leading Irish youth development organisation. Volunteers make up some 97 per cent of all youth workers in Ireland. Outcomes for huge numbers of young people are mediated through and depend upon volunteers' suitability, availability, knowledge and skills. The article takes as its starting point three pieces of research in Foróige. Using this evidence, I describe what appear to be the key strengths of the cohorts of volunteers we studied and how Foróige builds on these to reach positive youth development outcomes similar to those sought by the Queensland framework. To support this, Foróige has invested heavily on volunteer development to increase volunteer engagement and provide more roles in which volunteers can participate in achieving youth development outcomes. I explore the value of the positive interactions between volunteers and young people, the role of volunteers in increasing young people's connectedness to community, and the impact on volunteers of other life issues that compete for their time. I outline how the outputs and outcomes of youth work in Foróige would be hugely diminished without adult volunteers.

Introduction

This article offers reflections on the importance of adult volunteers in Foróige, a leading Irish youth development organisation, in achieving positive youth development outcomes. The article takes as its starting point three pieces of research in Foróige. One is a survey (Foróige 2014), completed by over 1,000 (almost 20 per cent) of Foróige's volunteers, which sought details on many aspects of their experience of volunteering in Foróige, but has many findings that are applicable across the sector. The second is a 2012 study commissioned by Foróige on its volunteer-led youth clubs (McGrath 2012), which showed evidence of the value of these clubs for the young people attending. The third, a randomised control test (RCT), of the Big Brother Big Sisters program in Foróige (Dolan et al. 2010) provides evidence of the value of volunteer-led mentoring.

Foróige is funded by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs, as well as agencies concerned with youth health, youth drugs prevention and youth

justice, as well as philanthropy and some corporate giving. We operate in a country where almost all youth work services are provided by voluntary organisations — unlike, for example, our neighbours in the United Kingdom where youth work services are more likely to be provided by local government. The Republic of Ireland has a population of 4.75 million (Central Statistics Office 2016). Available data show there were almost 900,000 young people in the state aged 10 to 24 in 2012 (National Youth Council of Ireland 2012). Foróige reached some 50,000 young people in 2016, supported by about 5,300 regular volunteers, over 400 paid staff and up to 1,600 occasional volunteers (Foróige 2016). This level of volunteerism is not unique in the Irish youth work sector, where 97 per cent of all adults involved in youth work are volunteers — some 40,000 people (National Youth Council of Ireland 2012: 14). I write this having spent last Friday night at *Band on the Strand*, a live music event on a beach for almost 2,000 teenagers organised entirely by Foróige volunteers some of whom gave 12 hours of their time that day. We estimate that volunteers give over 386,000 hours a year in Foróige (2016), although this is never easy to calculate (Hall 2001; International Labour Office 2011).

Foróige's fundamental purpose is to enable young people to involve themselves consciously and actively in their own development and in the development of the community, through programs to support skills for family life, vocational development, recreation activity, and civic and social development. This purpose, in line with the Irish government's national youth work legislation (Government of Ireland 2001) and *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, the national youth policy framework (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014), is strongly reflected in the Queensland Good Practice Principles (Seymour 2012) — some — Principles 1, 2 and 4 explicitly — and some (as described in Seymour's article in this issue) — Principles 3, 5 and 6 — in a more implicit way here, although they are explicit in other aspects of Foróige's policies and procedures.

Volunteers and Youth Development

In our experience, outcomes for young people in Foróige are mediated through and depend upon volunteers and their suitability, availability, knowledge and skills. Two of Foróige's largest means of achieving positive youth development are entirely led by volunteers. Both have been shown to have significant positive developmental benefits for young people. Our clubs scored strongly on, increasing community awareness — belonging (McGrath 2012), while our Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring program had significant benefits on self-esteem, school retention, resilience and more (Dolan et al. 2010).

A brief true (but altered for confidentiality) story demonstrates this. John, describing his experience of residential and foster care to a parliamentary committee, lists all the professional roles that interact with his life and then tells the parliamentarians that his volunteer 'Big Brother' is the one person who consistently listens to him. A combination of good programs and suitably chosen and trained volunteers makes these results possible. While these programs could be delivered by paid staff, the current scale of operation could only be achieved by large numbers of volunteers.

Conscious of this, Foróige has invested considerable resources in volunteers over the past five years, including creating a post of National Volunteer Development

Manager, and new volunteer training and online resources. A survey completed by over 1,000 (almost 20 per cent) of Foróige's volunteers in 2014 sought details on many aspects of their experience in Foróige and, in the light of the six principles, has findings applicable across the sector. The factors that most impact are positive interaction with young people, connectedness/community involvement and time.

Positive interaction speaks to volunteers' enjoyment of the energy, curiosity and vibrancy of the young people with whom they work and their sense of having a privileged relationship with the young people, focused on their happiness and development. Young people are their 'cause' (McKee and McKee 2007: 60). Put simply, volunteers like to spend purposeful time with young people. This liking is reflected in the survey findings about the outcomes and activities volunteers see as important. 'Time to relax and have fun', 'support from caring adults', 'friendship' and 'opportunity to work with other young people' were the top four things volunteers believed young people could get from Foróige.

These four may indicate volunteers' view that youth work clubs and groups may provide, at least in part, a respite from the pressures in the lives of modern young people. But more than this, volunteers are clear that conversational and recreational activities hold significant learning opportunities and clearly contribute to the achievement of Foróige's youth development purpose. When asked what activities young people learn from, the volunteers listed inter-club events (youth groups from different areas meeting and doing agreed activities), fundraising activities (such as sponsored walks and car washes), tea and biscuit time (unstructured discussion with drinks and snacks) and the club meeting (a structured gathering of young people and adults to choose and plan activities and other club business).

Foróige has been building on volunteers' (and staff members') liking for opportunities for positive interaction with young people, to achieve more obvious developmental and evidence-based outcomes. Over the past few years, a team of Foróige research and development staff has designed, tested and implemented a range of manualised programs covering areas such as leadership for life, community action, health and wellbeing, youth entrepreneurship, and relationships and sexuality. Some of these have also been evaluated by external professionals, overseen by university academics (Brady et al. 2012; McGrath 2012). We provide training to volunteers in how to facilitate these programs and supply all the necessary materials. These programs give volunteers a structure for the conversations and enable them to clearly see outcomes evidenced by the observable unfolding confidence and self-awareness in the young people as well as through more formal evaluation processes. The Leadership for Life Program is the first Irish youth work program accredited by a university, earning the young person, while still in school, transferable credits of use in some college or tertiary education courses. The number of volunteers using this and the other programs started small but is growing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that volunteers facilitating these programs experience heightened role satisfaction, while the young people have enhanced experiences and measurable outcomes — a double win.

There is another win for the organisation: *connectedness*. Volunteers who participate in training to facilitate the programs discussed above exhibit increased connection with the organisation. Connectedness is a key factor in volunteer retention (McCurley and Lynch 2013: 142). It is related to volunteer engagement, which results in what is described as organisational citizenship behaviour (Cornelis

et al. 2013) — behaviour that goes beyond the basic requirements of the volunteer's role. Foróige and other youth organisations rely on engaged volunteers to fill governance, peer support and other roles. This increase in extra-role behaviour is evidenced by our volunteer survey (Foróige 2014), which indicates that the volunteers who remain longest in the organisation are often the busiest and most satisfied.

Foróige volunteers also promote young people's connectedness to community, which is Principle 4. This is the basis of Foróige's perhaps inaccurately titled Citizenship Program. Our volunteers, drawn from the local community, lead the young people in the Foróige Citizenship Cycle. The cycle involves studying the community to become aware of its needs, taking action to meet one of those needs, then evaluating to see how the community has benefited and what the young people have learned; often leading to identifying more needs and so into another cycle (Brady et al. 2012). We have an annual Youth Citizenship Award for groups and individuals, currently sponsored by the Aldi retail chain, which acts as both an incentive to get involved and as recognition for achievement. Volunteers' local knowledge and connections are vital to the operation of this citizenship program. As importantly, involving young people in leadership, decision-making and action on matters that interest them contributes to their retention in Foróige and keeps open to them the other program opportunities it has to offer (Bowden and Martin Lanigan 2011).

Irish society has changed enormously. Twenty-five years ago, we were one of the last countries on the planet to legalise divorce, yet in 2015 we were the first country to introduce same-sex marriage by a vote of the people. Our volunteers' knowledge of the changing priorities and needs of the young people in or joining Foróige strongly influences policy development and practice in the area of inclusion — Principle 3. Most recently, the experiences of our volunteers seeking to involve young people with autism has led to new guidance and procedures on this, designed by a joint staff and volunteer working group.

Time is at the nexus of many volunteering characteristics. Time constrains, concentrates, and challenges. Today, a youth worker's volunteer time is less freely given, but is instead consciously and carefully invested in one opportunity from the many on offer. As one volunteer put it, 'I want to volunteer where my presence is an asset but where my absence is not a liability.' The volunteer needs to know what the return on their time investment will be. The return may be the positive interaction with young people and their contribution to youth development; it may be that their own child now has an opportunity to participate or perhaps it may be experience for the volunteer's future career plans. Whatever the return, youth organisations must focus on the legitimate needs of volunteers so as to retain and engage them (Russell 2014).

Time constraints present challenges that must be overcome if we are to continue to benefit from large numbers of youth work volunteers. Compliance and legislation are increasingly taking more of the limited time volunteers are usually prepared to give. In the past number of years, legislation on data protection, lobbying, charities, mandatory reporting of child protection concerns, club standards compliance and police vetting have all impacted on how volunteers carry out their role. Organisations must find ways to make compliance with these laws and standards as time efficient as possible for the volunteers, so as not to negatively impact on the volunteer's willingness to engage. Similarly, the growing number

of volunteers who don't want to be involved every week, but instead want to be on a rota, can cause difficulties in fostering developmentally positive relationships with the young people.

Conclusion

'Volunteers are the front line in the delivery of youth work.' This unscripted comment, made in 2015 by the then Irish Minister for Children, Dr James O'Reilly (personal communication, 29 September 2015), sums up Foróige's belief in the importance of youth work volunteers. Despite the difficulties and challenges outlined in this article, the experience in Foróige is that volunteers play a major part in delivering good practice youth work, and achieving good outcomes for young people. This huge voluntary resource is not cost free. As described in this article, Foróige has had to invest significant resources in supporting volunteers, including in program design, training, and recruitment and retention strategies, and reducing the impact of work needed to ensure compliance with legislation and standards. Foróige welcomes the explicit references to volunteers in the Queensland *Good Practice Principles for Youth Development Organisations* (Seymour 2012) because they recognise and value the opportunities offered through programs such as ours, in which volunteers bring their diverse skills and experiences to enhance positive developmental outcomes for young people (Matenchuk 2011).

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