

‘We are all like a family here’: Qualitative insights on the role of youth cafés in supporting the health and well-being of young people

Brady, Bernadine, Moran, Lisa, Forkan, Cormac

UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, NUI, Galway

Introduction

While there have been many positive policy developments for young people in Ireland over recent decades – including increased access to and participation in education – issues related to the well-being of young people are matters of public concern. Ireland has one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the European Union (PISA, 2015), while recent research demonstrated that one in three young people had elevated levels of emotional distress (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2013). Research with young people shows that the social resources available to them are critical in terms of their ability to negotiate the challenges of modern life. In particular, supportive relationships with at least ‘*one good adult*’ remain critical to the well-being and transitions of young people (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2013; Thomson, 2007). Community based supports and services are widely accepted as having a key role to play in ensuring the safe and healthy development of young people (DCYA, 2015).

The youth café model has emerged as a key form of policy provision in Ireland over the past decade, with over 160 cafes now in operation (Forkan et al, 2015). A youth café is a safe, relaxed and inclusive meeting space for young people, primarily ranging in age from 12-18 years. Youth cafés are drug and alcohol free settings, designed for recreation, entertainment, information, advice and, in many cases, direct service provision. Drawing on qualitative research with young people in Ireland regarding the youth cafe model, this paper focuses specifically on the perceived **outcomes** of the youth cafe in terms of health and well-being for young people.

Methodology

From the 163 identified youth cafes in Ireland, a purposive sample of 10 youth cafés was selected, to ensure a range of urban / rural areas, scale, standalone or integrated, etc. 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. Young people were asked a range of questions regarding what the youth cafe means to them and what they gain, if anything from attending. A variety of methods were used, including post-its and small group discussions. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the authors' institution. Focus group data was transcribed in full and analysed inductively using thematic analysis.

Findings

Young people see youth cafés as informal, relaxing, safe, accessible and fun spaces to ‘hang out’ with friends. In terms of the benefits derived from youth cafe attendance, themes related to health and well-being emerged strongly. For the purposes of this paper, we focus specifically on findings related to social support; belonging and connection; personal and identity development; safety and alcohol and drugs.

Feeling supported

The benefits of positive social relationships are well documented, including helping to ‘buffer’ or prevent stress (Frey and Röthlisberger, 1996) and to support people to cope with challenges and issues in their lives (Cohen and Willis, 1985). The youth café is generally seen as a supportive space and an arena in which support from staff/volunteers and peers can be accessed. 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. The study findings indicate that young people see this support as enabling them to cope with challenges, be they minor or major.

‘It makes me happy mentally as it makes me happy being here and there is always someone here if I need to talk to someone.’ [Café 1]

‘If you’re upset, they’ll try and help you. Like, everyone will. And if your friends can’t help, there are loads of volunteers who will help ... The volunteers won’t like nag you or tell you what to do. They won’t tell anyone or they won’t judge you. They treat you like an adult ... you’re on the same level. There’s no condescension. They will help you, but they won’t lecture you ... I’d be happier to go to a volunteer than a teacher any time.’ [Café 10]

Belonging and connection

The importance of a sense of belonging in terms of mental health has been underlined by a recent study by Cheng *et al* (2014), which found that young people living in economically deprived neighbourhoods showed higher levels of depression, but that feeling a sense of connection to their neighbourhood was positively associated with levels of hope and negatively associated with depression among young people. Young people used the terms ‘belong’ and ‘belonging’ frequently when referring to the youth café. The youth café was described by some as being ‘like a community’ and of enhancing their connection to the community in which they live. Some participants were of the view that young people are often not included in communities, an issue that the youth café addresses.

‘We feel like we belong. It gives us friendship and we feel like we belong.’ [Café 4]

Personal and identity development

Developing a coherent sense of identity that is distinct from those of parents or peers is a key developmental task of adolescence (Lalor *et al*, 2007). Young people were of the view that youth cafés play an important role in terms of the personal and identity development of young people. Many participants spoke of having gained in confidence and become more outgoing as a result of coming to the youth café.

‘I used to be a very closed-off person. I wouldn’t leave the safety of my own room. I’ve learned to be more confident and open up to people and I’ve learned to have a lot more confidence ... and respect for myself since coming here.’ [Café 10]

Safety

Young people, particularly in disadvantaged urban areas, spoke of how, on the streets, they risked getting into fights and other trouble, while bullying and peer pressure often lead 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]

‘The staff make me feel safe. They helped me not to get in with the wrong crowd. I listened to them.’ [Café 1]

In addition to avoiding danger on the streets, 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 nice to have a place to call home when you have stuff going on at home and at school.’ [Café 2]

Young people also used the term ‘safe’ to refer to how they feel when in the youth café, due to the fact that everyone is accepted for who they are and because bullying is not accepted.

‘When I’m outside of here, I feel way more self-conscious about what I do and what I say and how I look. But the second I walk back in here, I feel a million feet tall. I don’t have to worry if I say something stupid or act like an idiot because I’m accepted. There are no worries, you know.’ [Café 10]

Alcohol and drugs

Some young people, particularly in older age groups, said that the youth café helped them to avoid or reduce alcohol and drug use. For example, one female participant described how the youth café helped her to control her own patterns of substance abuse as follows:

‘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]

Similarly, 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]

Conclusion

Young people taking part in this research see the youth cafe model as a means of enhancing their connections with their communities, providing them with support, promoting personal development and helping them to stay safe. Youth cafes were seen to have particular significance for young people living in disadvantaged urban areas who valued the cafe space as a refuge from stress experienced at home, school and in the community. At a time of significant concern over youth mental health, the findings underline the importance of community based provision in promoting and safeguarding the health and well-being of young people. While acknowledging the limitations to generalisability of the study, it can be argued that the findings appear to validate the government's decision to invest in the youth café model. For many youth cafe stakeholders who took part in the research, however, the resourcing of youth cafes to ensure their sustainability into the future was the key issue they would like to see addressed by government.

References:

Cheng Y, Li X, Lou C, Sonenstein FL, Kalamar A, Jejeebhoy S, Delany-Moretlwe S, Brahmbhatt H, Olumide AO and Ojengbede O. (2014) The association between social support and mental health among vulnerable adolescents in five cities: Findings from the study of the well-being of adolescents in vulnerable environments. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 55: 6 (Supplement):S31-S38.

Cohen, S. and Willis, T.A. (1985) 'Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis', *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 98, No. 2, pp. 310-57.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs. (2015) *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures. National Policy Framework for Children and Young People*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Dooley B, Fitzgerald A. (2013) *My World Survey: National study of youth mental health in Ireland*. Dublin: Headstrong and UCD School of Psychology.

Forkan C, Brady, B, Moran L, Coen, L. (2015) *An operational profile and exploration of the perceived benefits of the Youth Café Model in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Frey CU, Röthlisberger C. (1996) Social support in healthy adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 25: 1: 17-31.

Lalor, K., de Róiste, A. and Devlin, M. (2007) *Young People in Contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

PISA Research Project. (2015) *Facts about Suicide*. Dublin: Dublin City University. Available at: <http://www.pisa.dcu.ie/index.php?page=suicide-facts>

Thomson R. (2007). Biographical approaches. In: *Understanding Youth: Perspectives, identities and practice*. M.J. Kehily (ed.) London: Sage / The Open University.