Youth Work and State Education: Should Youth Workers Apply to Set Up a Free School?

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Abstract:

The UK Coalition Government's new policy on Free Schools presents a dilemma for youth workers. Is there any possibility of establishing a 'youth worker – led Free School' based on the principles and values of youth work? Do the potential pitfalls make this too risky to even consider? This article outlines the policy on Free Schools, and assesses the potential for youth workers to run a radical and creative alternative to mainstream education. It includes a summary of the key issues to consider, and concludes with a suggestion about which types of Free Schools are most likely to be consistent with the values and principles of youth work.

Key words: Free schools, policy, state education, ethics, values.

BRITAIN IS IN ITS deepest recession since the 1930s and the Coalition Government has responded by, amongst other things, cutting funding to public services. Some argue that this is a purely pragmatic response to the debt crisis; others accuse the Conservatives of hiding behind the economy whilst fulfilling their political ambitions of rolling back the state (Sparrow, 2010). Whatever the reasons, the impact remains the same. Youth and community work is under threat. Youth centres are shutting down. Frontline services are being streamlined. Youth workers are being made redundant (Watson, 29 June 2010). Fewer young people are able to access youth work and youth workers.

Yet at the same time, the Coalition Government has announced new policies – the Big Society, the Localism bill, the Academies Act, to name but a few. Some of these involve 'new money' (or cynically, a redistribution of money taken from other services). Is there any possibility that these new policies offer opportunities to youth workers to benefit from 'new money'? Could youth workers apply to run Free Schools, for example, and still stay true to the ethical and professional principles of youth work?

This article outlines the policy on Free Schools (embedded in the Academies Act 2010) and explores the potential – and the contradictions – for extending youth work into this arena. It will be argued that the policy on Free Schools does provide an opportunity – albeit a risky one – for

youth workers to step into the state education system in a more formal way. It includes a series of recommendations about the key issues to consider, and concludes with a suggestion as to which types of Free Schools are most likely to be consistent with the values and principles of youth work.

What are Free Schools?

The Conservative Party has long since held ambitions to offer autonomy and freedom to schools within the state education system. Examples of this were seen in the 1980s when their 'New Right' agenda was in full force. At this time, policies were designed to aid parental choice and increase competition between schools – to introduce free-market economics to the education system (Carr and Hartnett, 1996). The policy on Free Schools might best be seen as an extension of these ideas – as another way of helping parents to choose between (and in some cases set up) local schools. It is, of course, also a policy which redistributes power to make decisions about schools from Local Authorities to National Government. The political importance of this should not be underestimated.

Free Schools were established as part of the Academies Act 2010. This Act had two key features. First, it enabled all state schools to apply for Academy status, with the associated benefit of more autonomy for Head Teachers to make decisions about their schools. Second, it enabled groups of individuals to apply to set up their own, state-funded schools ('Free Schools'). These provisions signal a dramatic change to the education system as prior to this, Academy status had been reserved for 'failing schools' which were forcibly taken over and re-launched as Academies. There was no provision for ordinary people to apply for state funding for schools. The Coalition Government have made much of these changes. Michael Gove, Education Secretary, claimed that they signalled 'radical, whole-scale reform' (Gove, 20 June 2011).

According to the Department for Education:

> *Free Schools are non-profit making, independent, state-funded schools. There is not a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. They are not defined by size or location: there is not a single type of Free School or a single reason for setting them up. Free Schools could be primary or secondary schools. They could be located in traditional school buildings or appropriate community spaces such as office buildings or church halls. They could be set up by a wide range of proposers – including charities, universities, businesses, educational groups, visionary teachers or committed parents – who want to make a difference to the educational landscape* (Department for Education, 2011a).

In this statement, one sentence stands out – 'There is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach'. This

message has been reiterated by Gove who has said:

> *And for those of you who may have concerns that I am in love with one particular model of school structure and wish to impose it by relentless diktat let me make clear – my desire to see academy freedoms extended springs from precisely the opposite impulse – it's because I want to see more diversity, more creativity, more professional freedom – that I want to extend autonomy* (Gove, 2010a).

This desire for 'more diversity, more creativity, more professional freedom' is permissive and implies that Gove is open to a range of different models of Free School. In fairness to him, this sentiment has been carried through in practice so far. An analysis of the first few approved Free Schools suggests that there will be at least some element of diversity; of the first 16 which were approved, there were five faith schools, eleven primaries, and one was based on Montessori principles. Since this, dozens of Free Schools have been approved, including many in deprived communities, several offering alternative curriculums, some special schools, and even one run on co-operative principles. Does this mean that a Free School could be run by youth workers, working in partnership with young people, and based on the ethics and principles of youth work?

Youth workers have not yet been specifically named as one of the groups who might like to set up a Free School (Department for Education, 2011b). However, given that teachers, parents, charities, business, and community and faith groups have been listed, it might be assumed that youth workers might feature in one or more of these categories – charities, or community and faith groups, for example. Prime Minister David Cameron has spoken positively about the contribution which youth workers have made to the education system:

> *... we need a whole new relationship between state schools and those voluntary bodies and social enterprises which have real expertise in turning around kids who get excluded ... I have seen some extraordinary projects – places like the Lighthouse Group in Bradford, Amelia Farm in Wales, Base 33 in my own constituency, Hill Holt Wood in Lincolnshire – where tough kids are turned around through a mixture of discipline and kindness and hard work ... What do these places all have in common? They tend to include a mix of youth workers and teachers and other professionals specialising in working with children. The people who work there have a vocation not just to educate but to bring up the kids they're trusted with. They provide holistic, personal care* (Cameron, 31 July 2007).

There is one more point worth mentioning. Although all Free Schools must have non-selective admission procedures and serve the needs of a local community, they are not restricted to being either a primary or a secondary school. It is possible to run an 'alternative provision Free School'. In September 2012, Everton Football Club, for example, is opening an alternative provision Free

School for young people aged 14-19 'who would benefit from a wider range of learning styles and approaches' (Everton Football Club, 14 November 2011). Free Schools can also be offered which specifically target young people aged between 16 and 19, and, given that the compulsory age for leaving school is due to increase to 18 by the end of this Parliament, this is important as is it likely that even more young people will demand new provision that meets their needs.

Let us be clear. The Free School policy is controversial, and has been opposed by The Labour Party, the Teaching Unions, and even the Liberal Democrats (Anti Academies Alliance, 2011, NASUWT, 2011, BBC News, 20 June 2011, Vasagar and Mulholland, 20 September 2010). The main concerns of opponents are that the policy undermines the state education system and further increases divisions between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. There are also concerns about the funding arrangements and cost-effectiveness of these new schools. In addition, the flexibility in staffing and curriculum arrangements has raised questions about quality. Nonetheless, it has been adopted as policy and the first Free Schools opened in September 2011. This leaves youth workers in an interesting situation. By applying to open a Free School, they run the risk of associating themselves with a tainted policy and possibly alienating local schools and other partner organisations. By staying away from the policy, they potentially miss an opportunity to find creative and radical ways of meeting the educational needs of young people.

Youth workers as Free School providers?

The relationship between youth work and the education system is not simple. Youth workers are educators, of course, but their role has usually been defined in terms of informal – rather than formal – education (Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Nonetheless, there are numerous examples of how youth workers contribute to formal educational settings. Some youth workers are employed directly by schools to support informal and after-hours provision. Some youth projects have informal partnerships with schools and run teaching sessions such as drugs awareness, self-esteem or sexual health. Other youth centres have formal partnerships and are paid to offer alternative education packages to individual students, possibly those who have been excluded or are at risk of exclusion. Outside of mainstream settings, youth workers sometimes support the work of Home Education Teams, Pupil Referral Units, Colleges or Vocational Providers. What youth workers offer in these contexts and settings is an alternative way of working – and this is crucial. When youth projects engage with young people as part of a formal education system, they still find ways of holding to their own values and principles. The importance of using conversation, for example, stays central to the work (Young, 2006).

Jeffs and Smith state that 'Educators in formal and informal settings ... have far more in common than both often admit' (2005: 22). They challenge the assumption that youth workers and

schoolteachers are diametrically opposed, arguing that teachers sometimes use informal methods and youth workers formal ones. With the Academies Act, this could potentially become even more apparent. Teachers in Academies have more freedom to work flexibly in terms of curriculum, teaching methods, and the organisation of the school day. They also have greater control over budgets. Youth workers may therefore be able to negotiate a place within these new systems.

Whether this involvement in formal education should extend as far as running a youth worker – led Free School is of course another question. Before considering this, it is important to be clear about the purpose of youth work. In 2007, the National Youth Agency produced the following statement:

> *Youth work helps young people learn about themselves, others and society through activities that combine enjoyment, challenge, learning and achievement. It is a developmental process that starts in places and at times when young people themselves are ready to engage, learn and make use of it. The relationship between youth worker and young person is central to this process* (National Youth Agency, 2007).

In a separate document, eight key values and principles of youth work are outlined: (1) Treat young people with respect; (2) Respect and promote young people's rights to make their own decisions and choices; (3) Promote and ensure the welfare and safety of young people; (4) Contribute towards the promotion of social justice; (5) Recognise the boundaries between personal and professional life; (6) Recognise the need to be accountable to young people; (7) Develop and maintain the required skills and competence; and (8) Work for conditions in employing agencies where these principles are discussed, evaluated and upheld (National Youth Agency, 2004).

The central question to address is whether it is possible for the purpose of youth work, and for these values and principles, to underpin practice in a Free School. At the time of writing, this question is purely hypothetical as there has – as yet – not been a test case to try this out. In principle though, there appears to be nothing on paper which stops the proposers of a Free School working within these parameters. There are a number of youth work values which would need to be considered though – first, by the youth workers completing the application; and second, by Gove and the Department for Education. Two of these will now be explored.

A central consideration for youth workers relates to the principle of voluntarism, or starting where and when young people are ready to engage. Running a Free School would be part of a compulsory education system, and as such, young people would have to attend. Any non-attendance or unauthorised absence would have to be reported. This could potentially compromise the integrity of a youth worker, but it is important to note here that being part of a compulsory education system does not necessarily mean that all lessons have to be compulsory. There are at least two schools in England which do not have compulsory attendance at lessons – Summerhill School in Suffolk

and Sands School in Devon (Sands School, 2011, Summerhill School, 2011). In 1999, the issue of non-compulsory lessons at Summerhill caused conflict with Ofsted (see Vaughan, 2006 for the full story). In this case, Ofsted wanted Summerhill to make lessons compulsory, but Summerhill refused. They took Ofsted to the High Court, arguing that students learned as much outside of lessons as in them – and they won. Lessons are still optional. For youth workers, this case is important because it helps to separate formal lessons from informal learning. Informal and non-formal learning can happen in many ways, and a youth work led Free School would presumably want to ensure that this was recognised. Although it would be compulsory for young people to attend school, there could be a great deal of flexibility about how they engaged in learning once they got there. It might be possible to argue, therefore, that the principle of voluntarism could be upheld.

A second issue relates to the nature of the relationships between youth workers and young people. In youth work, developing and maintaining good relationships – based on equality and respect – is central to the nature of the work. If youth workers were to be involved in a Free School, either alone or in partnership with teachers, maintaining these types of relationships would be vital. Now, it might be assumed that these types of relationships do not exist between most teachers and students, and that therefore, translating the youth work relationship to a Free School would prove difficult. This is not necessarily the case, as an exploration of two small schools in the independent sector demonstrates.

Sands School is a small secondary school in Devon. It is a fee-paying school, rated as 'good' and 'outstanding' by Ofsted. The reason this school might be of interest to youth workers is that it is a democratic school. It runs on principles of self-governance, it has no Head and no hierarchy. Students and staff collectively make decisions about the school through weekly School Meetings. The experience of the students at this school is dramatically different from any previous experiences that they had in mainstream schools. One explained that 'the teachers treat you as equals'. Another said 'it's more like a big group of friends who learn stuff from each other than a stressful education'. In this school, teachers and students work together collaboratively. They treat each other with respect. In many ways, the relationships which are fostered are identical to those experienced in youth work settings (Hope, 2010).

The Small School is another independent school in Devon, but this one does not charge fees. It is run as a community school, relying on support from parents and local people for its survival. At this school, students described their experiences as being 'very informal', 'really relaxed' and 'more like a youth club'. Although some teachers in this school used traditional didactic teaching methods, others were much more informal. Some were even youth workers and used many methods which would usually be seen within youth centres. In this school, the importance of developing good relationships between staff and students was explicit. The Head explained that the school was

'run on a family model rather than school model'. For youth workers, this is interesting because it implies that there are different ways to run formal educational settings (Hope, 2010).

These examples show that is possible to run schools – and good schools at that – which strive to develop strong relationships with young people. If youth workers wanted to run Free Schools, they would have to ensure that they took their experience from running effective youth clubs and youth organisations into these settings. In particular, young people would have to be central in terms of decision-making and governance. And this is where the clash could come with Gove. Although he talks of freedom, autonomy, diversity and creativity, it is unclear whether he would welcome a youth worker-run Free School. This is because the message from Government is not consistent. On the one hand, the Coalition Government want freedom, but on the other, they talk of 'strong discipline' and 'traditional subjects'. In a speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 2010, for example, Gove said:

> *We have to stop treating adults like children and children like adults. Under this Government we will ensure that the balance of power in the classroom changes – and teachers are back in charge ... At the moment heads are prevented from dealing with their pupils if they run wild in a shopping mall or behave anti-socially in town centres. So we will change the rules to send one clear – and consistent – message. Heads will have the freedom they need to keep pupils in line – any time, any place, anywhere* (Gove, 2010b).

This message runs counter to many of the values of youth work. To talk of keeping 'pupils in line' and of ensuring teachers are 'back in charge' reinforces a traditional educational agenda – and one which youth workers have worked hard to avoid. It clearly positions teachers as superior, rather than equal, to students. This message is reinforced through a close examination of the guidance of how to set up a Free School. Of the numerous groups listed as able to apply to set up a Free School, and even those named in terms of who should be consulted, students do not feature even once (New Schools Network, 2010). They are clearly seen as recipients – but not designers – of education. If youth workers proposed that students were involved in the governance of a school, it is possible that this would be far more radical than the Coalition Government would be willing to accept.

Key Issues

If youth workers were even to consider applying to open a Free School, there are a number of points which must be considered. This list is far from exhaustive.

First, the questions of 'what is a school?', and 'how do we value a good school?' must be

considered. The answers to these must be consistent with the values and principles of youth work. Youth workers must not fall into the trap of imagining that a youth worker led Free School must model itself on the local state school. The Academies Act offers an alternative – a youth worker led Free School could be designed by youth workers and young people. This could involve building on good practice from all sectors, including independent schools such as Summerhill, Sands School or The Small School – but more importantly – using the experience of youth work organisations. However, and this is worth noting, the hidden message of the Coalition Government policy on Free Schools is not about freedom and choice. It is about improving educational standards. And of course, measuring the effectiveness of schools is a highly contested area. Is an 'effective' school one which produces a specific number of GCSE passes at a particular grade? Or is it one which supports young people to develop more holistically, as citizens? To apply to be a Free School means engaging in some of the debates. This is something that youth workers might reasonably choose to avoid.

Second, the issue of curriculum must be considered in some depth. The attempt to develop a curriculum for youth work has not been straightforward, so it might be assumed that developing a curriculum for a youth work led school would be even more challenging. The Government wants a 'broad and balanced curriculum' but does not demand the implementation of the National Curriculum. This leaves some flexibility, although it might reasonably be assumed that the curriculum would still need to include English, Maths, Science and Modern Languages. In order to adhere to the principles of youth work, though, youth workers would have to careful not to conflate 'learning' with 'lessons'. The 'curriculum' would have to include recognition of informal learning that took place outside of formal lessons.

Third, attention would need to be paid to teaching and learning methods. The guidance on Free Schools is clear that staff at Free Schools do not have to have Qualified Teacher Status. If there is another way to organise staffing, then the school is free to choose. This means that a school could be run by a whole team of youth workers, or possibly by a combination of youth workers and qualified teachers. The decision on this might depend on the philosophy behind teaching and learning. Would some lessons be student-led, for example? If youth workers were teaching the formal curriculum, is there an expectation about how they would facilitate learning? If qualified teachers were employed, would they be expected to adhere to the values of youth work? The answers to these questions might vary, but one thing is clear. A youth worker led Free School would have to put relationships at the heart of learning.

Fourth, the thorny issue of assessment would need to be addressed. The Government has been clear that it wants Free Schools to raise 'standards', and by this, they mean exam results. At the end of the day, a youth worker run Free School would have to get embroiled with these debates. Now, in principle this may not be a problem. Many youth work organisations offer accreditations and qualifications as part of their work and so have developed extensive experience about assessment.

In practice, however, this could be more challenging as the young people who would be attracted to a youth worker led Free School would be likely to be those who struggle, for a variety of reasons, with formal assessments.

Finally, and probably most importantly, empowerment as a principle and as a practice must be firmly integrated within all of the structures and processes of a youth worker led Free School (Hope, 2011). This has implications for governance, leadership and decision-making at an organisational level, but also for issues of choice and control at a personal level. This is the key issue that will ensure that this youth worker led school is consistent with the values and ethics of youth work.

Conclusions

The Coalition Government wants to change the education system in this country. Gove wants 'radical, whole-scale reform' (Gove, 20 June 2011). Cameron hopes for a 'people power revolution' (Cameron, 8 July 2010). For them, the Academies Act 2010 signalled the start of the process, and it links with the desire for localism, for decentralisation, and for rolling back the state.

At the same time, dramatic cuts in public spending threaten youth services. Many youth workers face an uncertain future. And the removal of the Education Maintenance Allowance, the change in the way that Universities are funded and the raising of the school leaving age to 18 all affect – for better or worse – the educational futures of young people in this country.

In this political landscape, to suggest that youth workers even consider applying to set up a Free School might seem ludicrous. The policy is controversial, untested, and liable to change in line with political whims. And yet – for me at any rate – there is something about the idea that is intriguing. Could this be a new way, an innovative way, of working alongside young people to meet their needs?

In reality, the most likely way in which youth workers might set up a Free School would be to focus on developing an alternative provision Free School for young people alienated and/or excluded from mainstream schools. This is, after all, the type of work in which youth workers have developed considerable experience and demonstrated expertise. Another possibility is to run a Free School for young people aged 16-19. This could be an exciting addition to the educational choices for young people once it becomes compulsory for them to be in education until the age of 18.

What is certain is that the Coalition Government are working hard to change the relationship between 'the state' and 'the people'. This has huge implications for everyone working in public service, including youth and community workers. The question that has been explored in this

article is whether youth workers want to engage with the Government head-on – such as through applying to open a Free School – or whether they want to stay outside the formal education system. It will be exciting to see what happens.

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