THINKING SPACE [1]

The Value of Youth Services towards Child and Adolescent mental health

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THE PREMISE of this article is that local authority and voluntary youth services are not valued regarding the role that they play in preventing mental health problems developing in children and adolescents. This opinion derives from attempts I made to bring together evidence and research which would show such causation, and the realisation that there is a lack of research on this topic.

There are some small snippets of research evidence showing some benefits to be gained from youth work approaches, an example being Mahoney and Stattin (2002), who show the value of after school activities on depressed unattached youth, and Fite et al (2011), who consider attendance at youth programmes to act as a buffer against depressive symptoms developing in young people in deprived areas. A report by Coulston (2010) suggested an affinity between youth work and the promotion of mental health, and detailed some of the ways in which youth work can help prevent young people from developing mental health problems. The report identifies how youth clubs can help to develop and strengthen young people's resilience, reduce the vulnerability of young people to adverse negative social-demographic factors, and also help prevent young people with 'low level' mental health problems from developing a more severe mental health problem. Coulston also indicates that youth clubs can help promote mental health awareness and also assist in young people getting access to more specialised mental health services.

My own reading of the government's 10 year strategy for youth services (DfCSF, 2007), gave me cause for hope at the time, as that paper placed some emphasis on the role that youth services can bring to building resilience in youth through helping the development of social and emotional skills.

I looked forward then to the youth work profession vocalising its suitability for this approach.

However, in practice, the profession did not seem to recognise or appreciate the significance of this in terms of young people's mental health, and little more was said on the contribution of youth services to social and emotional learning (SEL). This is a shame, as the evidence from social and emotional learning theory, implicitly gives significant credence to youth work's potential role in promoting SEL.

So where can this potential be located? It is worth considering how youth work fits into SEL competencies. Firstly a brief look at the core values of youth work may highlight some links. Resourcing Excellent Youth Services (DfES, 2002) summarises some of the core values; young people choose to be involved; youth work starts where young people are at; it encourages critical thinking and exploration and recognises and respects communities and cultures; it seeks to help build stronger relationships, as well as collective identities, and is concerned with the feelings and attitudes of young people; it aims to empower young people, respects and values individual differences, and can work with other relations in young people's lives such as family or school (adapted from DfES, 2002).

For me, seeing these values in practice, as well as having an awareness of SEL theory proclaims their similarities. Martinovich (2006) provides a useful breakdown of SEL by saying that it consists of three competencies; self-awareness, social awareness and interaction, and self-management. A closer look at how youth work compares with specific SEL competencies will make my point clearer, and I will begin with Martinovich's first competency of self-awareness.

Martinovich defines self-awareness as 'awareness of self and own emotions, ability to decode, understand and label emotions, self-regulation, communication, self-motivation, realistic and positive sense of self' (Martinovich, 2006: 43). From the youth work perspective, Young captures the equivalent role in fulfilling this by saying succinctly that it helps 'young people to see themselves' (Young, 2006:75), and that it encourages young people to examine their values and morals as well as their sense of self. As well as unmasking self-image, youth work aims to help develop a positive self-concept through challenging negative self-perceptions and providing opportunities to discover positive strengths. Meanwhile, Bamfield says that Youth work can 'transform young people's outlook and dispositions' (Bamfield, 2007: 20).

Through working for statutory and voluntary youth work organizations, in a wide range of settings from traditional generic youth work drop in sessions, through to working with young people being sexually exploited, I have found that youth work is ideal for working on the competency of self-awareness. Youth workers through discussions in informal one to one or group work settings, discuss and explore young people's perceptions of themselves, and encourage reflection on comments or behaviours perhaps signalling some self-belief. The skill of youth workers lies often in their ability to come alongside young people, and this skill, particularly when employed consistently with young people over extended periods, is pivotal in building new positive attachments for young

people. Garbarino et al (1992) demonstrate how an attachment with a supportive adult can help build self-esteem and resilience with children exposed to high levels of family and community violence. Similarly, Luxmoore (2008) disagrees with a view of poor early attachment being definitively conclusive in regards to a young person's self-esteem. He shows how professionals and other supportive adults can build new healthy attachments with young people, which can bolster and reinforce a new and more positive sense of self.

Martinovich's second SEL category is social awareness and interaction, which she defines as, 'awareness of others, ability to 'decode', understand and respect their perspective, appreciating the differences of others, (and) collaboration' (Martinovich, 2006:43). Jeffs and Smith (1999) say that building relationships is central to youth work, and emphasis is put on the relationship between youth worker and young person to equip young people for their own relationships, while Merton et al (2004) show how youth work helps provide key relationship building skills.

Within youth work, relationship skills are often taught within group work settings, providing a safe place for young people to learn and reflect on practical experience. Youth workers also often work with young people on a one to one basis, which gives space and safety for young people to talk through their emotions. This seemingly mere act of talking between youth worker and young person is considered by some as therapeutic in itself (Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Youth workers also at times provide constructive feedback about relationship skills which include empathy awareness. In discussing the *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies Program*, Kusche and Greenberg (2001) assert how having increased empathy can help improve interpersonal skills, meaning the young people concerned are more likely to become part of a social group, and so accordingly achieve a sense of belonging.

Martinovich's third category is self-management, defied as 'problem solving, decision making, realistic analysis, ability to set and work toward goals' (Martinovich, 2006:43). Larson (2000) discusses how positive youth activities can lead to increased motivation, autonomy and initiative, and Bamfield (2007) shows how non formal education can lead to skills in motivation, aspiration, self-determination and self-control. Through youth work led group work activities, young people are often tested and challenged around self-control, as well as this learning being fostered in an environment governed by rules and boundaries. The youth work method at times uses young people-derived goal oriented tasks, such as organising a camping trip, or a funding or arts project. These types of activities, facilitated by youth workers, are particularly constructive for young people learning to handle conflicts, or disappointments and upsets.

It is difficult to fully capture the many facets of the youth work approach, but what is salient is that youth work begins where young people are at and responds to them in the multitude of contexts that they find themselves in. Youth work can occur in schools, communities, with groups or individuals. It can make use of targeted projects, outdoor education or indoor activities. It can use arts, sports,

volunteering, be based on the street or in centres. It can cover power, justice, inequality, health, the environment or local community issues (see for example, Devon Youth Service, 2006), as well as a host of other informal learning topics.

Based on my experience it seems clear to me that there is an increasing demand for the application of SEL approaches with children and young people. This is supported by recent evidence from the Royal College of GPs indicating an increase in mental health concerns in youth (Whitworth, 2014). Schools may be a good place to consider implementing SEL programmes, however, Shute (2012) identifies some existing barriers to this, including the need to ensure that SEL programs in schools are evidence based.

I have presented how local authority and voluntary youth services are best placed, and best experienced, to respond to the need to develop SEL competencies in our youth. Given the government's claim to recognise the value of early intervention with regard to mental health (HMG 2011), should not this early intervention be better delivered more widely by youth services?

There may be challenges with this approach. Some youth workers may perceive a greater emphasis on mental health as a threat to their professional identity, or there may be an expectation of greater workloads or commitments. However, the only change that I can see as necessary is in how youth services capture and communicate their contribution towards SEL competencies.

What would be helpful then is further training and awareness for youth workers, on the contribution that they make towards child and adolescent mental health, as well as further research and exploration around this topic in general. Also, given the need and trend for greater partnership working among services working with children and young people, greater collaboration between the youth and mental health work professions is essential.

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