

Youth & Policy Special Edition:
The Next Five Years: Prospects for young people

Youth Work: A Manifesto For Our Times – Revisited

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The Youth & Policy editorial group are delighted to re-publish Bernard Davies' *Manifesto for Youth Work*, re-framed to reflect on the current context for the field. Originally published 10 years ago in 2005, Davies' Manifesto has been an influential document in both practical and academic discussions of what constitute the key features of youth work. We hope it stimulates reflection on the role of empowerment, voluntary participation and working with groups in youth work practice today. Re-publishing it in our 2015 election issue of the journal feels timely as we face what feels to be a critical juncture for youth work and youth services.

Policy: how it looked in 2005

When *Youth Work: A Manifesto For Our Times* was published nearly a decade ago, it opened with what was for me, at the time, a perplexing question:

Has youth work ever been so fashionable – or at greater risk? (Davies, 2005:7)

At the heart of this paradox, the paper suggested, were two conflicting sets of priorities. On the one hand were those of the managers and workers in a range of 'youth services' who, having recently 'discovered' youth work, wanted it to help them achieve what were, for them, 'pressing and precious outcomes'. Rubbing tensely up against these expectations were the concerns of youth workers themselves and many of their managers, who regarded most of these outcomes as difficult, if not impossible to achieve through youth work, and who were experiencing their imposition as undermining its distinctiveness as a practice. What the new youth work enthusiasts seemed to be demanding was a cherry-picked, if not a de-rooted, version of youth work practice, re-engineered largely to stop young people from dropping out of school, offending, taking drugs or displaying other kinds of 'anti-social behaviour'. Within this refiguring, only incidentally (if at all) was youth work's core educational commitment to tapping into young people's personal potential being endorsed or even recognised.

Even as early as 2005 then, in its analysis of the policy context of the period, the Manifesto displayed some major concerns for the future of youth work. For example, though it suggested that

the ‘new youth work chic ... perhaps promise(d) finally to move it from the recreational margins of public provision for young people’, what it saw as most in demand was youth work’s product. The process necessary for generating the desired outcomes was likely to be treated with impatience, the paper suggested, especially once it became clear how lengthy and labour-intensive it could be. As a result, because what was being offered in the name of youth work ultimately wasn’t youth work at all, there was a real danger that it was being set up to fail – that once the new converts came to realise that the practice as they conceived it couldn’t ‘deliver’ on their terms, youth work would end up losing credibility.

The original Manifesto also judged youth work to be at risk because it saw the organisational environment in which it was operating, comprising the then emergent Children and Young People’s Services, as less and less congenial to it. In particular, by prioritising younger children and child protection, these services were bound to rate the skills and knowledge of some practices, especially social work, as more equal than others. Increasingly, therefore, youth workers and those managing them, were finding themselves at the bottom of these departments’ long lines of accountability, far removed from the centres of power and decision-making and overseen by senior managers with little, if any, understanding of, or even perhaps sympathy for, how they practised.

Nor were voluntary sector organisations seen as having any reason to feel complacent. The Manifesto acknowledged that as the future role of statutory provision became more uncertain, voluntary organisations were likely to be courted by central and local government, to take over services. Once the bottom-line principle of ‘piper calling the tune’ had been applied, however, the paper envisaged that here too there would be ‘a serious diversion from the kind of youth work which the voluntary sector had pioneered and still widely prioritised’ (ibid).

All of this led to the speculative question:

How much will be left of the Youth Service – the only agency which, with all its flaws, has had an explicit public remit to nurture and develop this practice as a distinctive way of working with young people? (Davies, 2005: 10).

This rehearsal of the threatening policy trends of a decade ago is not meant to demonstrate the prescience of the original paper. (On the contrary, who today even remembers most of the policy initiatives listed on its first page or why they then seemed so significant?) Rather, what emerges ten years later as much more telling, are features of the policy environment of the period to which the paper gave little or no attention. Most striking here is the absence of any explicit discussion of the dominant neo-liberal ideology which by the time the Manifesto appeared had been shaping the ‘modernisation’ programmes of New Labour’s public services for nearly a decade and which was to have profoundly negative consequences for youth work (see Davies, 2009). By the mid-2000s, this ideology was already embedded in political, policy and media discourses. A deep

suspicion of the state-as-provider precipitated imposed notions of competitive and market-driven public services. This prompted repeated and major bouts of organisational restructuring and built demands for a practice which, through stringent forms of managerialist control, would demonstrate it was achieving ‘hard’ (ie. statistically measured) ‘outcomes’ with the ‘risky’ and the ‘at risk’.

Against this background, the original Manifesto’s failure to give close critical attention to *Transforming Youth Work: Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* (REYS) (DfES, 2001) particularly stands out. This after all was a state paper which had (correctly) been described by the minister who launched it as a ‘landmark document’ for youth work. By the time the Manifesto appeared two-plus years later, it was being experienced by youth workers and their managers in England as seriously constraining and often diversionary – forcing them to meet targets which many felt had little to do with the real needs and expectations of the young people they were working with. In response, all the Manifesto had to offer was one passing second-hand reference.

Policy a decade on

As this revised version of the Manifesto is being written, the catastrophic effects of the worst ‘recession’ since the 1930s – more accurately described as the near-collapse of the capitalist banking system – are taking a huge toll on public services in general and local authority Youth Services in particular. In the most material and crushing ways, these are largely resolving the youth work paradox posed by the original Manifesto. For whatever fashionableness youth work had had in the early 2000s rapidly dissipated under the Coalition government. Though ‘traditional’ youth work has been sustained in parts of the voluntary and faith sectors, under pressure from government ‘austerity’ programmes, one local authority after another has followed Warwickshire County Council’s very early example by ‘ceasing’ its Youth Service and closing all or most of its youth centres. Where provision has survived, it is refocused on projects strictly mandated to target pre-identified ‘vulnerable’ or ‘anti-social’ young people, often using money for ‘early intervention’ or so-called ‘troubled families’.

A July 2014 Cabinet Office survey captured the stark consequences of all this when it revealed that between 2011-12 and 2013-14:

- council spending on Youth Services fell by 22.3%;
- the proportion of that spending committed to open access provision fell from 55.25% to 47.5%;
- 75% of the 97 survey respondents were predicting that, within three years, between 75 and 100% of their budget would be for targeted work.

The survey also revealed at least 58% of those 97 local authorities, by their own admission were failing fully to meet their legal obligations (McCardle, 2014).

Why a Manifesto in 2015 – and in what form?

If good grounds existed in 2005 for youth workers to make the case for youth work, by 2015 the need for this has become overwhelming. Ultimately, of course, as the original Manifesto emphasised, the most convincing way of making such a case is likely to be through a practice whose quality and impact speak for themselves, particularly through the voices of young people. However, with fewer and fewer settings available for undertaking such practice, youth workers need, as never before, to be clear, confident and articulate about just what their practice involves and how its distinctiveness enables them to reach parts of the adolescent population that other practices cannot or do not reach.

What follows is an attempt to reconstruct such a statement for a very different historic moment from that out of which the original Manifesto emerged. This has had the benefit of collaboration with colleagues from the In Defence of Youth Work campaign, in particular in producing ‘This is Youth Work: Stories from Practice’ (IDYW, 2011) and in running the nearly thirty youth work story-telling workshops which flowed from this (see IDYW, 2015). From its launch in March 2009, the IDYW campaign has advocated strongly for a conception of a practice with defining characteristics – what it terms its ‘cornerstones’ – that overlap substantially with the distinguishing features of youth work proposed by the 2005 Manifesto. As the facilities providing for this practice have been increasingly dismantled, the campaign has also sought to reach out to workers who, in settings where a very different kind of practice is being required, are struggling to sustain this way of working.

In making the case for youth work as a distinctive practice, the Manifesto is not suggesting that it is superior to other practices with young people. Nor is it denying the potential added value for young people of using so-called ‘youth work approaches’ and ‘youth work skills’ in agencies whose structures and approaches are very different – in schools and pupil referral units, youth offending teams, employment training, health promotion and drugs projects. Nor is it overlooking the fact that the actual practice in some self-defined ‘youth work’ organisations may be very different from how youth work is conceptualised in this paper. Indeed, far from being treated as some final ‘set-in-stone’ statement of position, what follows needs to be seen as the latest stage in a search for clarification of the distinctive nature of youth work which for me has been going on for many years (see, for example, Davies, 1979; 1981; 1999).

Nonetheless, though often dismissed as idealist and passé, the paper’s arguments are quite deliberately presented in an assertive and hard-line way, not least because, as a Manifesto should, it seeks to lay down some clear bottom-lines both for policy-makers and professional worlds outside youth work. Equally unashamedly, it aims also to concentrate minds within youth work on what at this moment, clearly and boldly, needs to be articulated if the practice is to be defended.

This purist position is retained for what I consider to be three very positive reasons:

1. Far from being a pick-and-mix collection of skills available for selective transfer into other ‘youth practices’, youth work is, and needs to be, understood as a practice in its own right, with characteristics which, in combination, give it an overall coherence and distinct identity.
2. For this practice to occur, settings are required which themselves have crucial defining characteristics; above all, that they are self-chosen by young people to use in their discretionary (leisure) time and so have an ethos which is welcoming and comfortable for them, not least because it is substantially shaped by what *they* would expect and want.
3. Evidence exists that a significant minority of young people have been making this choice for decades and that they continue to do so. Surveys from the 1960s right up to 2013 indicate that between a fifth and a third of 13 – 19 year olds regularly use some form of youth work facility with up to six in ten saying they try them at some point in their teens (NCVYS, 2013).

Searching out youth work’s distinctive identity

The contention of this paper is that, for youth work to be on offer, positive answers are needed to the following questions:

- Is the practice taking place in *settings which are ‘open access’* and to which young people have chosen to come, that is, is their *participation voluntary*?
- Is the practice proactively seeking to *tip balances of power in their favour*?
- Are *young people perceived and received as young people* rather than, as a requirement, through the filter of adult-imposed labels?
- Is the practice *starting where young people are starting*, particularly with their expectation that they will be able to relax, meet friends and enjoy themselves?
- Is one key focus of the practice on *the young person as an individual*?
- Is the practice respectful of and actively responsive to *young people’s peer networks*?
- Is the practice respectful of and actively responsive to *young people’s wider community and cultural identities* and, where young people choose, is it seeking to help them strengthen these?
- Is the practice seeking to *go beyond where young people start*, in particular by encouraging them to develop their personal potential and be critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them?
- Is the practice concerned with *how young people feel* as well as with what they know and can do?

Interrogating practice: towards a clarification of youth work's defining features

Is the practice taking place in settings which are 'open access' and to which young people have chosen to come – that is, is their participation voluntary?

Since the original Manifesto appeared, interpretations of 'voluntary participation' have been a focus of some healthy debate in youth work circles (see for example Williamson, 2007: 38; Ord, 2007: 58-62). This has happened, however, at a time when even key players within the youth work field have been collapsing 'youth work' into any form of 'work with young people', including ones which require or even legally compel attendance (see, for example, Davies, 2013: 21-22). In these circumstances, it has become increasingly urgent to reassert young people's participation in self-chosen 'open access' settings as a – perhaps *the* – defining feature of practice which claims 'youth work' as its title.

In this context, 'setting' does not just refer to buildings such as youth clubs, youth centres, drop-in centres and cafés which have been specially provided to attract young people in their leisure time. It also includes spaces where young people congregate spontaneously, without any prior adult endorsement, and into which, on young people's terms, detached and outreach workers seek to negotiate some right of entry and, perhaps, ongoing contact. At least implicitly, all this also assumes that workers in these settings will go beyond merely tolerating young people's voluntary participation, to positively embracing it as an integral – again, defining – element of their relationships with young people.

Nor, as has sometimes been suggested, is the rationale for this position just theoretical or ideological – 'conservative' or bloody-minded youth workers holding onto a belief which has passed its sell-by date. Rather, it is a position with both deep historical roots and a continuing pragmatic rationale. From the earliest days of 'youth leadership', even its powerful and often evangelical 'pioneers' accepted that 'in the first place the boys had to be persuaded to come...' (Russell and Rigby, 1908:18). More immediately, 'the voluntary principle' continues to ensure that, in their dealings with the institutions which provide youth work and with the practitioners who deliver it face-to-face, young people retain a degree of power. Though the action may never be framed in this way by either adult or young person, each knows that at any point the young person, simply by walking away, may leave the adult powerless in the relationship. This unique feature of our society's public provision for young people is perhaps one hidden explanation as to why youth work in the current neo-liberal climate is so out of favour with politicians and policy-makers. The young person's sense of power may be limited, and to some degree negative, in the sense that attendance at a youth work facility may be the least worst option available in a neighbourhood. Nonetheless, it exists because of the role and the status which are structured into the relationship between user and provider.

Because of this balance of power, youth workers have no choice but to negotiate their way into their relationships with the young people they meet. Nor can this just be a ‘tactical’ manoeuvre focused on easing the young people through ‘boring’ but pre-set and essential tasks *en route* to later, more rewarding outcomes (as it may need to be in teaching for example). The youth work negotiation has to be part of a built-in, authentic and reciprocated give-and-take, sustained throughout the young person-adult engagement. Only then are the young people likely to exercise their power in favour of staying long enough to become exposed to the educational opportunities which youth work might offer – and so sustain a personally committed participation rather than a merely compliant attendance.

The voluntary principle also impacts significantly on the *content* of what is on ‘offer’. Because young people engage in youth work ‘in their own’ time’, youth work proceeds on the presumption that it must deliver returns which are *valued* by young people in their terms. Moreover, and integrally linked with the requirement to negotiate, these ‘valued’ returns need to be valued by the young people in their own right, in the here-and-now or at least pretty soon, and not just as a promise of some later gain. Given the terms on which young people attend, youth workers cannot assume that gratification too long delayed is an option, of the kind, for example which many school students settle for, on the decreasingly credible promise that even on syllabi experienced as ‘irrelevant’, hard work today will eventually bring tradable qualifications and well paid jobs ...

The voluntary principle has significant implications, too, for the ‘hidden’ curriculum’ – including those interpersonal exchanges between teacher and student which can have such an impact on motivation and learning. In many educational environments these can indeed remain hidden, or at least treated as secondary to the real business of getting through the syllabus. In youth work, however, such process questions have to be addressed openly and directly. This is partly because learning experientially about people and their relationships is so central to youth work’s overt ‘curriculum’. However, it is important too, because any youth worker who patronises, rides roughshod over or simply ignores the views or feelings of the young people they meet, is liable to find themselves without a clientele. In more positive terms, young people also often make this clear when they report that what they especially value in their encounters with youth workers is that ‘They treat you like adults’; ‘They don’t judge you ... They don’t stand over you and give out to you’ (Davies and Merton, 2009:11; Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 41).

In the conditions of early 2015, especially the funding climate, many employed as youth workers in non-youth work settings increasingly find themselves needing to apply their skills to convert young people’s enforced attendance into a form of ‘voluntary’ (or at least less compliant) participation. In the process, as was suggested earlier, they may have been able to add significantly to the value of the work for the young people involved. For a much bigger constituency of young people, however, none of this can be a substitute for the open access provision to which they came voluntarily (or not), over whose style and content they had some genuine leverage and whose

distinctive benefits were often only achievable because of the more equal power relationships between adult and young person.

Is the practice proactively seeking to tip balances of power in young people's favour?

As the discussion above has highlighted, for youth workers the centrality of 'the voluntary principle' makes a confrontation with questions of power – who has it and how is it used – unavoidable. For many policy-makers and youth agencies, such questions are now newly fashionable as they struggle with how to tap into 'young people's voice' and provide some (carefully bounded and controlled) 'participation' programmes.

However, for the youth worker such goals are not incidental luxuries – the icing on the cake – while implementing them is often not achieved through committees or other formal machinery. Rather, they are pursued through the workers' everyday routine exchanges with the young people who turn up; exchanges whose built-in power balances mean that, from day one and throughout, they have to be shaped by 'participatory' principles and the mutuality of respect and influence which these assume.

The power which young people actually exercise within the youth work relationship is, of course, relative. It is relative, still, to the degree of formal power (for example, over money, buildings and equipment) which remains with the youth worker. And, even more significantly, it is relative to young people's very limited formal power, sometimes coming close to powerlessness, in other spheres of their lives – at home, within education more widely, within employment and (unless they have real money in their pockets) even in their leisure. Indeed, despite the high profile official initiatives to foster their 'empowerment', the fundamental shifts over the past two to three decades in their structural, and especially economic, position in the labour market, the benefit system, the housing market, even now higher education, have very substantially weakened their control over key aspects of their lives.

Youth work's commitment to tipping these balances in young people's favour needs to be seen in this contemporary context. But it needs to be understood, too, in a much broader way: explained bluntly as 'young people are citizens, too – and now'. Though apparently a simple notion, this needs to be asserted uncompromisingly at a time when so many current policies assume that, just because young people (and indeed children) have to be prepared for citizenship, they are therefore *not already* citizens.

For youth work the proposition to tip the balance of power is an entirely contrary one. This insists that the need for preparation and support cannot be merged into a denial that young people now possess some basic civil and legal rights. At a time when all the talk is about 'a lost generation', re-affirming this proposition has never been more urgent.

Again exceptionally if not uniquely youth work's commitment to these more equal power relationships has in some form been embedded in its public remit throughout its history. For example:

A girls' committee ... is a very important element of a girls' club (Stanley, 1890: 62).
(S)elf-government is a basic principle of the club method ... (Henriques, 1933: 79).

As such, it has been practised neither as a grudging concession nor merely as a tactical manoeuvre to convince a potentially sceptical clientele to 'give youth work a chance' or to draw them into adult-designed and directed programmes. Rather, it exists as an integral element of the practice. It is there in its own right, rooted as we have seen in young people's choice to attend, to be proactively nurtured and resourced, including, as appropriate for the young people concerned, in arenas without as well as within the youth work context.

Are young people perceived and received as young people *rather than, as a requirement, through the filter of adult-imposed labels?*

Youth work can and does work with 'special groups', including focusing on their specialist interests, needs and concerns. The young people who are engaged may also take a variety of routes to that engagement, including on occasions their (voluntary) follow-up of a referral from a specialist non-youth work agency.

For youth work, however, the *raison d'être* of the work stems solely from the fact that its 'users' belong to a section of the population who are at a particular stage in their personal development, with some specific needs, demands – and opportunities – flowing from this. This in turn assumes a holistic perception of, and set of responses to those needs, demands and opportunities. The practice which emerges will therefore, as far as possible, not be blinkered by any of the (often pejorative) labels attached to young people by powerful adults and adult institutions.

As always in such practices, this stance is not without its contradictions. One of the trickiest is that, especially in today's climate, 'young people' has itself become a pejorative label. Once attached, it is liable to have the same kinds of consequences as any other such prior and rigid categorisation of an individual: prejudgement of personalities and behaviour; a masking of more personal characteristics or of alternative (perhaps self-chosen) identities; a resultant lowering of expectations leading to defensive rather than expansive and affirmative responses to those concerned.

Youth work seeks to guard against such negative effects of the 'young person' label in a number of ways. Some are captured later in this article as other key constituent elements of youth work are explored, in particular, through youth work's adoption of potentiality rather than deficiency 'filters'

through which to view the young person, and in its respect for, and active response to the different collective identities young people may choose to take on.

Nonetheless, a crucial youth work starting point is an acceptance of young people as young people, at a particularly formative stage in their lives and development.

Is the practice starting where young people are starting – not least with their expectation that they will be able to relax, meet friends and enjoy themselves?

‘Connect, only connect’ with the person, with what they know, how they feel, what they want from the encounter: this has long been an equally crucial starting point for any educator aiming at internalised (‘owned’) and transferable learning. In more formal educational environments like schools, colleges and universities the main connection sought is likely to be with the learner’s intellectual starting points. In these environments, but perhaps especially in non-formal educational settings, emotional connections will also be seen as important, focusing for example on the learners’ levels of confidence, on their self-esteem or on the ‘baggage’ they may be bringing from, say, past educational or family experiences.

Though the youth worker will also be seeking connections with these starting points, other connections will be vital. One, initially and maybe ongoing, will be with young people’s own ‘territory’ – with the physical and geographical spaces which, certainly for leisure purposes, they come to regard as ‘theirs’, where they hope to ‘freely associate’ and where they feel most comfortable. Often these will be public spaces which for periods of a day or week they use and even take over – a key arena, as suggested earlier, for detached youth work.

However, in part again because young people are choosing to participate, they will need to experience even the more institutional contexts and environments in which youth work takes place, to a significant degree as *theirs*. Adult – as well as young people-defined rules and boundaries will usually, and necessarily, operate within these spaces. Nonetheless, sufficient freedom and informal and sociable control of their use will need to exist (or be created) to enable their users to experience high levels of ownership of them: as safe, welcoming, flexible, consultative, dialogical, in significant ways responsive to their starting points.

Ideally, of course, these environments will be of high physical quality offering good, even state-of-the-art, facilities. Even when they are very basic, however, young people may still be willing to engage because workers, working with the young people themselves, have developed an environment which is young people-oriented and to a significant degree young people-driven. Key to defining and creating this ethos will be the creation of another crucial connection: starting with the concerns and interests, and especially, but not only with the leisure interests, of the young people actually involved. It is these that can open up new opportunities for enjoyment

and relaxation and for informal education which, as we shall see later, is another of youth work's commitments. Hence, we see young people's use of youth clubs in even the drabest of community halls and of detached work contacts made on the bleakest street corners or in a 'youth shelter' stuck out in the middle of a field.

Is one key focus of the practice on the young person as an individual?

Liberal educationists (which in this context include youth workers) have historically given high priority to 'the individual' and their development:

... in a club of a hundred members each officer will know every boy (Russell and Rigby, 1908: 33).

The head of the club must ... get to know and to understand really well every individual member (Henriques, 1933: 61)

Underpinning this focus, at least rhetorically, is a societal commitment long endorsed by youth workers to help realise the potential within each of us to become more than we are presently, and even perhaps – if we can break the constraining bonds of material or social circumstances – more than we have ever envisaged ourselves becoming.

In our neo-liberal era, however, these individualistic perspectives require renewed critical scrutiny without being abandoned altogether. Individualistic values have become so deeply and matter-of-factly embedded in our everyday culture that all educational practices, including youth work, are now expected to concentrate almost exclusively on ensuring that each young person becomes 'resilient', 'self-reliant' and 'enterprising'. What such goals mask, are the constraints on any individual's opportunities and self-expression built into such an intensely competitive environment which, in order to guarantee some winners, is bound to leave many as 'losers'. This individualism is therefore likely to play out for many young people as a zero-sum experience which makes far more promises that it can possibly deliver.

Therefore, aspirations for youth work, as for all educational practice, are needed which go beyond and, indeed, sometimes override this elevation of the individual as the only legitimate focus.

Is the practice respectful of and actively responsive to young people's peer networks?

Youth work seeks to be respectful of and responsive to young people's networks through a commitment to working with and through the 'collectivities' to which young people are, or could be attached. At the very least, these include their peer networks and (considered later) those rooted in community and culture.

Because most young people give such high priority to their relationships with their peers, working with and through their self-chosen friendship groups has to be central to a practice committed, as youth work is, to *starting where young people are*. Most obviously, such groups operate through young people's shared leisure interests and activities – formal and informal, casual and organised, some admittedly less individually affirming or socially acceptable than others. These provide them with opportunities for new experiences which, again, are often valued in their own right, for their here-and-now impact. They, therefore, help balance adults' overwhelming preoccupation with adolescence-as-transition, with ensuring young people make the 'right' moves to become skilled and conscientious workers, contributing and law-abiding citizens, caring parents. Working with and through young people's peer groups is, therefore, one of the ways in which youth workers can attend to, indeed, positively affirm the value young people themselves place on their present. Though, as suggested earlier, to gain access to young people's 'present' on terms which are acceptable to those young people, youth workers will need to assume that a negotiation is essential.

For young people, however, involvement in these networks has other powerful outcomes, some of which in fact, do contribute to adolescent transition as well as having important individual pay-offs. Their often intensive interactions with friends are, to a significant degree, constructed precisely to create a separation of time, space and activity from parents and other power-holding adults – social and emotional 'territory' exclusive to their age group. Here they find leeway to start to define a distinctive and more autonomous adult identity for themselves: what is special about them and their potential, how they wish to express this difference, who other than parents they might wish to recognise as 'significant others'. More positively, this also offers support as well as often painful challenge from those in the same adolescent group as themselves – both vital for navigating this tricky process of self-definition.

The gains can be much more than individual. Working with and through this collectivity whose very label (peer group) too often limits expectations of it – making use of the extra human resources and capacity generated by strength in numbers – can also produce valued shared outcomes: a play, a music group, a sports team, cooking and eating together, to say nothing of 'mere' sociability. By focusing on their peer relationships, youth workers seek to encourage young people to make gains which may only be achievable because the whole at times develops into much more than the sum of its parts. The potential also exists here for redressing the increasingly organised and articulate influence on policy-makers of often youth-averse 'grey power' groups – an influence, as current government policies vividly demonstrate, which is now seriously distorting the state's allocation of resources.

In order to establish productive connections with young people and to have impacts which they value, acceptance of the reality and indeed centrality *for them* of peer interactions, experiences and networks is thus located at the very heart of youth work practice. Though not exclusive to youth work, this remains an exceptional position. As we have seen, our most powerful educational and

welfare ideologies continue to be overwhelmingly focused on the individual – sometimes on her or his potential, too often on their defects. When young people’s groups do appear on the radar of the institutions applying these ideologies, most still (implicitly if not explicitly) see and treat them as unhealthy, risky, threatening – as cliques to be broken up, gangs to be decriminalised. Youth work, on the other hand, starts from the premise that, because such peer networks are so binding on the individual young people who belong to them, they represent a crucial point of access to and arena for working with them. Precisely because this proposition is so exceptional in educational and welfare practice, it embodies one of youth work’s key defining features.

Though peer networks constitute a vital point of contact for the youth worker, not all of course are benign – to be treated as ready-made sites for the realisation of either the young person’s unique talents or the wider social good. Like all collectivities they can also be restrictive, oppressive and even damaging, not least for young people themselves. Many young people are on the receiving end of unwelcome pressures such as bullying and sexual and racial harassment which, if anything, have become more intense in an age of social media. Here, therefore, the agreements being sought through the youth work negotiation will not only need to be acceptable and credible to the young people, they may also need to be challenging to a group’s norms or status quo.

For the most part, however, a much more creative view of the potential of young people’s peer networks shapes youth work practice – a perspective which here too has been at its heart from its inception:

The boy has a natural instinct for association. The club must organise that association so that it is profitable to the members and to society as a whole (Henriques, 1933:8).

Increasingly, this has assumed that a key area of youth work ‘skill’ is the proactive development of these group experiences. Using a range of media, which non-youth workers have often dismissed as mere ‘treats’, including sport, the arts, outdoor activities, residential experience, youth work seeks to harness the positive potential of peer interaction and the shared interests and concerns which it can build on to draw young people into new and stretching experiences.

This emphasis on the collective does not of course rule out a deepening of individual relationships including, where appropriate, some intensive personal support and agreed referrals to specialist services. Indeed, these can often emerge out of group situations precisely because, over time and in their own chosen milieu, young people have been able to test out the trustworthiness of this adult called ‘youth worker’. Nonetheless, youth work’s core perspectives and many of its core activities remain negotiated interventions into the self-formed groupings through which, in our society, young people experience influential, if often highly informal, developmental opportunities.

Is the practice respectful of and actively responsive to young people’s wider community and

cultural identities *and, where young people choose, is it seeking to help them strengthen these?*

A youth work practice which seeks to take its lead from where young people are starting also requires a commitment to respect and be responsive to other collectivities, significant for them.. Those of ‘community’ and ‘culture’ are of particular importance since, often in profound ways, they also help shape the long-term development of the young, as well as their everyday experience. In this context, ‘community’ may be defined geographically or by a group’s commonality of interests and concerns; ‘culture’ by their consciousness of the values, norms and practices which they share with each other through immediate family, wider kin, friends and neighbours as well as through their class, disability, sexuality, ethnicity and/or gender. Indeed, it is particularly these overlaying identities which ultimately undermine those one-size-fits-all explanations of ‘adolescence’ referred to earlier.

For youth work, here too there are both negative and positive perspectives at work in how the individual is placed by society in relation to these collectivities. Youth work resists the assumptions that personal growth is determined *only* by individual choice and effort, and that individual failure is the product *only* of family pathology. For many young people (and indeed adults) with little power to be proactive or indeed even answer back, our society can be experienced as isolating and dislocating, excluding and demonising, not least for those who choose to retain and publicly assert the ‘otherness’ of their community and culture.

Here, too, contradictions and dilemmas are embedded in such a practice. Like peer networks, these collectivities, as well as being supportive and liberating, can be constraining and even oppressive. Some may support cultures which marginalise, harass or actively reject individuals or whole groups through their own oppressive definitions of ‘otherness’. Even where such prejudicial attitudes are not culturally endorsed, an individual’s efforts to balance self-expression and personal growth with respect for and adherence to community or cultural expectations can be painful and even, at the extreme, destructive. This ambivalence can be experienced particularly sharply where those individuals, though wanting to sustain their identity, nonetheless come to resent some of the demands and limits this places on them.

However, in such situations, youth work will be seeking positive and supportive interventions, perhaps by offering the young people alternative affirming experiences or contact with others who are struggling in similar ways. In conditions where the playing fields are far from level, encouraging such collectivities can provide individuals and groups with the extra support, security and identity which derive from some additional strength in numbers. These collectivities also have much more positive and developmental dimensions which fit closely with youth work’s educational and developmental aspirations. Strong community and cultural identities can be decisive in helping young people establish a clear and confident intellectual and emotional self-identity as well as helping them enrich their lives socially. Involvement can also raise consciousness of shared issues

and concerns from which wider political engagement may flow.

Because youth work has to work within these tensions, working with and through the community and cultural identities central to young people's lives is therefore never straightforward or one-dimensional. This of course is likely to be especially true where the worker does not or is not seen to share those identities personally. Once again, therefore, carefully negotiated entry into the collectivities young people define as significant for them emerges as vital. Here, too, a mutually acceptable, if often tense, reconciliation may at some point be needed between, on the one hand, the starting points for this negotiation as defined by the young person themselves and, on the other, the youth worker's judgment on if and where she or he might need to move beyond these.

In this delineation of the 'wider networks' on which young people draw, one 'absence' is particularly striking: that of 'the family'. This is not because most young people do not value their familial relationships, often broadly defined. Nor is it to suggest that youth workers seek to work deliberately against these, or – whether or not they are supportive – that they underestimate their significance for young people. It is, however, to recognise that, for youth work, families do not have the same profile or priority as either community or culture. This is because, in starting where young people are starting and by working on their territory, youth work engages with young people at just those moments and in just those contexts where, often explicitly, they are seeking some separation from familial, and particularly parental, oversight and control.

Clearly circumstances will occur where involvement with family may be necessary and even urgent – occasionally in spite of what an individual young person might choose. Dilemmas, sometimes acute, are also likely where the lines between 'family' and 'culture' are especially blurred, for example, by class or ethnicity. However, where the choice presents itself: 'Whose side am I on – the young person's or the family's?'; the 'default' response, set once again by the young person choosing to engage with youth work, is for the youth worker most likely to be: 'the young person's'.

Is the practice seeking to go beyond where young people start, in particular by encouraging them to develop their personal potential and be critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them?

Because of its emphasis on process, youth work is liable at times to give too little priority to task and product (see, for example, IDYW, 2011: 46). This is a tendency which is likely to be exacerbated by the current obsession with demonstrating 'hard' outcomes. However, the risk also exists because so much youth work is located within young people's leisure time and so often starts from what, to a casual observer, looks like mere recreational distractions. At times, youth workers themselves reinforce such perceptions by taking a line of least resistance, avoiding the often tough process of negotiation with the young people they meet and settling for unchallenging

‘pass-times’. In doing this they may, in effect, keep the young people in the already circumscribing traps of limited opportunity, experience and self-expectation.

Crucially, underpinning youth work is a commitment to working from a potentiality rather than a deficiency model of the young. This assumes that each young person, particularly a young person still at an early stage of their development, is capable of more than she or he has yet achieved; and indeed, as suggested earlier, more even than anything they may have yet imagined for themselves. And so, rather than just going along with their immersion in the world as it is and as it has always been, delivered to them by their more powerful elders, a key youth work rationale is to provide secure arenas for young people to risk more critical and creative responses.

As we have seen, for fuelling such movement, the links made with young people’s starting points – with the expectation of relaxing and having fun; with their needs, interests and aspirations as individuals; with their identification with peer, community and cultural networks – are vital. But they are just that: starting points. Or, more actively: they are launch pads from which lift-off can begin into a newer and more developmentally stretching and liberating orbit of personal and collective achievement and satisfaction. Though, objectively, this may look quite modest, subjectively the distance thus travelled, the personal altitudes reached, can for the person feel quite giddy.

Here again, the notion of process is central because such expressions of this new self in new actions are rarely instant events, especially if they are to be sustained. Nor are they often brought about in isolation, insulated from the stimulus and sustained support of others. Few of us, whatever our class background, gender or other prescribed social role or situation, achieve raised self-expectations and the personal development these can generate without the prompting and prodding of others, including often, of course, our peers. Indeed, what is often most significant about this process is that, far from exercising major influence as the currently fashionable ‘role model’, the youth worker is as likely to act as facilitator, particularly of relationships which for the young person will be with ‘people like me’.

Is the practice concerned with how young people feel as well as with what they know and can do?

A single-minded focus on process can result in youth workers underestimating the importance for young people of the new knowledge and ‘hard’ skills to be derived from the activities which youth work makes available to them. Such ‘outcomes’ may be largely or wholly defined by the young people themselves and, so, are very different from those relentlessly demanded by current policy-makers. Nonetheless, for those young people they can be both valuable and valued. They can also be key to a youth worker’s successful negotiation with them of a more long-term involvement.

In the youth work context, however, young people are also likely to be looking for something more. Given that most often they choose to come with their friends in their ‘social’ time, as important and motivating for many will be responses and experiences which touch them in quite personal ways: which respect them for who they are, what they think, how they feel; which allow them to speak for themselves, be heard and have some control over what goes on, especially in their encounters with adults; which take their peer relationships seriously and affirm their wider identities. By closing down the space or blocking the responsiveness needed for addressing these more expressive tasks, practice which is obsessively instrumental, preoccupied only with the technicalities of what is to be done, is always at risk of being alienating.

Essential to reversing these kinds of negative processes is therefore another of youth work’s markers: a sensitivity to and prioritising of what and how young people feel – about themselves, about others, about their wider world. This again will need to include specific attention to their here-and-now as well as to the futures (which for many in the current context feel quite elusive) that adults are urging or requiring them to attain. For whilst youth workers view young people as citizens now, they see them also as people now – with feelings needing to be recognised and affirmed, emotional needs to be satisfied and actual as well as potential ‘emotional intelligence’ to be tapped into and endorsed.

Configuring youth work

Clearly many other practices-with-young-people would lay claim to some, or even many of the characteristics set out above. Those working in further and higher education, for example, would probably say that they too rely heavily on participants’ voluntary engagement. Like other educators, they are also likely to see themselves as working hard to start where young people are starting, and then helping them to develop well beyond those starting points. Practitioners in a range of fields would assert their commitment to the client or student, or indeed patient, as an individual, to showing respect for their community or cultural identities and to connecting with their feelings.

However, even where there is common ground, youth workers are likely to be looking to push beyond some often taken-for-granted boundaries, for example, beyond consulting and informing young people, to a more genuine form of power sharing; and beyond respecting, to actively embracing their peer group and collective identities, including helping them to assert these more confidently. Even more fundamentally, however, other practices are unlikely to see all the features outlined as requiring the high priority they have within youth work or to insist that their close interrelationship and interdependence constitute an overall configuration which defines their practice’s distinctiveness.

How then might this ‘configuration’ show itself in a practice like youth work which takes place ‘on the wing’ (DES, 1987: 2), in largely unstructured environments within highly interactive face-to-

face situations? In dealing with such a question, practitioners are prone to fall back on ‘intuition’ – ‘it’s just what we do, subconsciously’. Yet where recognisable youth work is occurring, the practice, far from being simply random and off-the-cuff, will at the very least be guided by a prepared mind and shaped by some practised tactical responses often called ‘skills’. Like jazz, its process will at the same time be improvised for the moment, and disciplined.

Set out as a series of open-ended questions, the final section of this paper seeks to capture some of the elements of both these qualities – of the preparedness and the tactical responsiveness. Even ten years after the originals were first framed, they remain a ‘work in progress’, included as material to encourage critical debate and further input. Here, I believe, face-to-face practitioners’ contributions will be crucial since credible ‘answers’ are only likely to emerge from searching, systematic and collective as well as individual reflection on practice, of the kind, for example, which IDYW’s youth work story-telling workshops have often stimulated (See IDYW, 2015).

Such reflection might be built around the following questions:

- *Who are **these** young people?*
- *Why are **they** here?*
- *Why are they **here**?*
- *What individual abilities, interests and aspirations are they bringing with them?*
- *What are their levels of confidence and self-esteem:*
 - as individuals;
 - in their relationships with their closest friend or friends;
 - within their wider informal peer group structures ;
 - with – which – adults;
 - in possible relationships with us, the youth workers actually in touch with them?
- *What are, for them, important peer relationship/group contexts?*
 - What are the power relations, rules and sanctions within these?
 - What effects are these having on individual young people – positive and/or negative; defined how?
 - What effects are these likely to have for any youth work intervention?
- *What, for them, are explicit or possible wider identities which need to be respected and embraced?*
- *How are structural factors – poverty, (un)employment, class, race, gender, disability, sexuality – likely to be affecting them, individually, within their peer groups, more widely?*
- *What do these ‘readings’ suggest as possible/promising connecting points for any youth work intervention?*

*Is some youth work intervention in these young people’s lives **justified**?*

- *Are there ethical factors to take into account before making such an intrusion into these*

young people’s relationships, their leisure – their lives generally?

- What would be the justification for making such an intervention?
- On what evidence?
- How motivated are these young people likely to be to receive/respond to such interventions?

How do we personalise this first contact?

- How do we tailor a first contact to respect these young people’s right to choose whether or not to become further engaged?
- How do we tailor this to who they are and where they have reached in their (personal and group) development – particularly as young people?
- How do we tailor it to their wider collective identities?
- Where could this contact best happen?
- Who should try to make it?
- Does the identity of the worker(s) matter – whether, for example, they are local or ‘an incomer’; male or female; black or white; gay or straight, (dis)abled?

Within what ‘activity’ or on what other ‘territory’ could the contact be best initiated?

- What are the (stated or implied) individual and/or collective interests, concerns, aspirations, preoccupations, of these young people?
- What are the points of youth work access to and entry onto this territory?
- Where will an appropriate youth work intervention fit on an informal-formal continuum of activity and structure?

What connections might be made between these young people’s starting points and ways of moving on beyond them – for prompting additional developmental opportunities for these young people?

- Again: What individual abilities, interests and aspirations have these young people brought to their meetings with youth workers?
- And: What are their levels of confidence and self-esteem?
 - What connections can be made between these starting points and potential developmental opportunities?
 - How motivated are these young people for actually looking for, making and acting on such connections? What barriers might exist to this happening?
 - What youth work inputs might be needed to create/increase this motivation?
 - What youth work inputs might be needed to build these connections?

Within all this, how best to tread the delicate line between, on the one hand, supporting and increasing and, on the other, weakening or undermining these young people’s autonomy and control over their lives?

- How do these young people define:
 - their starting points, including their starting motivation;

- their interests, abilities and aspirations;
- their levels of confidence and self-esteem;
- their significant peer relationships and community and cultural identities?
- How far do the potential youth work definitions of each of these co-incide with those of young people?
- Where are there significant discrepancies between the two?
- What are the justifications for trying to go beyond – maybe even override – these young people’s own perceptions and definitions?
- In seeking to do this, what might be the cost-benefit balance for these young people?

The youth worker with the prepared mind will also, however, need to be ready for another set of (usually unspoken/implicit) questions which, again, often ‘on the wing’, in the midst of the action, will require some kind of response, even if this ends up as a non-response. These may, for example, include:

- *Do I correct that factual error – or that one? Or just ignore both?*
- *Do I follow up that implied personal disclosure? Now? Later, in some more private space? Or just keep a watching brief because at the moment the implication is so weak or because I’m not sure the young person would respond to a follow up?*
- *Do I react to that racist remark now? Or later? By a confrontational challenge? By a more indirectly questioning approach, by prompting a one-to-one discussion? Or by looking for some group activity or experience which will address the issues more implicitly and tangentially?*
- *Is that really an expression of an interest in music/football/discussing relationships between the lads and the girls/challenging the council’s cuts to the Youth Service? Might some of the group be willing to follow it up? If so, initiated how, when, by whom? Or was it just a passing remark? To be followed up anyway?*

An unfinished practice in an outcome-oriented world

These questions are offered as an attempt to illuminate, to bring to life some of the realities of the process likely to be set in motion when the core and defining features of youth work outlined earlier come together into an interdependent whole – an overall configuration. Such continuing (self-) questioning also helps to highlight how, to be implemented, a worker’s strategic vision of where these young people might go, what they could become, will require grounding in a tactical ‘nous’ involving balance, timing and nerve. It is here particularly that responses will need to make the how of the worker’s interventions consistent with the messages she or he wants the young people to take away from their encounters with them – in other cruder terms, to put their actions where their mouth is!

The questions are also intended to illustrate something else: the essentially ‘unfinished’ nature of a youth work practice which, to be effective, requires practitioners – to say nothing of the young people they work with! – constantly to negotiate uncertainty: to make balanced choices, resolve dilemmas, take the risks which are integral to youth work’s, and indeed many other of life’s, shifting informal human exchanges (see Davies, 2015). All of which explains why (very unfashionably) it can offer no guarantees of reaching certain and final ‘outcomes’ least of all ones which have been externally laid down before any of those ‘*who-are-these-young-people*’ questions have been confronted.

All of this returns us with a bump to our starting point – to the fact that, by its very nature, youth work will (at best) often be able only accidentally to sight its targets with the clarity, or demonstrate its impacts with the neatness, demanded by most current policy-makers. In this managerialist age, this of course is not just youth work’s dilemma: which teacher or social worker or, indeed, doctor would not recognise it? However, because it is so process-driven, the challenge for youth work has become especially sharp as, in their search for ‘measured impacts’ and ‘hard outcomes’, other agencies working with young people extract from the practice what makes it youth work in the first place.

At this critical, historical moment in the struggle for youth work, such negative stances are unlikely to have much resonance or impact. More positive responses in that struggle will certainly be required, including as an important (though on its own far from sufficient) contribution, a spirited and coherent articulation of what distinctively defines the work as youth work. This will especially need to highlight how often it is these defining features of the practice which make it attractive and acceptable to young people in the first place, particularly ones not being reached by other services; and how these distinctive ways of working can motivate them to make the kinds of personal and educational gains which policy-makers and funders repeatedly claim to want for them.

This paper is offered as a contribution to that articulation – for others to amend, build on and refine as their situation demands.

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