

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

Youth Policy: Future Prospects?

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OVER THE LAST thirty years scholars have drawn attention to how young people's lives have become more complicated, fragmented and difficult to navigate (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). While youth transitions are now recognised as non-linear and more complex, policy has predominantly focused upon transitions that are deemed problematic as a result of their association with 'poor' welfare outcomes (teenage pregnancy, NEET, homelessness). However, since the 2007-2008 financial crash and subsequent austerity measures, debates surrounding youth transitions have gained renewed prominence resulting in some commentators talking of a 'lost generation'. Research exploring indicators of economic inequality in the UK since the financial crash show how young people have been hit particularly hard. Between 2007-2013 the most striking change is the deteriorating economic position of young people (Hills et al, 2015). It is well established that social inequalities shape young people's choices and opportunities. Poignantly, the choices and opportunities available to young people are predominantly interpreted as a lack of aspiration rather than the wider structural determinants that provide a backdrop to their lives.

Economic and social policies entrench disadvantage. While concerns surrounding young people's labour market transitions have tended to focus upon youth unemployment, growing concerns have also been voiced with regards to the impact of underemployment. Commentators such as Shildrick and colleagues draw upon longitudinal biographical data to illustrate how young working class youth transitions often involve long-term churning between precarious, low quality jobs and unemployment (Shildrick et al, 2012).

Within the current climate of austerity and the decimation of youth services, young people are left with limited opportunities and little support to forge and navigate increasingly complex, and for some, increasingly marginal transitions to adulthood. What provision does exist often perpetuates the discourse that the lack of opportunity is one of individual responsibility and deals with them punitively as opposed to supportively. Within this context, social policy can also be criticized for focusing upon young people in deficit terms – concentrating on them as a problematic group with particular issues that need to be targeted and addressed through professional intervention. It is rare that the voices of young people come to the forefront of political and media commentary. When combined with a toxic public discourse that vilifies the most marginalised young people in society there is little indication of a more supportive and compassionate approach towards the most vulnerable.

This special issue seeks to stimulate a more comprehensive debate surrounding youth policy with a particular emphasis upon ‘working with young people’ via a youth work approach. (See Wylie, Mason, Jeffs, and Davies). However, by encompassing a closer examination of the key policy areas of housing, health and crime we are able to take the initial steps towards forging a broader ‘vision’ for youth policy.

The articles highlight the need to reflect upon the multiplicity of issues that impact upon young people’s lives and how these issues often interlink and overlap with one another. It is clear from the discussions in this issue of the journal that the complexities of young people’s lives require a holistic and integrative approach in response (Coles, 2000). The examples of housing, health, and crime illustrate how the policies and practices of major welfare institutions continue to influence and shape young people’s transitions. Social inequalities are built into these welfare and control systems – and an investigation into how these institutions serve to reproduce inequalities needs further analysis and discussion.

Rugg and Quilgars article focuses upon young people’s housing biographies. They illustrate how housing trajectories have become more complex and difficult to navigate, and like wider youth transitions, are best represented as non-linear, extended and precarious. The failure of housing policy to meet the needs of young people is evidenced via an overview of recent policy interventions before highlighting how short term interventions do little more than perpetuate exclusion from mainstream tenures in the medium and longer term. They draw attention to an increase in the number of young people who are likely to follow chaotic housing pathways and conclude that a fundamental re-examination of how the tenure system works for young people is required if young peoples housing needs are to be met in the future.

Coleman and Hagell’s analysis of young people and health provides a detailed overview of statistical data that paints a rather complex picture of ‘success’ (via reductions in teenage pregnancy, drinking and smoking), but also, of contemporary concerns surrounding young people’s mental health and the impact that austerity measures have had upon CAMHS in particular. They highlight examples of services and interventions that demonstrate ‘good practice’ whilst also drawing attention to areas that are likely to gain traction in the forthcoming policy arena (for instance, research on the adolescent brain, sleep and nutrition).

With regard to youth crime, Pitts undertakes a searching, evidence-based analysis of the issues that are currently pertinent and asks about the significance of these for the next five years for the new government. Pitts draws attention to how policing will have to change as a consequence of budget cuts and the subsequent wider re-structuring of public services. Here, Pitts believes we will increasingly witness policing functions offloaded to welfare agencies. He argues this can either be interpreted as the ‘criminalisation of social policy’ (Rodger, 2008) or the de-criminalisation of the consequences of social deprivation. Issues of youth crime are also the focus of Belton’s critical

assessment of the impact of the planned ‘secure (or ‘fortified) college’ for 320 young offenders in the *Thinking Space* section of the journal.

Youth & Policy, since its inception, has been concerned with the impact of policy upon youth work that offers a holistic approach to educational and welfare work with young people, unique in its focus upon the voluntary participation of the young. Wylie’s discussion of youth work provides a compelling account of its value, but also its displacement since the financial crash. Wylie argues that cuts in public spending have had a devastating effect on youth work resulting in making the case for investment rarely being more important or more difficult.

Mason offers an overview of policy initiatives since the 1990s, focusing upon how these have affected open access youth work. He draws upon the results of three years of ethnographic research to illustrate the practical impact of contemporary policy. In particular, his evidence highlights the tension in youth work practice created by the expectations of policy-makers and the reality of youth work in the current funding climate.

Understanding the devastating effect of years of attrition in the youth work sector, Jeffs suggests that an entirely new and comprehensive approach is needed if youth work is to survive at all. Grounding his discussion in the historical value of the work, he argues that the work needs to be refocused on the question of education for democracy, and can only succeed in the future if it is reconstructed as a secular practice of value by those who are committed to its worth in these terms. This suggests working outside the control of statutory and commercial funding regimes.

The Articles section ends with a new Manifesto for Youth Work. The first Manifesto, published in this journal, and as an independent booklet in 2005, set out what in that context appeared to be the necessary and fundamental conditions for the continuing survival of youth work as a distinctive set of practices in work with the young. In this issue, Davies reviews and rewrites the Manifesto for the contemporary situation. This new Manifesto will also be launched as an independent publication in Birmingham in April 2015 in an event supported by *Youth & Policy*, In Defence of Youth Work, and the Coalition for Independent Action.

While these articles very much stand alone, all authors provide careful reflections on the social policy needs of young people, what they consider to be the key issues for young people today and what this means for the future direction of policy. It is hoped that not only will the articles provide stimulating food for thought as we approach a key transitional phase; the juncture between the Coalition Government and the likely change in governance to take place from 2015, but also that they will inform ongoing debate and political activity which works for the benefit of young people in our society.

References

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