

youth & policy  
no. 103  
Summer 2009

# Youth & Policy

Number 103 Summer 2009



**The National Youth Agency**  
Getting it right for young people



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**Published by:**

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**Proofread by:**

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**The National Youth Agency**

supports those involved in young people's personal and social development and works to enable all young people to fulfil their potential as individuals and citizens within a socially just society.

We achieve this by:

- informing, advising and helping those who work with young people in a variety of settings;
- influencing and shaping youth policy and improving youth services nationally and locally; and
- promoting young people's participation, influence and place in society.

ISSN 0262 9798

*Material from the journal may be extracted for study and quotation with acknowledgement of the journal and author(s).*

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**Subscriptions:** 0116 242 7427

**Advertising:** 0116 242 7480

**Information for contributors:** Inside Back Cover.

# Contents

Youth & Policy  
no. 103  
Summer 2009



|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Squaring the Circle?</b>   |            |
| <b>The State of Youth Work in Some Children and Young People's Services</b>   | <b>5</b>   |
| <i>Bernard Davies and Bryan Merton</i>  |            |
| <b>The 'Teen Brain' Research: An Introduction and Implications for Practitioners</b>  | <b>25</b>  |
| <i>Howard Sercombe and Tomas Paus</i>   |            |
| <b>Thinking the Unthinkable: Youth Work without Voluntary Participation?</b>  | <b>39</b>  |
| <i>Jon Ord</i>  |            |
| <b>Measuring Outcomes in Youth Work in Northern Ireland</b>   | <b>49</b>  |
| <i>Tony Morgan</i>  |            |
| <b>Educating Youth Workers as Public Advocates</b>  | <b>65</b>  |
| <i>Judith Bessant</i>   |            |
| <b>Rethinking the 'Problem of Youth': Refocusing on the Social and its Interrelationship with Dominant Power Structures</b> | <b>81</b>  |
| <i>Charlie Cooper</i>   |            |
| <b>Inter-racial Conflict and Identity Formation</b>   | <b>81</b>  |
| <i>Joan Bailey</i>  |            |
| <b>Reviews</b>  | <b>108</b> |



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# Squaring the Circle? The State of Youth Work in Some Children and Young People's Services

*Bernard Davies and Bryan Merton*

*This article presents the main findings of a 'Modest Inquiry' into the state of youth work in the new Children and Young People's Departments. Between October 2008 and January 2009 staff of Leicester De Montfort University visited twelve local authorities interviewing youth work managers, youth workers and young people. In groups they were asked to reflect on what for them made youth work a distinctive practice and how this practice was faring in the current policy environment and as organisational structures changed. Many were most preoccupied with the impact of target-setting and the targeting of particular sections of the youth population. Though in most authorities 'integration' was still at an early stage, useful insights also emerged into how this and partnership-working are affecting youth work and youth workers' professional identity.*

**Key words:** *youth work; integrated youth support, targets, targeting*

## Where is the youth work?

Despite the government's evident enthusiasm for 'positive activities', especially when 'structured' (Hughes, 2009), in recent years youth work has not exactly been celebrated by ministers. The last major state papers to give it top billing were *Transforming Youth Work (TYW)* (DfES, 2001) and *Resourcing Excellent Youth Services (REYS)* (DfES, 2002). Since then it has attracted little more than passing ministerial nods. The Green Paper *Every Child Matters (ECM)* (HM Treasury, 2003) – the catalyst for so much that was to follow – did identify youth and community workers as potential members of the new multi-agency teams it was recommending (p.62). It also saw youth services, with others, as providing 'personal development opportunities' for young people. (p.63). However, given that the policy's main purpose was to deal with the fall-out of a major child protection tragedy, a focus on these wider goals and therefore on youth work was always likely to remain secondary.

More was certainly expected of the subsequent initiatives designed to provide a specifically 'youth' focus for ECM developments: the consultative paper *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2005) and the government's response *Youth Matters: Next Steps* (DfES, 2006). Though tagged 'Something to do, somewhere to go and (eventually) someone to talk to' – all focuses which youth workers could claim as central to their practice – youth work made only passing appearances in both publications (see Davies, 2005a).

*Aiming high for young people* (HM Treasury/DCSF, 2007), significantly sub-titled *A Ten-year Strategy for Positive Activities*, talked of youth work having 'a crucial role', particularly 'in



supporting and challenging young people to try different things'. It saw youth clubs ...as 'contexts' for young people's participation in positive activities. And it laid the funding ground for a network of high quality 'youth hubs'.

However, the policy came in the wake of simplistic ministerial interpretations of complex research findings (Feinstein et al, 2004; Margo et al, 2006) which led to one Children's Minister (Margaret Hodge) generating the headline, 'Youth clubs can be bad for you' (Hodge, 2005; Ward, 2005); and to another (Beverley Hughes) asserting that youth work must be 'primarily about activities rather than informal education', with 'self-development', though welcome, not seen as an essential goal (Barrett, 2005).

Since *Aiming High* ministers have stayed largely silent on youth work. Neither in her April 2008 letter to Directors of Children's Services on implementing the ten-year strategy nor in a speech to the Local Government Association did Beverley Hughes (2009) make a single reference to youth work. Meanwhile, what echoed through the silence was her demand that local authority services ensure 'year-round highly personalised provision for the most disengaged young people'; '[their] sustained participation in activities'; their involvement 'in decisions which affect them'; their engagement with 'strong, supportive adults'. Which practitioners were best placed to fulfil these challenging aspirations, what skill-sets they might need to draw on to implement them on the ground – on such matters the minister had nothing to offer.

## Youth policy in context

Youth work has not ended up in this position simply as a consequence of ministerial absence of mind. Margaret Hodge for example, when chastising youth workers for being trapped in their 'silo' (Donovan, 2004), clearly saw them as only half-heartedly committed to New Labour's 'seamless' 'joined up' vision for all public services. Beverley Hughes' comment, quoted above, clearly saw youth workers as too concerned with informal education and not enough with activities. Even Ofsted has called on the DCSF to 'communicate better the role of youth work in young people's education' (Ofsted, 2009: 5).

This lack of a top-down endorsement for youth work stems particularly from a perceived poor fit between these high priority outcomes and how youth workers themselves define their core 'mission' and role. New Labour youth policies – particularly *Every Child Matters* and *Aiming High* but also *Connexions* when it was introduced in the late 1990s – were most intensively focused on 'at risk' or 'risky' young people. While most urgently being concerned to guarantee better protection to abused children, they also set out to enable young people – again especially the most 'disadvantaged' – to make effective and successful 'transitions' into the labour market, parenthood and healthy and law-abiding citizenship.

Despite the often unacknowledged ambiguities and complexities of the teenage behaviour being addressed, these were all objectives to which youth practitioners needed to give sustained attention. And these practitioners certainly include youth workers, who – as the *Connexions* planning documents conceded – are often able to reach those labelled 'hard-to-reach'. For youth workers, however, government policies have far too readily adopted a

deficit model of the young. In a policy environment in which education had been defined in 2005 by Tony Blair as 'the centre for economic policy-making for the future' (quoted in Mansell, 2009), practices based on a potentiality view of the young were likely to win less enthusiastic ministerial endorsement.

## **Beyond anecdote: a *Modest Inquiry* into the state of youth work**

It was against this policy background that reports began to emerge that, on the ground, youth work was having a hard time. A little of this evidence came from research (for example Tiffany, 2007; Spence, 2006; de St Croix, 2009). Within an assessment which was positive overall, echoes of it could be found in Ofsted reports (for example Ofsted, 2009: 4). However, much of it emerged as 'tales from the grass roots' – of struggles to defend youth work locally against the impact of government directives and the increasing micro-management of both managerial and face-to-face practice. These concerns were captured by the circulation of an open letter *In Defence of Youth Work* early in 2009 (see <http://indefenceofyouthwork.wordpress.com/>) which by mid-year had attracted over 160 signatures and, to the first five of seven regional meetings, some 220 workers and managers from both the statutory and voluntary sectors. The website itself had received 6000 hits.

The *Modest Inquiry*, carried out in the autumn of 2008 and early 2009 by staff of the Youth and Community Work Department of Leicester De Montfort University, was an attempt to get beyond anecdote to a somewhat more systematic understanding of what was happening to youth work practice in this shifting policy and organisational context. More specifically, the *Inquiry* sought to clarify how youth work was currently being conceptualised by youth work managers, field practitioners and young people; how current policies were supporting or impeding its implementation and management; and how these developments were affecting youth workers' professional identity.

The *Inquiry* set out to sample the experiences and views of staff and young people in 12 youth services judged by Ofsted in recent reviews as providing 'good' or 'very good' youth work – that is, services which could be said to be starting from strengths in responding to the current policy priorities. A full day was spent in each authority meeting senior managers, front-line staff and young people, to gain as balanced a picture as possible, including contradictions and tensions as well as emerging common themes. The findings were reported in May 2009 (Davies and Merton, 2009).

The *Inquiry* was never conceived as a 'pure' research project, not least because of limited time and resources. No claims could be made for example that the chosen youth services were nationally 'representative'. Meanwhile, with most of the evidence being gathered through, at best, 90 minute group discussions, only limited analysis was possible of the data gathered both within and between authorities. However, conceiving of the exercise as an *Inquiry* had advantages. As we met field colleagues and young people, it reminded us to keep our youth work 'hats' firmly in place particularly by striving to start from *their* starting points. In seeking to extract some wider messages from these personalised and localised

responses, we sought to listen to and remain respectful of respondents' experiences and understanding of their complex, contradictory and fast changing working situations and their feelings about these.

Initially we had assumed the *Inquiry's* primary focus would be where and how youth work was finding its place within integrated youth support services. Evidence about this did emerge, particularly on partnership-working. However, because 'integration' in most authorities was still at an early stage, it attracted less attention, particularly from workers, than the impact on practice and management of REYS and especially the targets it set for youth work.

## Adjusting our language

As we analysed the *Inquiry* responses it became clear that some key terms, used repeatedly by respondents in taken-for-granted and interchangeable ways, would gain from more explicit definition. One such set of terms was 'targets', 'targeted provision' and 'targeted youth support':

- In the context of current policies, *targets* are specific required or expected objectives for practice with measurable outcomes, often to be expressed numerically. For youth work such targets have been most clearly embodied in the REYS recorded and accredited outcomes for young people.
- *Targeted provision* comprises specific programmes and/or facilities which young people – particularly those identified as 'at risk' and/or with 'special needs' – may be required to attend and which are meant to offer them dedicated and often intensive support.
- *Targeted youth support* – recently introduced into the 'youth offer' – brings together dedicated resources for providing co-ordinated and closely monitored programmes designed to ensure young people at risk get that extra and intensive support.

A second set of terms which, we concluded, needed greater clarity – especially for making the most positive case for forms of youth work which were not targeted – were 'universal', 'generic' and 'open-access':

- *Universal provision* we see as available to all potential users as a citizen's right, without financial or other qualifying tests. However, youth work has never had the statutory underpinning to ensure such non-selective availability. From its 19th century origins, much of it has very deliberately been 'targeted' – in the past on 'the poor' and 'the lower orders', today on 'the disadvantaged' and 'the socially excluded'. Moreover, as the long-running debates on secondary school selection illustrate, even if universally available it is not necessarily 'open access' or 'open door' – the features which those using the term often seemed most anxious to highlight.
- *Generic provision* embraces a range of inter-related, even integrated, facilities and opportunities which in a youth work context might include sport, art, drama, IT and

unstructured social interaction. However, as entry may be restricted or filtered – for example by requiring a qualifying level of skill – such provision does not guarantee the inclusive 'openness' which youth workers and their managers seemed to be advocating when using the term.

- *Open access* is the term we therefore use as most accurately and positively capturing what respondents seemed to be advocating when arguing for young people's engagement which was not dependent on their having a prior label attached (other than, of course, 'young person'); did not lay down eligibility criteria; and was not only voluntary but allowed considerable freedom of choice within the relevant facilities.

## Youth work as a distinctive practice – in principle and in practice

Having agreed a baseline definition of its own (based on Davies, 2005b), the *Inquiry's* initial open-ended question asked staff and young people to identify what for them made youth work a distinctive practice. This generated a high degree of consensus, including between workers and managers. On the other hand, when asked to reflect on how this practice was faring within the current policy frameworks, respondents were often much more ambivalent (at best), revealing divisions between and amongst managers and workers.

### **Process**

Implicit if not always explicit in many of the discussions were notions of youth work as a form of experiential learning. This was seen as developing in informal ways from what young people were doing, thinking and feeling in their current activities and their inter-personal exchanges, including with workers. For one part-time worker, such starting points might well include 'the fact that [they] will bring some frustrations to the youth centre'.

In ways and to an extent that was rarely *required* of other practices, attention to *process* – to the medium of the work as well as its content – was thus widely seen as central to youth work. This process was described by one worker as 'unforced' and by another as '[having] no end point'. However, the development and negotiation of the process was not straightforward. Boundaries had to be set, and workers needed constantly to be alert to possibilities for challenging young people – not just on their immediate behaviour but on their view of themselves and on how they might realise their potential. Exploiting this process for developmental ends therefore required patience and time.

It also assumed that workers would be personally open: 'at the end of the day ... you're offering young people yourself'. For one worker this included, 'mak[ing] fun of ourselves...It breaks down the them-and-us', while for one young person it was marked by the fact that 'we have their (mobile) numbers – we can contact them at any time'. Such openness also required a high degree of 'unshockability' and a frankness of language which meant, for example, that in sexual health sessions a worker would 'talk about tits and willies'.

For many, such approaches were being increasingly constrained as current policy frameworks, in combination with budget cuts, tipped the balance of youth work away

from open access facilities. One Principal Youth Officer talked of 'the reduction in "bread and butter" open sessions in order to increase more specialised [targeted] work', while according to a worker-in-training 'balancing targeted and universal – we can't square the circle'. The tendency of 'the statutory service [to] become more targeted, less open access' was noted too, by a voluntary sector manager.

### ***Young people's voluntary engagement***

Beyond these more general concepts, workers and managers, usually unprompted, repeatedly articulated a more specific core characteristic of the work. Most consistently they pointed to the centrality of young people's voluntary engagement, with their rationale for this, far from being merely theoretical, stressing that it was 'paramount to change in young people'.

However, as more young people were referred by schools ('It's not a real choice – the alternative is PE!'), by the police, by Connexions and other agencies, youth workers found themselves working increasingly with young people who were required to attend. The result for one youth worker was to undermine '[the] ability to use a key youth work skill – negotiation'.

The question then arose: how to meet this challenge? One response was to put some distance between the practice and the most controlling aspects of compulsory attendance – for example by leaving the referring agency to deal with non-attendance. Another, more fudged tactic in school-based projects was to take pupils off-site. Workers were also increasingly embedding in their practice an extra relationship-building stage in the process aimed at motivating those who 'start with various degrees of reluctance' – that is, in Jon Ord's terms (2009), at moving them from attendance to participation. One school-based project was thus able to point to youth worker-run sessions attended by regular truants who bunked off immediately it ended.

### ***Starting, and going beyond, where young people are starting***

Most respondents, especially in open access settings, took it for granted that their 'vehicles' would be young people's recreational interests. However their strong commitment to being 'young people-led' emerged in other ways. These assumed a responsiveness not only to what young people verbalised but also – indeed perhaps most often – through 'listening, believing, understanding'; '[using] the softly-softly approach... picking up clues and signals;; 'pick[ing] up the mood... when a comment is personal'. As one young person put it: '...they understand where we're coming from'.

Respondents recognised that such an approach was rare – 'adults don't often do that' – because other practitioners had other pressing priorities: getting through a syllabus; ensuring a CV was prepared; or completing an intensive behaviour modification programme. Though important in its own right for developing trusting relationships with young people, connecting with their starting points was also seen as crucial to pro-actively encouraging and supporting young people to go beyond these. Indeed, for one worker at least '[Though] the process is important the product needs to give a sense of achievement – to have real quality'.

'Tak(ing) them a little bit further', as one worker put it, could take quite subtle, personalised and challenging forms, such as '...work(ing) across their own divisions' and '... tackling racism'. It was often explicitly welcomed by young people:

- *They build up your confidence.*
- *[I] expect youth workers to challenge me...*

It also enabled some services to claim the 'positive activities' being promoted by government, as a youth work tool.

Here too, however, as pressures built for work to be focused on re-engaging disenchanted school students or 'NEET' young people or reducing anti-social behaviour, expected outcomes were seen, particularly by field staff, as being increasingly set in advance (often rigidly) by the policy-makers. The choice for one worker was thus 'young people-led versus target-led' while for others 'it's top to bottom not the other way round' and 'it's not about tailor-making responses to need'. In addition, because more and more resources were for targeted work, workers and also some managers talked of practice being increasingly funding- rather than needs-led, resulting in 'diversion from the role'.

### ***Developing trust and personal relationships***

Though relationships were emphasised repeatedly by respondents as the basis for young people allowing youth workers into their lives, what went into developing and sustaining these was given some important glosses. For one thing, they were not seen as developing by accident: as one worker put it, 'You have to win their trust'. Another essential was to '[make] it ... fun first, [to] get the relationships going'. Workers also needed to 'be non-judgemental' and 'never stigmatising'; 'set and maintain boundaries' and create spaces that were safe. Some young people made it clear that this too was what they valued:

- *They (youth workers) are more fun ....*
- *They treat you like adults.*
- *They are like friends – with authority.*
- *She's funny but she can be strict and serious too...*

Once again, however, sustaining this way of working was not always easy. Because of the short-term nature of much of the funding – 'one-off 12-month projects – they're more about PR' (see also Audit Commission, 2009), workers were sometimes required, all within six months, to move from a first encounter with very alienated young people, via building mutual trust and respect, to demonstrating 'hard' measurable outcomes.

As workers were drawn into the procedures of the new integrated services such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), a further pressure on relationship-building was the expectation that a young person would be required to relate, even report, to 'their' youth worker. This sometimes brought with it a requirement to relate also to their parents in ways which young people might not welcome. As one young person commented: 'Youth workers are more confidential. They keep it to themselves, not share it with our families'.

Perhaps the greatest perceived threat to the youth work relationship was the requirement

that workers share young people's personal information with other professionals. Expectations here were hardening as, in the name of more effective child protection, the government rolled out its ContactPoint project (see DCSF, 2009). This was happening despite strong criticisms by an independent study of its potential threat to young people's privacy and confidentiality (Anderson et al, 2009) and the Conservative party's indication that it would scrap it if they came to power.

Here youth workers face a sharp dilemma. Clearly, no less than other professionals, they have a responsibility to do all they can to keep young people safe. Moreover, precisely because of their informal roles with young people, information often comes their way which is unavailable to other professionals. However this very informality means that young people have often (perhaps usually) entrusted them with the information, not on the basis of an explicit 'contract', but because through experience they have come to trust that a given worker will, as the young person quoted earlier put it, 'keep it to themselves'.

Some workers were able to resist pressures to pass on information by arguing that the young person had not agreed to this. However, one worker had concluded that out-and-out resistance was the only option: 'I am actively encouraging young people to go against the system. I say here's a form; please don't sign it'.

### ***Participation***

Practitioners and managers repeatedly and spontaneously identified 'enabling the voice of young people – for them to be equal stakeholders' as a core element of their practice. Often this was illustrated by reference to specific 'participation' projects such as a young people's Question Time session with local councillors. Elsewhere however this commitment clearly flowed more organically from the fact that 'at the heart of our service is involvement so that young people can make decisions about their lives' and a commitment to create 'horizontal relationships – young people to youth worker – a negotiated relationship'. For one young person 'it was not just a one-way street. [The worker] had power but there was never a power imbalance'.

For this element of their practice, many respondents saw current initiatives such as the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds and the Youth Parliament as well as local youth councils as giving a renewed validation for what they were attempting to achieve. Indeed some felt that they were now being seen by other professionals as the experts as other services came under increasing pressure to consult and engage with young people in developing and delivering their services. Even here, however, reservations were expressed about some councillors' and other professionals' limited view of participation – as, for example, merely 'consultation'.

### ***Working with and through young people's peer groups***

Though for one worker this was 'the kernel' of the practice, few explicit and spontaneous references were made during the *Inquiry* to informal 'on-the-wing' work with groups. The clearest endorsements for this came more implicitly and negatively, in critical reactions to recent moves towards what was often called 'casework' – more structured approaches to the one-to-one support which, as an extension of relationships developed in informal group situations, has long been a feature of youth work. One-to-one approaches were also seen

as more common as provision was re-balanced from open access to targeted work and as workers participated in common assessment and information-sharing arrangements.

***Working with young people's transitions – and with their 'here-and-now'.***

In the context of the current youth policy focus on ensuring young people's 'effective transitions' (see for example Margo and Dixon, 2006; Ofsted, 2009, para 10), the *Inquiry* sought to clarify whether and how this was affecting youth workers' attention to young people's 'here-and-now' – their "'being" as well as "becoming"... the quality of [their] present as well as preparing for the future' (see Williamson, 2008: 68).

Convincing evidence of youth work's contribution to transitions was not hard to find. It might mean something quite short-term – providing a safe place where excluded young people could do their college work. Or, as some workers made clear, it might represent something much more long-term: '...encourage[ing] young people to...raise their aspirations,...achieve things they might otherwise not have achieved', such as a 19 year old young woman with two children doing an NVQ.

Though it needed to be sought more directly, evidence also emerged of youth work's focus on the here-and-now of young people's lives. This featured most obviously in efforts to make the youth work experience pleasurable and relaxing even while it was designed also to be developmental – something which young people frequently noted approvingly in their comments on 'the food, relationships, youth workers, trips' and 'having a laugh'.

Attention to the here-and-now could also have more far-reaching connotations. Vivid examples, indeed quite detailed case studies, were offered of workers 'hanging in there' through a long process of testing out by a young person before finding the moment to respond to deep-seated emotional needs or a basic physical need such as hunger. Here too young people provided moving supportive evidence. For one it was simply about 'being valued – attending the youth club was a break, time for myself without worries'; while for another it meant '[being] able to share stuff with the workers about myself where I felt I was important, that I mattered to someone. They helped me get in touch with my feelings'.

In seeking to be supportive to such 'in-the-present' priorities, some workers felt constrained by what they experienced as policy pressures to be 'doing to' young people. Nonetheless, where they explicitly considered it, they often found it difficult to separate working with young people within their here-and-now from helping them to move towards future possibilities. As one worker put it, 'The present holds the future in it too in every interaction', while another was clear that 'if you only focused on the destination it wouldn't start – it has to get them out of bed'.

Though here as elsewhere the picture of what was happening to youth work was far from one-dimensional, many of the respondents to the *Inquiry* clearly felt that current national policies were putting their ability to practice in line with their self-defined model of youth work under significant strain. Though again not true for everybody, two specific elements of those policies were often identified as particularly threatening. One was the requirement to meet the REYS national targets, particularly for young people's accredited and recorded outcomes. The other was the moves to integrate youth work practice into overall local authority provision for children and young people.



## Hitting the targets

Many managers as well as some youth workers, the *Inquiry* suggests, now regard targets and the head-counting which goes with them as normal and positive. Thus for one head of service they were 'saviours ... given our past history of failure. We need to evidence, not just deliver' while, echoing others, one worker was clear that '...they give us a focus – before we did whatever we did'.

Others, though less enthusiastic, seemed determined to make virtue out of necessity – or perhaps to play down the impact of targets, focussing for example on 'the only target of concern... the number of young people worked with across the year'. Or, where a worker did have reservations, it was because of how targets were being used as '...a stick to hit you with if you don't quite do it.' Often however the criticism went deeper, and could be fierce. Many (especially workers) were fearful that the pursuit of targets was coming to dominate their work, so that only what could be measured was being valued. For them, 'capturing very soft outcomes is a challenge'.

Targets were also seen to be reducing flexibility. For one worker this meant 'not being proactive any more... the work is becoming too prescriptive... If you go out and get a group to work well, then they move you on'. One principal officer, in effect confirming this view, reported that, with every centre in the service now expected to deliver sessions on sex and drugs, young people were beginning to comment on workers' preoccupation with targets. Another senior manager was concerned that, in developing the service's new quality assurance document, he was being asked: 'What will universal provision be targeting?' The results for many were responses to young people that were no longer 'tailor-made', shallower relationships and fewer opportunities for deepening trust with young people – for youth workers the springboards for drawing them into new and challenging experiences.

Detached workers often emerged as particularly dissatisfied. For them their work was concerned principally with 'organically developing relationships' with young people. Increasingly however numbers seemed to be all as they were expected – perhaps with a personal target – to make contact with a minimum number of (sometimes named) young people. The result, one detached worker reported, was that 'when we're talking with just four young people we have to run off. Once it was about building relationships – why move on?'

Part-time workers, too, could seem seriously demotivated by the target culture, claiming that at their level its dilemmas were felt most acutely. They talked of pressure to get the numbers through and of crude counting and measuring by managers interested only in outcomes often unconnected with their practice – or young people's everyday realities. Many also felt inadequately resourced to meet these demands especially given that – as their full-time colleagues in a number of services told us – most were working limited hours for less than they could earn standing at a supermarket checkout. Strikingly, such concerns were echoed, often unprompted, by the small number of managers from voluntary organisations who contributed to the *Inquiry*. 'The Authority', one commented, 'seem more concerned with statistics than quality', while another gave a very grounded insight into how such priorities were reshaping what he was doing: 'Filling in the [monitoring] form bites

into the time to talk to young people and the workers about their concerns... Clubs are suspicious about somebody jotting down numbers. They see it as a reporting process'.

Amongst workers particularly, criticism of targets often emerged most clearly because:

- *Everything needs to be accredited.*
- *Recorded outcomes have just been blanketed across the board.*
- *The emphasis is put on numbers (500 accreditations) – nobody seems to care about the quality of youth work behind it.*

Concerns were expressed that 'a lot of young people are just not interested [in accreditation] – not least because 'they see it as an extension to school' – and so might end up excluded even though they were a high priority for youth workers. One young person, apparently confirming these fears, commented, 'School is a pressure. Family is a pressure. I don't want my youth worker to do the same with me'. Above all, fears were expressed that the very process and intent of youth work were at least being diverted, if not fundamentally compromised, as 'some switch off from the group'. Thus for one worker, though 'young people are learning stuff that can be accredited... in the past they were learning soft skills like negotiation... [which now] are being devalued'.

Nonetheless, the expectation that youth workers would point young people towards recorded and accredited outcomes attracted considerable support, to the point where some staff were treating it as a given part of their work. Two significant caveats were, firstly that the whole commitment needed to be underpinned by appropriate staff training; and secondly that at least as much prominence would be given to recorded as to accredited outcomes, not least because these meshed more comfortably with the youth work process overall. Both workers and managers gave a number of reasons for their support. For some it had 'given direction', in the process providing important 'political' gains – something illustrated by one cabinet lead who reportedly saw youth work as having been 'beefed up' by accreditation, resulting in less work 'at the sloppy end of empowerment'. More positively, for some respondents the process of encouraging young people to analyse and record their experience had enhanced their learning by getting them '... to think about their achievements'. Most frequently, however, accreditation was justified on the very practical grounds that some young people, especially those gaining few formal qualifications, welcomed it – something which young people themselves confirmed more than once:

- *Accreditation ... It's an opportunity to grab with both hands.*
- *They are helping us get qualifications.*
- *It looks good on your CV.*

For many workers as well as their managers, embracing accreditation had clearly entailed a struggle – both in their minds and in the practice itself – particularly to ensure that it flowed 'organically' out of on-going work. For this to happen, as a minimum, a firm management steer was seen as essential; an award scheme appropriate to local circumstances needed to be selected, even tailor-made; accreditation needed to be a genuine (and 'fun') choice for young people; and it needed to start where young people were starting. Nonetheless, a sharp debate amongst one group of full-time workers revealed that 'conversion' to

accreditation could be based on some conflicting propositions. For some, it turned out, 'some young people don't know they're doing it'; 'young people can get outcomes just by being there' because, it was said, '... they've been in school all day and don't want more paper work ... but they like getting the certificates in the end'.

For some of their colleagues committed to accreditation for very positive reasons, such 'education by stealth' raised serious questions. If young people didn't know they were participating, how could they make informed choices? And how in such circumstances could they be achieving conscious learning? They were dismayed too – indeed angered and insulted – by what they saw as some of their colleagues just 'playing the game', merely 'ticking boxes'.

Often it seemed, reactions to what was seen as colleagues' subversion of accreditation arrangements were sharper because staff felt they had been on a challenging personal and professional journey involving a steep learning curve. Thus one worker, after acknowledging the resistance and indeed anger of some of the young people involved, had concluded, '... it's about creating a culture. It's about the ability to change, move, adapt, find in there what you want to do and do the job'. And although one colleague very explicitly continued to distance herself from this view, three other full-time workers agreed that 'we will get better and more skilful at finding accreditation more meaningful to young people'.

In confronting what, it was acknowledged, was seen initially as a threat to well-established principles of 'open' youth work, the bottom line often had to be a self-conscious pragmatism. Accredited and recorded outcomes, it was emphasised, had to be seen simply as 'part of "the offer" [to young people]' – but as inappropriate for example 'when you have 30-40 young people in a centre'. And what was important ultimately, it was said, was '... to be creative around the agendas that come down from above'.

Such reactions from both managers and workers are understandable. For, in what they have defined as a competitive market, politicians and policy-makers have used youth work targets, particularly as expressed as accredited and recorded outcomes, to check how providers are performing and whether tax-payers' money is getting the dividends as they define them. However in doing so, much of our evidence suggests, they have significantly bent the purpose and style of youth work, embedding targets so firmly in management practice that many managers as well as some workers cannot now imagine professional life without them. Many services have thus decided to retain targets for accreditation even though they have been replaced by a different key indicator – an increase in young people's participation in 'positive activities'.

Moreover this is happening just as such target setting and all its attendant detailed data recording is being questioned, and not just across public sector, but by highly influential voices from within the world of corporate business – the original New Labour inspiration for such policies. According to Ruth Lee, for example, formerly head of policy at the Institute of Directors and now advisor to a banking group:

*The public sector has been administered on a very basic, and misleading, interpretation of how the private sector operates. If you are a salesman, you have sales targets, but if*

*you are in, for example, human resources or legal services, you have a job description and you do it, without targets. Education is not just a matter of turning sausages out of a sausage machine and hitting targets – and that's where it's gone wrong (quoted in Mansell, 2009).*

## From partnership-working to integrated services

Though 'target-driven' policies preoccupied most respondents, the requirement to integrate with other services emerged as a less pressing issue, at least for most workers. Given how many young people slip through the net of service provision, such collaborative working can clearly be crucial. Though especially important for keeping a child or young person safe from abuse or neglect, it is needed too where problems are connected by threads of, for example, poverty, poor health and low aspirations. While most workers seemed not yet to have felt the effects of integration, few were unaware of the demand for 'partnership-working'. Indeed, with their work often rooted in communities and in a commitment to work from young people's agendas, youth workers in some places were being seen as key players within partnership scenarios, able to get to the young people other services could not reach. They were thus liable to be treated by other professionals with a combination of admiration and suspicion.

What such ambivalent responses demonstrate is that partnership-working, though now a New Labour mantra, is by no means a panacea. It confronts inward-turning organisational cultures and historic inter-agency rivalries which may be used to justify unhelpful forms of empire-building. As well as negotiation from above, partnership-working demands sustained personal and professional effort from below – what one worker, with feeling, described as 'a great slog and energy consuming'.

Once in operation it also requires managerial and practitioner eyes to be kept firmly, not just on smoother sweeter agency relationships as ends in themselves, but on the intended beneficiary. When this question of 'in whose interest?' is authentically embraced, tension or even confrontation with a 'partner' may arise, indeed be essential – as one case study from the *Inquiry* vividly illustrated:

*A housing association was making a young person homeless [for £200]. I wanted to work with them to devise a payment plan... [But] the housing association ... just wanted to get rid of [the problem]. I rang the [youth] office and said maybe we should pay the £200. I was told this was unprofessional... I was not suggesting anything unprofessional. I question whether our responsibility is to the housing association or to the young person. Management maybe have lost the way on that sort of thing.*

As one senior manager explained, important to avoiding such cul-de-sacs was that 'partners have to be clear and we have to be clear what we are bringing' – something which may involve 'revisiting core principles because ... otherwise we lose the reason for coming together'. This kind of clarity could also head off problems resulting from ill-defined boundaries and allocations of responsibility for leading and carrying out the practice.

For one service such struggles were nothing new since, with its provision including counselling and mentoring, it had long needed to embrace a wider range of professional perspectives and skills. In another, closer alignment rather than full integration was being sought through a 'slow and measured' approach of extending partnerships rather than completely deconstructing and reconstructing services.

However, with one senior manager describing '[the move to] IYSS [as] strategically catching up with what's happening on the ground', at the time of our visits some authorities were already 'seizing the day'. In one for example, though proposals to join up youth workers and Connexions personal advisers had been anticipated with some foreboding five years earlier, enough common ground had been found for a manager to be able to say, 'We can now celebrate what brings us together without compromising the values of social education'. Another service had already been involved in piloting the co-location of youth workers within multi-agency teams. In a third where initially the *Every Child Matters* agenda had been seen as a potential threat to youth work, the head of service reported that 'we can argue for the unique approach of the youth worker'.

Important gains were also being identified on the ground. Sometimes these were negative in the sense that it became easier to reduce demands on youth workers' time because in a multi-agency team, clearer about other professionals' expertise, workers were better able to signpost young people to them. More positively, youth work staff working in a pilot area support team felt able to 'open many doors' for young people as they drew on the greater mix of skills that integration had revealed. Workers in another authority also concluded that '[the] walls are now down', as relationships became more open and boundaries more permeable. This allowed learning opportunities to be recognised and exploited which were often invisible to others in mainstream services because '... we can pick up on things other people can't... We start with [young people's] love of music and they do music at a hate racism event'.

These developments also brought some positive pay-offs for youth workers' professional identity, and self-identity, certainly as perceived by youth work managers. Some saw themselves as starting anyway from a strong base. One emphasised that 'one of our strengths is the professionalism of our staff – we have no one without a JNC [qualification] and all part-time staff have to undertake training'. Another was clear that 'we're in a strong position to survive as our workers can articulate the work and its outcomes'.

From such confident baselines, the moves to closer daily working interactions with other professionals had raised both youth work's profile and its reputation. Thus one senior manager commented that his staff '[had] become less precious – not seeing [our] client group as just our domain. That enhances the professional identity'. In the view of one full-time worker 'we've never sold ourselves but now... there is more concern for us as youth workers' while for others 'the tone's changed. We are listened to, invited in – people want youth work as we define it'; 'our professional identity is on the turn because of CAFs and referrals'. One senior worker was even able to conclude, 'we are the big guns now... Youth workers are the most skilled... Being a big gun isn't just about having resources'.

The organisational restructuring which these development entailed certainly brought

uncertainties and anxieties – some personal, some professional, focused for example on whether youth workers would be managed by senior staff with little understanding of or sympathy for youth work. However, in authorities where significant steps towards integration had been taken, less resentment was reported than had been anticipated, with problems stemming from a lack of knowledge of each others' roles and ways of working being addressed through joint training which might include voluntary sector representatives.

However, as services edged toward greater integration, negatives were embedded in some of these positives. These might be quite basic: one voluntary sector manager for example explained that '[we] don't have the time or resources to attend Common Assessment Framework [CAF] meetings; [we] don't get travel expenses'. Some of the problems went deeper. Greater accountability to other professionals for their interventions was felt by some workers to be weakening their autonomy – for example, potentially constraining them from acting as advocate for a young person at odds with their school. A young person's trust could be put at risk when, as the lead professional, workers were required to co-ordinate statutory interventions. Indeed, though a young person might feel better for having a youth worker alongside them at a CAF meeting, once that worker was seen working closely with other professionals – some with coercive roles – the distinctive confidential relationship that had hitherto existed could be threatened.

The *Inquiry* also generated examples – often involving schools and what one manager described as a 'desk-bound and court-based' Youth Offending Service – which demonstrated how those empire-building impulses, mentioned earlier, might come into play. Thus, in one authority, work with Connexions on projects with NEET young people generated considerable frustration for youth work staff who felt Connexions colleagues were claiming the credit for what had been achieved jointly. Workers and managers were sometimes forthright in their view that increasingly they were 'ticking a lot of boxes for other agencies'. In this, risks of 'mission drift' were identified – for example by a worker for whom 'the homeless work [I do] isn't really youth work – it's floating support. The workers aren't youth workers'. As part of a departmental early intervention programme, workers in another service felt that, by being expected to support families with young children, they were working with an age group for which they had not been trained.

On occasions, tensions – indeed conflicts – arising from the co-location of staff with different professional backgrounds (often a key marker of integration achieved) appeared to go to the heart of each profession's practice. Thus, in one area Connexions PAs and youth workers were operating from a building owned and managed by the local youth service. However, the service's guiding principle – that young people should have a significant say in how the building looked and was run – did not sit easily with the Connexions' staff's view of it as their office. In another area the youth offending service's insistence that a young woman they had referred should not smoke while taking part in youth work activities such as an all-day cycle trip resulted in highly stressful exchanges between her and the youth workers.

Examples of practice dilemmas for youth workers arose most commonly in joint work with the police, with youth workers from different authorities having to resist being drawn into the enforcement process. And when young people, as they were used to doing, talked in

relatively unguarded ways with them, workers could not assume that the police personnel present would not feel bound to see this as 'intelligence' on which they must act. This example, like many others, highlights how within these 'integrated' settings youth workers wishing to stand unequivocally on the side of young people may well increasingly – and invidiously – find themselves between a rock and a hard place: regarded as 'precious' or 'unprofessional' by partner agencies, and, if seen to be working closely with other service providers, as 'one of the suits' by the young people.

The consequence of such dilemmas was at best ambivalence and at worst serious heart-searching over youth work's professional standing. Other than for two senior managers with staff development responsibilities, little attention was given to developments at a national level – for example the Children's Workforce Development Council's push for a generic 'youth professional'. This was true even though, just as the DMU report was being drafted, Secretary of State Ed Balls' list of those other than family and friends who could '[make] a real difference to us when we were young' included a childminder, a teacher, a speech and language therapist and a nurse – but only a *volunteer* youth worker (DCSF, 2008).

Here, it seemed, was confirmation of some workers' and also sometimes of managers' direct local experience of partnership-working, if not yet of integration: that 'youth work is seen by other statutory services as "fun", "playing table tennis" and being a "grandpa", and of them being 'treated as play workers who child-mind'. Even where perceptions of youth work seemed to be more positive, respondents still felt it was being used simply as a sub-set of other practices or as a relatively low cost substitute for other professionals. Such experiences prompted one worker to comment, 'I just feel as though I'm a cheap teacher'; another to fear that '[we would] become a reactive service, always fitting into something else ...never recognised for what it is'.

As evidence that such reactions were not just a display of youth workers' historic tendency to take on a victim status, one full-time worker provided an especially poignant example direct from personal experience:

*I work as a youth worker in the community where I live. I decided I needed to pass on my concerns about the children in one of the families on the estate. When the parents asked who had reported them, without consulting me the social worker gave them my name. Not only do I feel nervous now about being out on the estate. It's now very difficult for me to do my job.*

## **The impact of policy on the management of youth work**

One of the frequently hidden consequences of the rapidly changing policy environment of the past decade, including the push towards integration, has been increasing pressure on youth work managers. With no additional resources they have long been expected to take on a range of new initiatives, many allowing 'no time to digest what's been done'. Moreover, as we found in more than one authority, past budgets cuts made on the basis of protecting front line facilities had often seriously depleted management capacity. Not surprisingly, one of the effects of such demands on managers was that 'there's a lot of

sickness' and that 'a lot of time is spent on dealing with things that have gone wrong'.

The REYS targets – particularly ones for accredited outcomes – have provided managers with a valuable tool for calling youth workers to account. Though many workers see them as helpful, others expressed considerable frustration with them – for example as merely 'paper work' from which they get little feed-back and as consuming time that could be spent on face-to-face practice. Indeed, with the term 'tick-boxing' recurring repeatedly within and across the authorities, the requirement to meet targets emerged as perhaps the most divisive issue within youth work between managers and workers – particularly part-time workers.

To these (and indeed other) already testing and accumulating pressures on managers have now been added what one senior officer called 'the exploding demands of integration'. The timescales and lack of transparency with which these changes are being implemented are often, for managers no less than workers, sources of both professional uncertainty and personal insecurity. As one senior manager explained, 'it's been 18 months and I still don't know what job I'm doing'. In addition, having to respond to other people's agendas could prove disabling, placing further pressure on managers to demonstrate to their senior managers that their staff were 'performing'. In some cases these top-down demands were applied through high levels of risk-averse micro-management which failed to recognise that, as a recent Ofsted report pointed out, (Ofsted, 2009: para 9), youth work 'has the potential to help young people test the boundaries between reasonable and risky behaviours'. Because, as one senior youth work manager put it 'Integrated Youth Support is a risk – senior managers don't understand the youth work process', many of them felt even greater responsibility 'to protect the Service from misunderstandings about youth work'. In some cases managers were now also being asked to manage larger multi-agency teams in which youth workers were a minority. Though new structures and processes such as 'matrix-management' were being developed, these could bring their own tensions -prompting one senior youth work manager to comment, 'The problem is ... we don't know who is who or who should be making decisions... there is a gap between devolution of people and resources'.

All this finally has to be seen in the context of where youth work was being located within some of the services visited. One authority had moved it out of a leisure department – a decision welcomed by its senior managers – only to place it in a 'targeted services' division alongside 'behaviour management', youth offending, special educational needs and the pupil referral units. In another it had been located in 'targeted services' and linked with youth offending, and fostering, residential care and adoption. Elsewhere it fell within divisions or directorates called 'access to education' (including SEN and 'inclusion'); 'prevention and safeguarding'; 'vulnerable children'; and 'access, inclusion and participation'. Field staff rarely commented on these new arrangements while managers, though occasionally expressing frustrations, clearly felt they had no option but to make what they could of them. From a broader perspective, however, they could be seen as evidence of a trend which is disconnecting youth work from its educational 'mission' and its potentiality view of young people, and hitching it to child protection, youth offending and the deficiency models of the young which largely underpin them.



Often against the background of lost management posts, within these structures substantial extra demands were also being made on managers' time and energy to contribute to more strategic inter-agency developments. The result was often a diversion from operational management within their own services, leading to what one senior manager called a 'dramatic erosion of opportunity for providing [workers] with support'. In practice this meant, for example, 'mov[ing] from managing staff and projects to managing partnerships' and 'erod[ing] some of our quality assurance processes – no longer visiting centres [for practice observation] as we once did'. In one service it had also resulted in the officer team meeting monthly rather than, as in the past, weekly so that 'essentially we have to manage ourselves'. Moreover all this was happening in an environment in which 'outcomes' – or at least those treated as of most significance by senior managers and politicians – were more transparent and so exposing of what was judged to be poor practice. It was in this context that one field worker, with great feeling, spelt out the reality for her:

*The style of management is based on control at all costs. It's as if they fear that if they don't control a disaster will happen... Even if we are not the one who's made the mistake it affects us all... It squeezes the juice out of you; you wish for and desire to be trusted more and to be more equal.*

## What future for youth work?

It is of course not unusual for the state to have a troubled and troublesome relationship with young people since they are naturally and, some would argue healthily resistant to some of the measures prescribed for their welfare and development. For dealing with at least some of the resultant dilemmas, history suggests that for well over a hundred years youth work has been an imaginative and enduring response. However this *Inquiry* gives additional credence to the view that these dilemmas are being rendered more acute by state interventions which, centrally and locally, have become increasingly prescriptive, intrusive and controlling.

Unsurprisingly, the overall picture emerging from the *Inquiry* on how youth work is faring in this policy environment is far from clear-cut or definitive, with much depending on whether it is viewed from a practitioner or a manager perspective. Though positive Ofsted inspections were the trigger for inviting services to participate, some of the services had apparently been and remained stronger than others – politically, managerially and in the resources available – and so seemed more comfortable in their responses to the policy and organisational changes. Indeed, in places these were being experienced as genuinely affirming for youth work – as clarifying its goals, enabling youth workers better to demonstrate impact and making the provision more accessible to some young people and more credible to other agencies. Elsewhere, often creative accommodation with the policy regimes was generating managerial and practice responses intended both to satisfy 'the powers that be' and preserve what workers and managers saw as the essentials of youth work.

However, to the often unspoken but serious reservations embedded within such 'accommodation' have to be added the repeated and often blunt critiques of current

policy and the perceived resultant damage to practice. Sometimes with great feeling, these concerns focused for example on how open access is giving way to targeted provision; on how young people's required attendance is constraining the negotiation of relationships with them from their starting points and the developmental opportunities these can open up; on how those relationships, and especially the trust on which they depend, is being threatened by increasing expectations and requirements to share information. Moreover, these shifts are in many places being institutionalised by the movement of youth work out of structures labelled 'education' into ones that seem more concerned with prevention, protection and rehabilitation.

Our self-defined *Modest Inquiry* did not come with an 'opinion scale' for weighting these various evaluations. Once all the positives have been acknowledged, however, a key conclusion to be drawn from it has to be that, in many areas, youth work as both workers and managers define it is at the very least under considerable pressure.

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# The 'Teen Brain' Research: An Introduction and Implications for Practitioners

*Howard Sercombe and Tomas Paus*

*This article discusses advances in developmental cognitive neuroscience over the last decade, outlining major developments, how these are reshaping our ideas about youth and adolescence and considering the implications for working with young people. The authors also discuss the implications of this research for the concept of youth itself, arguing that it can no longer be seen as separate from adulthood. Youth is emergence into adulthood. The social environment, including policy settings, will significantly determine the shape of adulthood as it emerges.*

**Keywords:** *Brain, adolescence, neuroscience, youth work, myelin, nature, nurture, youth, emerging adulthood, risk, practice*

Throughout the last five years a swathe of writing in the academic and popular press has been talking about 'the teen brain' (Epstein, 2007b; Strauch, 2004; Wallis, Dell and Park, 2004). A new generation of tools and techniques has not only allowed scientists to see the internal structure of the brain in exquisite detail while the person is alive, but to study brain function when they are awake and working. These studies have indicated some differences between young people and adult members of the population: but what do these observed differences in structure and function mean for our understanding of young people?

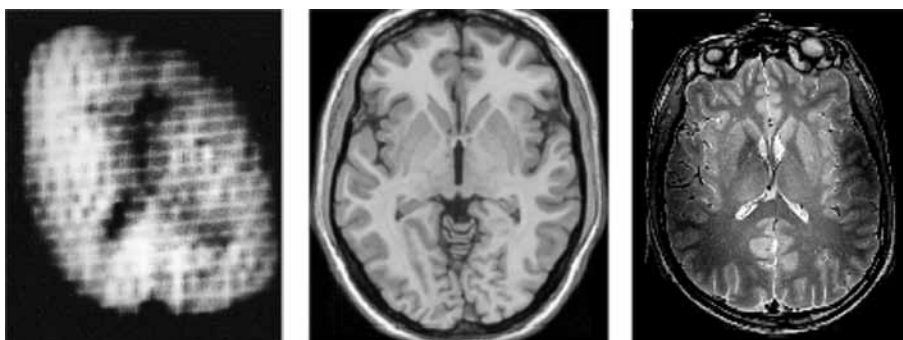
The purpose of this article is to sketch out what the research on young people's brains has found so far (at least the major milestones), to contemplate what the implications might be for an understanding of young people, and how this theory might be used in practice. It will be followed in a second article to be published in the next issue of *Youth and Policy* by a more critical look at the limitations of the research versus the strength of the claims that are sometimes made for its conclusions and the way the data is being interpreted in the scientific literature and popular press.

## The technology

At the forefront of the new brain research has been an exponential improvement in the tools available to study the brain. Twenty years ago most of what was known about the brain came from brain injury, dead people or EEG (electro-encephalogram) examinations that record brain impulses across a handful of electrodes placed on the scalp. There was not much capacity to visualise brain structure and function while a subject was alive, let alone awake and functioning. In the last 15 years a range of new techniques have allowed us to see what is happening to the brain structurally over time, and functionally in real-time, while the brain is actually working. These include:

**MRI.** Magnetic resonance imaging works by turning on and off radiofrequency (RF) pulses in a massive cylindrical electromagnet while a person is inside the cylinder. Because molecules of water in our body have a magnetic orientation, the magnetic field flips individual molecules to align with the magnetic field. When the RF pulse is switched off they flip back again, releasing some energy in the process, which can be picked up and measured. The energy depends on the amount of water in the different tissues and on what other molecules are in the tissue, so computers can then synthesise the energy output into an incredibly detailed cross-section photograph of the part of the body being scanned. As with digital cameras picture quality has improved exponentially over the last decade.

### Improvement of MR images of brain structure in the last 30 years.

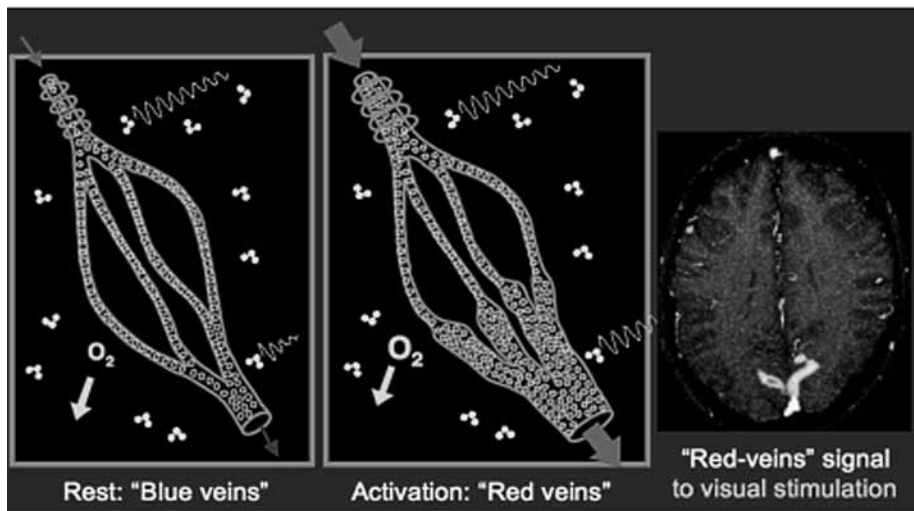


From left to right: An image of a dead brain obtained on a 0.1 T scanner in Nottingham in 1978 (courtesy of Prof. Peter Morris, Sir Peter Mansfield MR Centre); An average of 27 images obtained by scanning the same individual repeatedly on a 1.5T scanner in 1995 (courtesy of Prof. Alan Evans, Montreal Neurological Institute); and an image acquired on a 7.0 T scanner in Nottingham in 2005.

**Functional MRI (fMRI).** Functional MRI works a little differently, though still using the MRI scanner. Brains get their energy from the oxidation of sugars in the bloodstream. If a part of the brain is active, blood containing oxygen will flow to that part of the brain, and as the oxygen is used, the oxygen in the blood in that part of the brain will drop. A MRI scanner will pick that up, giving a clear picture of the parts of the brain that are active and which are not: all while the person is awake and active, albeit lying quite still in the scanner. A person can be shown pictures or videos, and asked to think about certain things or do mental tasks, and we can see what parts of the brain are working while they do that.

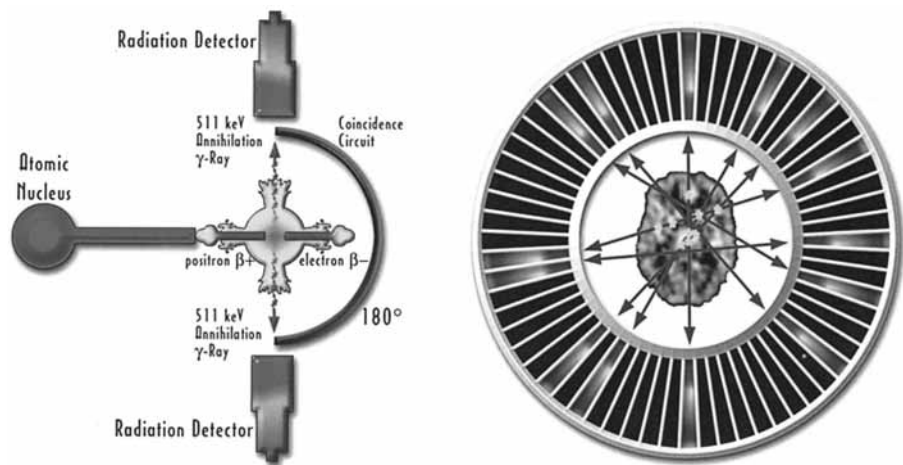
**PET (Positron Emission Tomography).** PET works by injecting a radio-isotope substance into the body. The isotope gives off positrons (a sub-atomic particle) in such a way that the isotope can be located precisely at that moment. Positrons interact with electrons and this can be picked up in scanning devices, effectively giving an internal map of the body in the area connected to the site of injection. There are risks, however, because the isotope is radioactive. It can't be used on small children.

## Principles of MRI



Courtesy of Professor Bruce Pike, Montreal Neurological Institute

## Principles of PET



Courtesy of Dr Ernst Meyer, Montreal Neurological Institute

## EEG: 128-sensor net



### EEG (Electro-encephalogram).

This technology isn't new: EEGs have been around for a long time. What is new, however, is that the amplifiers are much better so the skin doesn't have to be scraped to make a good connection, which makes it much more useable. Modern EEGs are up to 256 electrodes, instead of about four, and computers are now able to synthesise the 256 channels into a composite picture of what is happening inside the skull. The advantage of this is that the person doesn't have to be in a scanner, so they can move (a little) while the EEG exam is taking place. The disadvantage is that the signals are smudged, because the skull and the brain's protective tissue is in the way so the localisation isn't perfect.

There are other technologies too, and more are emerging all the time which

improve both in the way we see into the body, and the way computers are able to recreate a reality from the sensors. However, the technology is expensive, and experiments have to be painstakingly carried out. A lot of work (and money) goes into finding each fragment of new data but there are some interesting and exciting findings.

## Structure and function

For a long time in the human sciences (especially psychology), debate has raged about the extent to which human behaviour is determined by genes, and to what extent by experience and environment – the so-called 'nature-nurture debate'. Research has pushed the pendulum this way or that over the last century, but without resolution. One of the most important findings of brain science research is that experience actually creates physical structures in the brain. The theory isn't new. Sixty years ago, Hebb wrote:

*When one cell repeatedly assists in firing another, the axon of the first cell develops synaptic knobs (or enlarges them if they already exist) in contact with the soma of the second cell. ...The general idea is an old one, that any two cells or systems of cells that are repeatedly active at the same time will tend to become 'associated', so that activity in one facilitates activity in the other.*

(Hebb, 1949: 63, 70)

Or, put more simply, 'neurons that fire together, wire together'.

Brains are formed of a massive number of networks of neurons: spindly, branching cells looking like plant roots that transmit electrical currents along their length, like circuits in a computer. With every experience you have something happens to a neuron somewhere. It might be a new connection, or an extension of an existing connection, or a new branch. Making a new connection may take some time and there are an almost unlimited number of ways to make the connection in a way that works. The brain cannot develop without this kind of experience. It is as useless as a computer without software. While the theory is not new, the scanners are now so good that we can see the differences in brain structure and function that result from different experiences. Like hardware and software both genes and experience are important. In a recent special issue of *Human Brain Mapping* (Glahn, Paus and Thompson, 2007) a number of articles reported that when you study twins, looking at the amount of grey matter in different parts of the brain, you find that their brains really are more similar than those of unrelated individuals. This is true for adults, children and young people. When the genes are different, brain structure is different (Pezawas et al., 2005; Pezawas et al, 2004).

On the other side, several studies have confirmed that when a particular neural circuit is engaged repeatedly it leads to changes in brain structure. This has been tried across populations as diverse as musicians (Gaser and Schlaug, 2003; Sluming et al, 2002); London taxi drivers (Maguire et al, 2000) and people who are bilingual (Mechelli et al, 2004). You can actually see, using a scanner, the bit of their brains that is different. In one experiment a group of students were taught to juggle, and were set on a programme of juggling practice over some months. Brain scans done after the practice and compared with the initial scans, showed that the part of their brains associated with tracking moving objects had physically grown. Over the next few months, once the juggling had stopped, it shrank somewhat, though not back to what it was (Draganski et al, 2004). To add complexity it is clear that genes can be switched on and off according to age or environmental stimulus. You might have the gene, but it won't do anything until your fifteenth birthday, and only then if the conditions are right.

Overall there is an increasing body of evidence that challenges the simple one-way view that genes directly influence the brain and in turn the individual's behaviour, or that experience or socialisation directly determines behaviour without the influence of genetic programming. It is difficult to work with the way that all these factors influence each other. It is not possible to hold one still while you see what happens with the other one, because the first doesn't hold still. What we do know is that the human brain as a structure is highly 'plastic': it is flexible, responsive and by no means determined at birth.

There are a number of important implications of this discovery. The first is that *the nature-nurture debate is obsolete*. Neither genes nor experience determine behaviour. Both do, in a complex dance which includes the person's own brain as a structure. It makes no more sense to talk about which is determining behaviour than it does to talk about whether it is Torvill or Dean<sup>1</sup> who is doing the dancing, or to talk about a coin only having one side. Neither variable is independent.

The second results from the fact that the process of circuit-building is not linear throughout life. There is a massive proliferation of synapses, for example, in the first two years of life,



and another just before puberty. Between 10 and 12 years the volume of grey matter in the frontal and parietal lobes peaks, and then decreases slightly. In the temporal lobes the peak occurs around 16 years (Giedd et al, 1999a). If the environment is poor, cruel, or chaotic during these periods, that may determine many of the circuits that are laid down, if not the way they are laid down. This is already having an impact on policy around the care and education of infants. The same attention is not yet being paid to school-age children and young people. If you want good circuits to use as an adult, you need good things in your environment when you are young. Notwithstanding this, no matter how poor, cruel or chaotic the environment, some good things happen to children – some good experiences, some good relationships. Some people seem to be able to foreground these experiences, regardless of how few they have had. On the other hand, others seem to foreground bad experiences, no matter how privileged, kind and ordered their environment has been. This can change. It is obvious that the more poverty, cruelty or chaos you have had while the circuits are being built, the more difficult it is to foreground the helpful ones. One of the things we do in practice is to try to help young people foreground what is helpful in their experience, and sideline the circuits that make them smaller and meaner.

## **'Pruning' and the changing balance of grey and white matter**

Over the past 15 years MRI has provided new opportunities to assess brain development in large numbers of healthy children and adolescents. Sophisticated image-analysis tools allow investigators to identify and measure various structural features from MR images of the living brain. It is now clear from a number of studies that the human brain continues to change during adolescence (Blakemore and Choudhury, 2006; Lenroot and Giedd, 2006).

One of the key changes is in the balance between grey matter and white matter. Using a computer analogy, the grey matter is the circuits and processors. The white matter is the wires between them, with insulation wrapped around them. It is called white matter because a major component is myelin, a white fatty substance that insulates the wires, making the transfer of electrical pulses or 'messages', faster and more efficient.

Another useful analogy is that of roads. If you look at aerial photos of the Australian outback you will see roads everywhere: little dirt roads running to mine diggings or shacks or forgotten places; graded roads to sheep stations or water tanks or places people still lived in; gravel roads between small towns; bitumen roads between bigger towns or places of wealth and importance. Back at the start of the last century during the gold rushes, if a person wanted to go somewhere they pointed their cart or wheelbarrow in the direction they thought they wanted to go and off they went. Others might follow their track, and as they did a road formed. Or they might go another way that they thought was quicker or easier, and make another road. Over time, if the road was used a lot the Shire might grade it and lay gravel, and eventually bitumen. Once the bitumen was down everyone went along the bitumen, and the little dirt roads became overgrown. They rarely disappeared completely because it was so dry, but going along them was hard work and they mostly ended nowhere. Myelin is the bitumen of the brain.

Childhood is a process of creating little dirt roads all over the place, learning so fast,

learning or inventing a hundred ways to do things, and learning a hundred things to do every day. Children's grey matter is just blossoming. In adults it is much harder to see all these little dirt roads. Instead there is a network of bitumen highways: serious, efficient, fast. All the roads that don't go anywhere, or aren't the fastest or safest ways to get there, have been left to grow over.

Now one has to be careful of analogies. The fact is that the connections between nerves are as important as the nerves themselves in the transmission of information. It's like every road in the analogy above is a toll road. The toll stations vary a lot in efficiency: some have electronic readers that automatically deduct a bank account and mean that you don't have to slow down at all, others have a single toll lane with a grumpy attendant who never has the right change. There can be a highly efficient motorway with an inefficient toll station and the whole circuit will still be inefficient. (Though even this analogy has to be taken with a grain of salt.)

Although the timing is different for boys and girls, and different in different parts of the brain, the amount of grey matter appears to reach a limit in the teenage years. After that there appears to be a decrease in grey matter (the total number of circuits) and an increase in white matter (the myelin). In the frontal, parietal and temporal lobes this change appears to start around puberty in the sensori-motor areas and spreads forward over the frontal cortex and then back, first over the parietal cortex and then the temporal (Gogtay et al., 2004; Sowell, Thompson, Tessner and Toga, 2001). The change comes to the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and the posterior part of the superior temporal gyrus last of all (Gogtay et al, 2004), as late as the early twenties. The same process can be observed by measuring the thickness of the cortex (Shaw et al, 2006).

A common way to describe this change is 'synaptic pruning' (Thompson et al, 2000). In this metaphor unwanted circuits are pruned away, leaving the circuits that are most efficient or most useful for survival. We aren't sure that 'pruning' is the best way to see it. The amount of grey matter might not actually decrease: it might just be that the signal from grey matter is 'diluted' by the white matter and so appears as a reduction in volume in the scans (Paus, 2005; Sowell et al., 2001). What is certain, though, is that the amount of white matter increases significantly in the teenage years. There is a serious road-building programme going on, starting with the areas that are more fundamental to survival, and moving onto areas that are more concerned with conscious thought. The process is generally called myelination.

## Implications of the myelination process

We assume that the human organism will make decisions about which circuits will be confirmed and which ones bypassed according to the imperatives of its environment. These are presumably part of a survival process. *The environment in which young people live while these decisions are made is critical in determining the mind-set of the adult.* If young people live in an environment of suspicion and repression, the circuits that are confirmed during the teenage years will be those that are most appropriate to survival in such an environment. If this were to be taken seriously, it is doubtful that what passes for youth

policy would have quite the shape that it does at the moment.

At the level of practice our work is often about helping young people find other ways to do things. They may have myelinised a circuit in a context where their life was full of threat and violence and where there were few real options. Now, later, they are in a place where the hyper-alertness and instant defensive reactions appropriate to that kind of life are no longer necessary – and, indeed, threaten their survival in the present. In this very simplified model that we are using, change can often be the struggle to find the way onto a little overgrown dirt track that will enable the person to deal with situations in ways that are happier and more successful. It isn't easy: the bitumen is always easier to find and quicker and smoother to travel down. But in time with practice and hard work, the dirt becomes a graded road, the graded road becomes gravel, the gravel becomes bitumen, and the old bitumen road becomes broken up and potholed.

In counselling situations helping young people connect with the relationships or experiences in their past that worked and nourished them can help them find a different way of being in the present. So asking questions like, 'So who liked you as you were growing up? What teachers respected you? What was that like?' or 'When have you been at your best with this stuff? When has it worked? What was going on for you then?' or 'How would you like to be? What are you like when you are at your best?' can help young people find the beginning of the little dirt track and move off the bitumen.

In practice this approach is very useful in working with young people, especially young men, around a range of issues including violence and drug use. The mechanics of how the brain works often makes real sense to them, helping them understand why they react the way they do, and empowering them to take charge of the way they want their brain to work.

It can also help inform the logic of activity work with young people. Young people from impoverished backgrounds often have a limited range of experiences, and their environment can be highly conservative in its own way. New experiences can force the development of different connections and new circuits, creating opportunities for young people to do things a little differently and see other possibilities while still respecting the integrity of their lives and the choices they make. We have called this methodology 'ecological shock', and have used experiences ranging from travel, to light aircraft joyrides, to a dress-up dinner at a fancy restaurant. Often you can see the new connections happen before your eyes, as a young person suddenly 'gets it' or 'the penny drops'.

## **Different locations for processing information**

Functional MRI (fMRI) provides yet another avenue for exploring brain-behaviour relationships in the maturing human brain. Functional MRI allows researchers to see what parts of the brain 'light up' when subjects are asked to respond to different situations or perform different kinds of mental activity. It is difficult work: it can be hard to pinpoint exactly what is being measured, for example, whether the person is actually thinking about the activity or something else, or whether a difference in the way that the brain works is about age, or something else like intelligence or performance. Some of these things can be

controlled for, some cannot, and some the researcher may not have thought of yet. But the possibility of seeing how the brain is working while tasks are being performed is ground-breaking.

An influential study of this kind was published by Deborah Yurgelin-Todd and her colleagues in 1999 (Baird et al, 1999). In this fMRI study the researchers mapped what parts of the brain were active when a research group of teenagers (mostly around 13 years old) were shown pictures of faces expressing different emotions. They found that while older adults used their prefrontal cortex while they identified the emotion expressed in the photograph, the younger research subjects used the amygdala, part of the more fundamental limbic structure of the brain responsible for emotional reactions. The interpretation was that this was because the prefrontal cortex wasn't effectively wired up to the amygdala yet, though this has not been confirmed. There are also some initial indications that young people use their brains differently from other adults. The evidence does seem to be building that the process of referring information to the frontal cortex is less immediate for young people than for adults.

As we noted above the pre-frontal cortex is associated with a number of mental functions, including decision making, working memory and the suppression of alternative programmes interfering with planned actions (Duncan and Owen 2000; Miller and Cohen 2001; Paus, 2005; Petrides, 2005). The Yurgelin-Todd study cited above has been interpreted as indicating that young people's responses are more 'primitive' than those of other adults, that they are much more likely to react out of their gut reactions, and are less able to think about the consequences of their actions. A more careful interpretation might be that referring a decision to formal thinking processes is not necessarily so automatic or streamlined, and may be slower in young people than in those who are older.

During adolescence (and the rest of life for that matter) high demands are placed not only on the brain's executive systems – the systems that coordinate action – but also on the inter-play between cognitive (thinking) and affective (feeling) processes. Such cognition-emotion inter-actions are particularly crucial in the context of peer-peer inter-actions and the processing of verbal and non-verbal cues. It is likely that the inter-play of thinking and feeling is particularly important in social situations in which the right balance must be struck between peer-based influences and the individual's own goals.

Peer influence was the basis of a recent fMRI study undertaken by Tomas' team in the Brain and Body Institute. In this study the team wanted to see which neural systems, if any, are engaged in children or adolescents who differ in their resistance to peer influences. The team addressed this question by examining neural activity across different areas of the brain. Whether or not an adolescent follows the goals set by peers or those set by himself/herself might depend on the inter-play between three neural systems in particular, namely the fronto-parietal network (which deals with bottom-up imitation of actions), the superior temporal sulcus (STS) network (which sorts out social cues) and the prefrontal cortex (PFC) network (which directs top-down regulation of actions).

To answer the question a group of 10-year olds were asked to fill out a questionnaire developed by psychologists Laurence Steinberg and Kathryn Monahan (2007) to study

resistance to peer pressure as children move into and through adolescence. The Resistance-to-Peer-Influence (RPI) scale, a self-report questionnaire, is designed to elicit attitudes to peer influence but minimise subjects answering with the 'right' (socially desirable) response. Then they were asked to watch brief video-clips containing face or hand/arm actions, executed in calm or angry ways, while measuring changes in fMRI signal. The team found that the children with high RPI scores showed stronger inter-regional correlations in brain activity across the three networks mentioned above while watching angry hand-actions (Grosbras et al, 2007, fig 4) The pattern of inter-regional correlations identified by this method included both (i) regions involved in action observation: the fronto-parietal as well as temporo-occipital systems and (ii) regions in the prefrontal cortex.

What the scans showed was that a number of prefrontal regions showed *co-ordinated changes* in the fMRI signal that correlated with those in the other two neural systems involved in action observation. Typically, the prefrontal cortex is engaged when the subject performs an explicit task requiring, for example, manipulation of information in working memory, inhibition of imminent action and/or suppression of interference, or planning and decision-making (Petrides, 2005). These children were not asked to do anything that required that. The findings suggested that the brains of the children who scored high on resistance to peer influence engaged 'executive' processes *automatically* when challenged with relatively complex and socially relevant stimuli.

Experience creates structures in the brain. The experiment found that children who score high on these tests are better at co-ordinating different areas of their brain when they process information with inter-personal implications. Does this function also produce corresponding structures in the brain? The team examined this possibility in a sample of healthy adolescents (n=295, 12 to 18 years of age) and found that inter-regional correlations in *cortical thickness* in the same cortical regions revealed by the above fMRI study were higher in adolescents who scored high on the RPI test versus those who scored low (Paus et al, 2007, fig 5). These results suggested that individuals with certain personality and cognitive characteristics, compatible with high resistance to peer influences, are more likely to engage relevant neural networks whenever challenged with relatively complex and socially relevant stimuli. These networks include cortical regions activated during action observation and cognitive/executive control. Over time such a co-ordinated functional engagement is likely to shape these regions so that they become structurally alike.

There are risks in the interpretation of these data. Brain research, and fMRI in particular, is vulnerable to over-simplification, over-interpretation, and the confirmation of prior prejudice. Especially in media reports, huge claims have been made about differences in human capacity based on tenuous, and often small, observations of differences in brain activity or structure in different populations. As a rule, if people are making strong claims about 'this is why adolescents do x', it should be treated with caution. We just aren't that far along yet.

## **The implications of brain research for our concept of youth/ adolescence**

The question of what youth/adolescence is exactly is still hotly disputed (Bessant, Sercombe,

and Watts, 1998; Epstein, 2007a; Sercombe, 1996). On one hand there is the claim that it is nothing but a social construction, with no material difference between teenagers and adults, and any observed differences a product of the streaming of young people into age cohorts, age specific institutions, social exclusion and repressive social treatment. Development over the lifespan is a continuous unfolding shaped by the learning process. On the other hand is the dominant view that youth/adolescence is a biologically determined, discrete stage of the life span, qualitatively different from childhood and adulthood, and characterised by turbulence, storm and stress. Both of these views are now, we believe, obsolete.

The brain is in a process of continuous development through the lifespan, in a constant dance between the influence of biological factors and the physical and social environment, and involving the person's own agency. However the process is not linear. There are surges of growth and change in different parts of the brain, and in different processes within it, at different times. The timing of these is a function of the inter-play between the environment and the genetic programme. And it is likely, in ways we do not yet understand, that the person's own agency is also significant.

The brains of young people are not radically different from adults in structure. There is no great difference in capacity between young people and adults. There is a difference, however, in the degree of myelination, which makes brains more reliable and efficient in their reactions and responses but less flexible and less available for new learning. The major brain development in the teenage years is the ramping up of the process of myelination which then levels off to some degree in the mid-twenties.

The primary difference between a teenager's brain and an older person's brain then is not a *difference in capacity* but in the selection of capacities: that is, which of the brain's capacities are to be fore-grounded and used and which are to be sidelined and fall into disuse. This is an active process in which young people are consciously or unconsciously selecting preferred pathways for action and response, confirming favoured templates for life from the smorgasbord of ways of being generated through the process of childhood. It happens according to the survival and other interests of the individual in their social context.

Young people are not passive victims of brains that are out of control. They are active agents in the design of an adulthood that meets their needs and enables them to survive within their environment and make sense of their experience. *Youth is not separate from adulthood. It is the becoming of adulthood.* There is no 'next stage' of adulthood, which is qualitatively different from being a young person and adulthood is not itself a destination. You don't learn what you need for adulthood by being excluded from it until you can demonstrate that you have got the right circuits. A smart society would engage young people progressively in adult processes as they demonstrate their readiness. Our society does this a little but mostly we exclude young people until a certain arbitrary age is reached and then bestow the right to participate – mostly without guidance and support. It should be no surprise that it does not work too well. We respond to this failure usually by increasing the age at which responsibility will be granted. Folly, as Barbara Tuchman tells us, is the pursuit of a failing strategy by prescribing ever-increasing amounts of the same (Tuchman, 1984). The research isn't always interpreted this way, though influential work by Epstein (2007),

among others, is pushing strongly in this direction. The research tends to be dominated, not surprisingly, by the century-old view of adolescence as the 'stage of life characterised by turbulence' view. Experiments are designed within this frame, and written up and publicised accordingly, with the media often taking what are already stigmatising interpretations and pushing them further for mass titillation. In the next article we shall focus more on problems and dangers in the teen brain research and the assumptions underlying its interpretations.

## Note

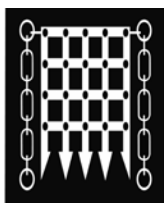
- 1 Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean were the ice dancers who achieved a perfect score at the 1984 Winter Olympics.

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We are delighted that Sir Al Aynsley-Green, Children's Commissioner for England; Lesley Longstone, Director General, Young People, Department for Children, Schools and Families; and Rt Hon Keith Vaz MP, Chairman, Home Affairs Select Committee have agreed to deliver keynote addresses at this seminar.

Other confirmed speakers include: Christine Grice, Head of Access and Support Services, Children & Young People's Directorate, London Borough of Lewisham; Professor Susan Hallam, Dean, Faculty of Policy and Society, Institute of Education; Professor Dennis Hayes, Professor of Education, University of Derby; Chris Wright, National Director – Operations and New Business, Catch22; and a senior representative from NASUWT. Further senior speakers are being approached.

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# Thinking the Unthinkable: Youth Work without Voluntary Participation?

*Jon Ord*

*Whilst acknowledging the importance of voluntary participation as an important dynamic in youth work, this paper sets out to analyse this controversial concept. It argues against the widely held belief that voluntary participation is a necessary condition for youth work. An important distinction is made between attendance and participation, arguing that it is the latter which ultimately underpins youth work, maintaining that practice can be participative in settings where young people have not chosen to attend. But importantly attention needs to be paid to structuring in power and choice, as these factors, whilst structured into settings which are characterised by voluntary participation, may be absent in those that are not.*

**Key words:** *participation, relationships, power, choice*

Voluntary participation is perhaps one of the most controversial issues in contemporary youth work. Workers are increasingly finding themselves being asked to work in situations where the young people have not accessed the provision voluntarily, and whilst this work may not be easy (for example in pupil referral units or youth offending teams) and the lack of choice to attend may be an initial barrier to engagement, workers are not, on the whole, unanimously complaining that what they are being asked to do is 'not youth work'. One thing we should remember from the 'importation' of accreditation into youth work (DfES 2002) is that workers are very quick to tell us when what they are being asked to do no longer approximates to youth work! However, as will be shown, voluntary participation is almost universally presented as a bench mark of youth work. That is most youth work theorists and academics maintain that voluntary participation is a necessary precursor to youth work. This article sets out to explore this controversy and ultimately assess the importance of voluntary participation.<sup>1</sup>

Within this paper I will highlight some of the important features of voluntary participation. I will go on to suggest that important though voluntary participation is, as a dynamic of practice it is *not a necessary condition of youth work*. In so doing I will offer some analysis of the concept of voluntary participation, making an importation distinction between attendance and participation, and the importance of maintaining 'adult to adult' communication (Berne, 1964). I conclude that it is participation itself which is important and go on to suggest that in such settings the engagement of young people through a youth work relationship is both possible and viable. However in settings which do not operate voluntary participation a number of other key factors must be considered including, perhaps most importantly that a degree of 'power is structured into the relationships' with young people (Davies, 2005). Although this article is written and directed primarily at youth workers and youth work academics there are lessons that can be learned that are relevant to other 'social professions'.

In many ways voluntary participation in youth work is unique as there are few other educational or even welfare services provided for young people that they access of their own volition. The dynamic of voluntary participation establishes an important foundation to the work. The power relations are clearly defined by it and it can be argued that the relationships of mutuality stem from it. Youth work practice has developed out of this tradition; it appears as a key feature of the major government reports of Albemarle, Fairbairn – Milson and Thompson; and historically youth work has consistently operated under this rationale (Jefferies and Smith, 1999).

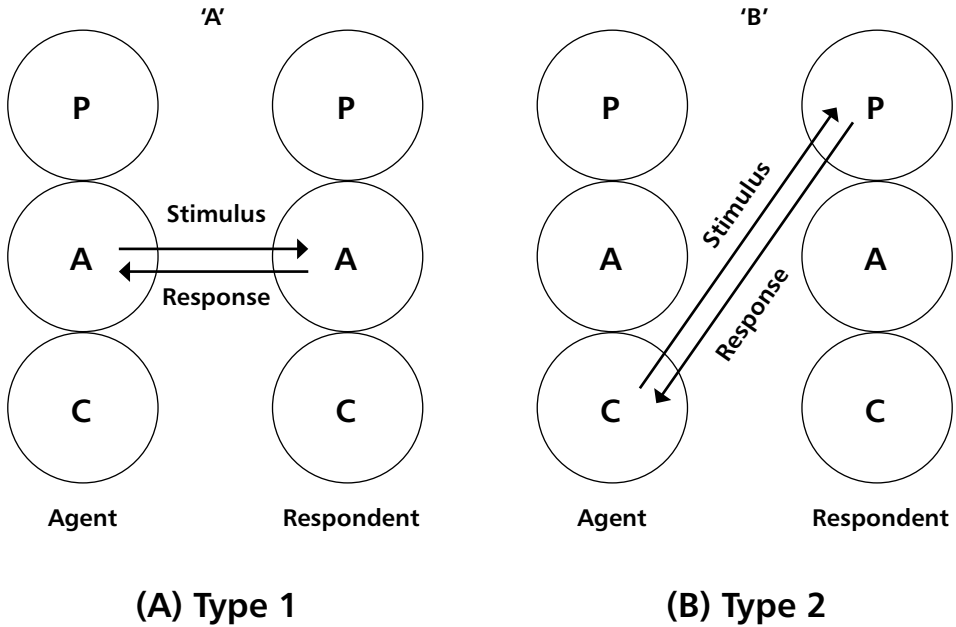
That young people have the 'ultimate choice' to attend or not is believed by many to be one of, if not the 'defining feature' of youth work. Derbyshire Youth Service for example, maintains that: 'The youth service considers its relationship with young people to be a unique one. It is a voluntary relationship' (undated: 7). Davies concurs, arguing that: 'the principle of young people's voluntary participation is a – perhaps *the* – defining feature of youth work' (2005:12) and it is stated as the first of his manifesto principles: 'have young people chosen to be involved, is their engagement voluntary?' (ibid). He goes on to suggest that not only has practice historically developed out of this state of affairs, there are significant reasons for the importance of voluntary participation. Davies argues the following four points from this:

1. Young people retain a 'degree of power intrinsic to practice... this is not just a concession made to the young by benevolent adults who see benefits for themselves in 'letting the young have their say...the power structured into their relationships with the adults [defines] a role and a status' (2005:12).
2. 'Practitioners have no choice but to negotiate with young people' (2005:13). Importantly this is not just a 'tactical manoeuvre' to ensure compliance as this would be unlikely to ensure long term commitment but must involve 'real give and take'.
3. 'The content of the youth work providers' "offer" to young people [must be]...valuable... in the here and now. This content must be relevant in the "here and now" (ibid), and is unlikely to involve any degree of "delayed gratification".'
4. 'The way adult and young people each see each other and interact...requires a greater parity and treatment than most other adult providers – young person exchanges *impose*'. (ibid)

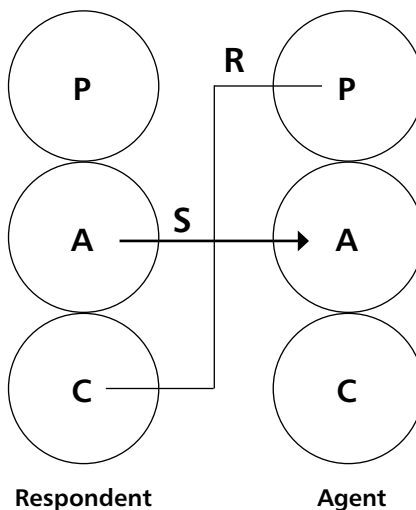
These are important aspects of practice which are in part brought about by voluntary participation. However it is points one and four which in particular when combined, help to define the important relational dynamic between young person and youth worker which is rarely present in other professional settings. On the one hand young people can walk away and, on the other, there is greater parity between the youth worker and young person than between young people and other professionals.

This relational dynamic is further illustrated with reference to the theory of transactional analysis (Berne, 1964), based on the assumption that there are three basic emotional positions or, to use the technical term, 'ego states': parent, adult, and child. Engagement in

communication or 'transactions' is always from one or other of these three positions. It is the transactions cumulatively which form the basis upon which a relationship is developed. Transactions can either be 'complementary' or 'crossed'. Complementary communication is successful, uncomplicated, and mutually beneficial, and is therefore ongoing, illustrated by these diagrams:



Crossed communication or 'transactions' are antagonistic, frustrating and not mutually beneficial. Importantly 'communication is broken off when a crossed transaction occurs' (Berne, 1964:8) as illustrated by the following diagram:



Young people are in a developmental stage in which they are separating emotionally and psychologically from their parents (Biddulph, 1984) and do not want to be engaged with as if they were children. Youth work ensures 'complementary communication' which allows for the development of a relationship because youth workers consistently and reliably engage with the young person in an adult to adult way. Importantly other professionals do not ensure an 'adult to adult' relationship because they too often either treat young people as if they were children (for example in assuming that they are without the capacity for autonomous decision making) or operate in such a way that a young person will perceive them as authority figures which inevitably results in young people feeling as if they are being treated like children. As the young person wishes to communicate as an adult this inevitably leads to 'crossed communication' and the breakdown of a relationship.

Sometimes this crossed communication is precipitated consciously when, for example, a teacher demands respect from pupils but does not necessarily give the same respect to pupils in return, or inadvertently because of the inherent power associated with their position and the lack of genuine power delegated to the young person. For example, when an education welfare officer is attempting to understand why a young person is not attending school, but are inevitably perceived as an authority figure.

This analysis may well encapsulate much of youth work's success. That is it enables dialogue with the young adult because it avoids the natural tendency of the young adult to perceive the other adult, who is in a position of authority (by virtue of their professional status), as 'parental'. Perhaps this is best summed up in the words of a young person from the evaluation of youth work by Merton et al '[youth worker] "x" is accessible and reliable and treats me like an adult. She lets me do it / helps me do it (social workers always did it for me), [The youth worker] makes me feel good in myself because I've done things' (Merton et al 2004:4).

It is certainly the case that voluntary participation does enable the four important aspects of practice, suggested earlier by Davies, to develop. Voluntary participation also helps to define the 'adult – adult relationship' required for 'complementary communication'. However the points identified by Davies (2005), are not all exclusively derived from the voluntary principle. The first point is perhaps the only one that does exclusively follow from voluntary participation and can instil that degree of power to the dynamics of practice, and this should not be underestimated. The other three follow from voluntary participation, and from the values of youth work; eg. the principle to 'treat young people with respect' and 'to allow for self determination' (NYA, 2001). The values of youth work therefore also have an important role in bringing about these particular aspects of practice, as does the young person centred curriculum (Ord, 2007). This is an important point when considering the significance of voluntary participation for youth work as it is often assumed implicitly that it is this alone which facilitates practice.

It is evident that we must look at voluntary participation in more depth. Undoubtedly it is a powerful force within youth work practice and underpins much of its curriculum. However I am not convinced that it is a 'defining feature' of youth work to the extent to which Davies (2005) and Jeffs and Smith (1998 / 99) argue. That is, if it is not present, then it is not youth work.

Jeffs and Smith link voluntary participation with two other criteria, encapsulated in the following quote:

*The work undertaken has an educational purpose... [and]the focus of the work is directed towards young people...For over 150 years... [these] elements [together with voluntary participation] have fused to delineate youth work and distinguish it from other welfare activities. It has been distinctive only when all these ingredients are present. Remove one and it becomes obvious that what is being observed may possess a resemblance to, but is unquestionably not, youth work. (1998/99:48).*

I think it is something of a fudge to suggest that criteria can in fact 'fuse', and it is not clear what is meant by this for the criteria to be credible; they must stand upon their own merits. Although voluntary participation is an important part of youth work practice, I would argue that it is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient condition of youth work.

A sufficient condition is one in which the presence of that criterion or factor alone is enough to produce or define the concept. Voluntary participation is clearly not a sufficient condition for youth work, as young people participate voluntarily in a number of disparate 'leisure activities' which are clearly not youth work. Indeed one of the problems concerned with the recent government incarnation of 'positive activities' (DCSF 2007, DfES, 2005) is exactly that, they are merely 'taking part' in leisure activities.

It is more likely that Jeffs and Smith are implying that voluntary participation is a necessary condition of youth work. That is, although in itself it is not 'enough' or 'sufficient' to define youth work, by the same token nothing can be legitimately described as youth work unless it contains that element; it is 'necessary' or 'essential'. For youth work to take place therefore, the young people must have voluntarily engaged in the process, activity or session; and furthermore, be able to leave at any point, of their own free will, with no repercussions.

I think although this is seductive, it is in fact untenable. Some very powerful youth work interventions may well take place in settings where young people do not attend voluntarily. For example what if a youth worker who has worked with a young person in a traditional youth club setting, and built a relationship through voluntary participation (and so according to the definition can legitimately be described as youth work), then undertakes work with the same young person in a formal setting? They could perhaps have advocated on behalf of that person in a meeting concerning their non attendance, or be brought in to help encourage the young person to re-engage with their schooling perhaps after a bereavement, through one- to- one work, thereby undertaking 'work' with that young person in a setting in which the young person is not choosing to attend. By Jeffs and Smith's definition the worker in these examples would no longer be doing youth work. This is clearly illogical. This work does not cease to be youth work just because it is in a setting in which the young person has not chosen to be. Jeffs and Smith may wish to counter with the observation that 'the relationship had originally been founded on voluntary participation and so that is why those instances can be described as youth work'. However if one concedes that, then it is equally plausible to imagine the very same scenario taking place which has not previously been founded on voluntary participation, whereby the worker

builds a sufficiently good relationship with the young person within the school environment and either advocates on their behalf on the issue of non-attendance or engages in one-to-one sessions around issues of bereavement and non-attendance, and so the same quality of work is produced without the precursor of voluntary participation. It would be implausible to suggest that one scenario is youth work and the other is not.

Voluntary participation may be a very important dynamic which youth work abandons at its peril, but it is not the 'holy grail' of youth work, and should not be used as the yardstick by which interventions and approaches are permitted into the realm of youth work.

What the above example alludes to, is that it is not voluntary participation in itself which is important, it is what it 'enables'. It is after all a means to an end, not an end in itself. Voluntary participation allows the formation of an authentic youth work relationship, one based on honesty, respect, mutuality and a concern for the well-being of the young person, as well as a degree of power at the disposal of the young person. It is easy to see why voluntary participation makes youth work relationships flourish, not least as Davies (2005) suggests, because of the inherent power which it affords the young people, as well as the necessity of negotiation. Without it, it may be much harder to form such a relationship, particularly with certain young people at the 'margins'. But it is not a necessary condition of youth work.

Part of the problem here is a false distinction operating between voluntary participation on the one hand and compulsion on the other. It is assumed that if a young person has not chosen to do 'x' and they have no right to leave 'x' they are under some kind of compulsion, which, if removed, means that they automatically would leave. The reality is a little different and life a bit more complicated. There are many things in life for young people, as well as adults, which we cannot walk away from, but do not feel a 'compulsion' to do. Compulsion is an emotive word which would 'set any one's back up'. We can all think of examples of situations we did not particularly want to be in or things we felt obliged to do, which, in fact, turned out to be enjoyable or ultimately rewarding. It is the quality of the experience that is important.

One could imagine a plausible scenario of a parent insisting on their son or daughter attending a local youth club. Reluctance to be there would certainly be an initial barrier, but with the quality of engagement on the part of the youth workers, the young person may subsequently be glad they were forced to attend. Youth work projects like e2e (entry to employment) involve a measure of compulsion (Redfearn, 2005). What is important in such projects is the curriculum that underpins their practice rather than the fact that the participants do not choose to attend. Indeed the curriculum could well be more stimulating and exciting, participative and challenging, in a project which is targeted, and young people do not choose to attend, than within one which the young people attended voluntarily.

There are at the very least degrees of compulsion operating in youth work settings which ostensibly lack voluntary participation. It may well be the case that many young people enjoy school, and go relatively autonomously but clearly there is more compulsion within a YOT team or a youth offenders institution. Importantly there are also 'levels of voluntary participation', that is differences in youth work settings which young people access

‘involuntarily’, as some contain more choice than others. A project in a school can be optional to the young people, even though the choice to be in school is not, such as a lunch time project which is the exclusive remit of youth workers, the focus of which may be entirely dictated by the young people who choose to attend. Meanwhile an ‘alternative to custody’ programme is opted into by potential inmates but the choice is a ‘Hobson’s choice’- prison or the project, and what they do on the programme may be entirely dictated to them.

## Enabling engagement or choosing to attend

Maybe one of the reasons why voluntary participation is held up as a defining characteristic of youth work is that it can be used to distinguish it from other welfare and educational services. But this alone should not be used to elevate it beyond its actual importance. Voluntary participation is an important principle upon which much quality youth work is founded. However one needs a critical understanding of the concept and it cannot legitimately be presented as either a necessary or sufficient condition of youth work.

Indeed there is actually no opposite to voluntary participation: One cannot participate ‘involuntarily’. Neither is this mere semantics. Participation is an intentional act. One can be physically present but not actually participate. What this shows is that there are two important and distinctly different aspects to voluntary participation – attendance and participation.

In youth work practice precipitated by voluntary participation, both aspects are entered into under the young people’s own volition. That is, they can both choose to attend and choose to participate. In practice without the precursor of voluntary participation it is only the latter which is entered into intentionally, ie the young people cannot choose whether or not to attend – they have to be there – but they can choose whether or not to participate. Perhaps practice should be as much concerned with ‘enabling engagement’ as ensuring young people are able to choose whether or not to attend?

Indeed the fact that young people attend through voluntary participation is not necessarily a guarantee that they have exercised a genuine autonomous choice, for example it is possible that peer pressure has had an influence on their attendance. Ultimately it is the quality of the relationship which forms out of the engagement, the degree of choice at the disposal of the participants, and the participative practices of the workers, not simply whether the project was based on the participants being able to choose to attend, that defines the potential of youth work practice. Ultimately it is the ability to ‘enable young people to engage’ which is important. Choosing to attend is one of the factors which would assist this engagement but it is not the only one and in itself it is no guarantee.

## A number of questions remain:

- *Are there any settings in which youth work cannot be undertaken, such as youth offending teams, youth offenders institutions?*



It is too easy to dismiss out of hand the problems associated with some of these settings, as they are considerable, for example the disempowering nature of the engagement a young person has 'as an offender' within a YOT, and the lack of any choice for a young person over process or outcomes when operating under a court order. However a subtle but significant dynamic within settings and institutions which do not operate voluntary participation is: 'who is perceived to be the authority figure?' Is the youth worker perceived as being in the position of authority or is it some other body such as a court when working within a YOT, or a teacher when working in a school. If the youth worker is not seen as the authority figure the formation of a relationship will be easier as an 'adult to adult transaction' will be enacted (Berne, 1964). They will be able to begin to engage with the young person and ultimately, be seen by them, to be on their side. Indeed informal educators may well point to the role of the prison chaplain, as someone who is both within the system, and ultimately independent. The chaplain is on the inmate's side and concerned exclusively with their interests. Even a youth worker overseeing a young person on a supervision order from a court has the potential to be doing youth work by 'being with young people and engaging in conversation' as opposed to merely ensuring they fulfil the requirements of the order.

One should of course not naively assume that youth work which is operating within the remit of voluntary participation places the youth worker outside the position of authority figure. For instance centre based youth workers have responsibilities for health and safety and the welfare of young people, as well as other members of the community, all of which can potentially set them against some young people. Neither is the detached worker completely removed from these responsibilities. Indeed ethical dilemmas (Banks, 1999) often result from youth workers witnessing young people's criminal acts and decisions need to be made as to whether to inform the authorities or choose an alternative intervention, with a view to committing to a longer term process.

Ultimately I would argue practice should contain a critical awareness of 'power and authority' whatever the context. Issues of power are mitigated in settings which operate through voluntary participation but they are not removed. Neither is it the case that merely because young people have not chosen to attend (ie without voluntary participation) that issues of power cannot be addressed. Participative practices can be built into such settings.

- *The community context of youth work.*

Implicitly practice founded on voluntary participation locates itself in the community, whether within a centre or through detached work. The community context is at least 'one degree' removed from the work in settings which do not adopt this principle. Schools and YOTs are at least to some extent detached and removed from their communities (though perhaps the best are less so). Informal educators who rightly value 'fostering democracy in communities' (Jefferies and Smith, 2005) highlight the problem of work in settings removed from their community context. Youth work would therefore be much the weaker in terms of both its processes and outcomes if a significant proportion of its energies were redirected from this important locus.

- *Youth culture and the social aspect of youth work practice.*

Traditionally youth work practice has embraced youth culture and develops out of the social world of young people (Davies, 2005). Work not based on voluntary participation at least

has the potential to ride roughshod across these very important aspects of young people's lives. Schools are not renowned for embracing youth culture, more often than not trying to eradicate young people's self expression entirely from the school environment. This is despite the importance of youth culture to many young people. Youth projects, particularly those associated with young people's voluntary participation, tend to embrace youth culture and young people's social networks, which may in part underpin their success. However one should remember that young people themselves are often excluded from attending centres or 'hanging out' on the streets or parks, through fear and intimidation and that voluntary participation has a habit of inadvertently reflecting the dominant culture of young people. Targeted work does have the potential to put youth workers in touch with young people who they would not ordinarily meet.

Despite this, and other related problems, most notably in relation to power and authority, I would argue it is possible to undertake youth work in settings which do not embrace voluntary participation, as long as they embrace a number of fundamental values and accepted practices. These would include acknowledging:

- the values of youth work most notably about respect, and self determination;
- conversation involving 'adult to adult' communication;
- Extending participation;
- 'Being with' young people, and not overly concerned with 'acting on' them;
- Devolving and negotiating 'choices' concerning content, structure, focus, and purpose;
- Building relationships that involve the development of a process.

## Conclusion

This is not an article arguing against youth work which operates with voluntary participation and it must be acknowledged that there are many important aspects of practice which are facilitated by a commitment to it. Furthermore youth work practice would be much the poorer if it discontinued. However it is arguing against the belief that one cannot do youth work in settings with 'in-voluntary' participation. It has been argued that this certainly is 'possible'. Although it should also be noted that this is not inevitable, and that if youth work is to be viable careful consideration needs to be given to the dynamics of practice in such settings as the 'givens of practice' will not necessarily follow and more attention needs to be paid to structuring in power and choice into such settings. Ultimately though the guiding principle in work which occurs in settings where young people have not explicitly chosen to be, should perhaps be, 'is this the kind of thing the young people would have participated in voluntarily, if they had been given the opportunity?' Indeed it would be beneficial to begin to talk of voluntary or involuntary attendance and participation separately.

Finally youth work without voluntary participation may well make a significant deviation from the historical tradition of youth work but this in itself does not or should not preclude work from being 'considered' in these new and challenging settings. If youth work within settings defined by a lack of choice over attendance, can still embrace many of its embedded values and 'procedural principles' (Ord, 2007), then there is no reason why it

should not be undertaken and it is feasible that many benefits will accrue for the young people involved.

Just because power is not structured into the dynamics of a setting, in terms of attendance, it does not mean it cannot be introduced in other ways. However therein lies the question. As we saw with voluntary participation many of the givens of practice necessarily follow (Davies, 2005). They do not necessarily follow in settings which operate without it and therefore a commitment to the distinctive youth work processes is required, not least the need to structure power into the engagement with young people. This state of affairs is not always apparent in the current policy climate. Whilst the outcomes of youth work appear to be in demand (DfES, 2002) the processes which precipitate those outcomes are often either unacknowledged or ignored. In situations where youth workers find themselves working without the precursor of voluntary participation they may well need to be assertive, articulate their distinctive approach, and garner commitment from within the relevant institutions if they are to continue with their successes.

## Note

- 1 This article began as a chapter in my earlier book, (Ord, 2007) but has been developed considerably. I am indebted to those who engaged in the debate following the delivery of earlier version of this paper at the 'Symposium on Youth Work' in Leeds (March 08).

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# Measuring Outcomes in Youth Work in Northern Ireland

**Tony Morgan**

*One aspect of the 'peace dividend' in Northern Ireland has been the increase in financial support from the European Union through Peace I and II funded programmes (now Peace III) which has given out millions of pounds to many youth projects. The implication of this 'additional' funding has led to recipients having to offer 'tangible' outcomes. Indeed the outcomes have led to many voluntary youth groups changing direction as they 'chase' the finance to survive and benefit from this short-term funding approach. This article plots some of the chronological decisions that have shaped youth work in Northern Ireland and asks the question, is youth work being ideologically shaped by external policies in the pursuit of learning outcomes?*

**Key Words:** youth work, Northern Ireland, peace dividend, outcomes

Nowadays, especially in youth work, the notion of educational objectives seems to have been replaced by the concept of 'outcomes'. Whereas 'objectives' tends to imply planning, tasks still to be achieved, learning still to occur, 'outcomes' mean something rather different. This concept assumes that the objectives have already been set, that the learning has taken place, and that some measurable effect has resulted from the experience. There seems to be, however, a significant level of discussion centring on the extent to which outcomes can be measured or observed.

In view of these concerns, it is necessary to examine definitions of outcomes, in particular outcomes as a result of social interventions, and in doing so, to consider the purpose and pressures for their development. Consideration must also be given to the possibility of locating a point in time when the concept of outcomes (as a pre-determined result of an intervention) entered the 'language' of youth work and to identifying who or what was primarily responsible for the introduction of the concept. Some attempt will also be made to explore the social and economic policy context against which the concept evolved and finally, to review its purpose and scope in youth work and specifically in the youth service in Northern Ireland today.

In the youth work sector, 'outcomes' are closely interconnected with the debate on the use of curriculum in the youth service. It is the intention to refer to this debate but only for the purpose of illustrating the impact of, and the context for the development of the concept of outcomes as a predetermined result of youth work interventions. However, an additional issue emerges from the debate which suggests that youth work does not have a clear understanding about what outcomes were already of offer within the service. If, for example, youth work can be freely shaped by funders what exactly is it that youth work loses, in terms of its own perception about expected outcomes. While plotting factors that have shaped an outcomes-driven agenda in Northern Ireland, this article uncovers a 'soft underbelly' associated with the concept of measurement in youth work. Measurement, in this instance is assumed to be a concept or tangible indicator that, if recorded and

understood in some scientific way, will enhance the provision of a 'youth service'.

For Jeffs and Smith (1998) there is a direct challenge to youth work from policy makers in terms of funded projects. They suggest that youth work is not exempt from an emphasis on control within some education and training programmes and that the aim of government is to change behaviour, or at the extreme, increase surveillance and incarceration of young people if all else fails. Funding in this instance is to develop less anti-social behaviour and more compliance in order to promote healthier practices (Jeffs and Smith, 1998:47). Some of these aspirations resonate with key funders. For Jeffs and Smith (1998:47) there is a Janus faced issue for youth workers. On the one hand they want young people to participate in a service that is about empowerment, engagement and understanding of their needs, while at the same time, chasing funding that has a predefined outcome not necessarily easily calibrated with these aims. They state quite categorically, 'New funding mechanisms have ended many of the historic characteristics of the work, in particular the need for continuity, the educational base and autonomy' (1998:48). They explain this by asking if youth work can operate if attendance is compulsory (p49), one indicator of a shifting fundamental principle for youth workers. They also discuss the changing role of youth workers, for example, when moving into schools. Research by Morgan et al (2007) is in agreement with their analysis when they say that youth workers are not doing what was historically their perceived role in the community. However, it was interesting to note that when asked about outcomes in the context of the school, many youth workers favoured them and indeed they were expected by teachers (Morgan et al, 2007). Parents, and indeed young people saw the benefit of this approach of informal education within the school. It is worth noting that many of the youth workers in the investigation did not continue to measure their work in the same way outside the school setting.

One might argue that the measurement of outcomes is a contextual concept more easily understood and operationalised by youth workers outside their own setting. If youth workers move into another setting, such as a school, they need to use a language that the organisation understands, thus forcing them to develop measurable outcomes often in terms of accredited personal development courses. In his work on social capital and lifelong learning, Field (2003) argues that educational establishments such as schools have started to use the language of markets and competition. He says that this has created negative unintended consequences. 'Thus output-related funding, rather than improving performances of service- delivery agencies such as colleges has often distorted their behaviour' (Field, 2003:209). Could youth work be following a funding agenda representative of the language of the markets and competition, such as outputs, outcomes, value for money and competition? Field believes so, and offers a word of warning:

*Rather than pursuing the aims originally envisaged by those who drew up the approved list of eligible outputs, organisational managers often seek to improve their share of resources by focussing on reported achievement against the key indicators, or reclassifying existing activities in order to meet new funding criteria and downplaying other (unmeasured or less generously rewarded) core activities. (Ibid:209).*

Field further suggests that the 'fuzzy' nature of soft outcomes creates problems if they are used by Government to achieve certain political objectives (2003:210). This is important to

youth work in that many of the outcomes, such as raising self-esteem, increasing young people's confidence, building relationships, challenging values and beliefs are perceived as soft outcomes. These are unlikely to be ones that ministers or civil servants feel confident using in their capacity to develop clear criteria for judging success (or failure). Field cites an example of reducing non-participation among adults in lifelong learning, saying, '... while utterly admirable in itself; the difficulties in reaching an agreed definition of 'non-participation' is likely to prove formidable...' p210. He goes on to say that there are similar complex characteristics around the question of informal education, yet, '...increasingly economic policy as well as education policy focuses on the role of networks and trust in facilitating the informal transmission of skills and knowledge.' (Field 2003:210)

Field's focus on lifelong learning, has some resonance with youth work. Youth work is based on outcomes that are often termed 'soft' and difficult to measure. Governments will fund programmes that can offer transparency, measurable outcomes and quantifiable outputs. Field says that governments will only offer small amounts of finance partly because of the difficulties faced in establishing whether the results offer value for money. For Field (2003:211) intangible factors invariably present policy makers with measurement problems. He says that pursuing soft objectives through partnerships with non-governmental actors also lays government open to the charge of throwing money away (2003:211).

Field outlines a few reasons why these types of projects, that have difficulty with measuring outcomes, are still prevalent in government policy:

- a. They normally have considerable legitimacy and are therefore 'safe' in political terms. Who is going to say that additional resources for youth work would not be welcome?
- b. They represent a relatively easy field for non-regulatory types of intervention. Much responsibility for implementation and delivery will rest with relatively low status and local actors. Partners can be won over through incentive funding and the prospect exists of hard short-term targets.
- c. Governments like to be seen as having faith in the human capital approach to human resource planning. The point is that 'schemes' that address aspects of human capital (qualifications led) are looked favourably upon by government ministers at policy level. Although it could be argued that this represents a highly mechanistic view of the concept of human capital.

What therefore are the implications for youth work in terms of short-term funding, 'safe' programmes, non-regulatory approaches that have difficulty with measuring specific outcomes?

## **In search of a definition.**

The Charities Evaluation Service (CES), for example, defines outcomes as changes that indicate whether an organisation has made progress to its aims and to what extent its interventions are making a difference (CES. 2000). In another context (research undertaken by the CES for the then National Lottery Community Fund) the authors define outcomes as, '... all the changes and effects that happen as a result of your work.' (Cupitt and Ellis, 2003:5). The use

of the word 'all' is very significant here. It encompasses both the intended *and unintended* outcomes of an organisation's work. This is an important point to be aware of when considering the effects of informal education interventions because often the unintended outcomes can be significant benefits that never could have been predicted. Kendall and Knapp (1999:25) in their work on behalf of the Voluntary Activity Unit of the Department of Social Development, Northern Ireland, refer to, '... the final outcomes, which, at the most simple level, are the changes over time in the welfare, quality of life and status (such as educational attainment or health) of end users induced by the voluntary activity in question.'

These definitions create a sense of services being provided in a particular setting, in exchange for learning, change or development. They also illustrate that the exchange usually takes place within a relationship and across social boundaries, for example, between a service provider and a client, user or customer. Of themselves, the definitions give no real sense of their role or purpose in these settings and relationships. What is also masked is the inter-dependence of the concept of 'outcomes' with a sub-set of other terms such as inputs, baselines, activities, outputs, outcome indicators, outcome targets, impacts and results. There is a risk of theoretical paralysis here if too much specificity is sought in relation to each of these subsets but to some degree, all of these must be established, recorded, monitored and evaluated before any connection between what has gone before and what has been consequent to it, even in a casual way, can be claimed.

## Splitting the Outcome

It becomes apparent in the literature that the term 'outcome' is used interchangeably, and sometimes confused with, other linked terminology such as 'outcome indicator'. A potential cause for confusion was the suggestion that outcomes could be split into two types, 'hard' and 'soft'. Table 1 below illustrates examples of both. It is an extract from a guide on measuring soft outcomes, developed specifically for projects funded through the European Social Fund (ESF); a fund primarily focussed on training, especially that which leads to the enhanced employability of participants. However the authors, Lloyd and O'Sullivan (2003:5), also believe their findings can be applied in a range of settings.

| <b>Table 1                      Examples of Hard and Soft Outcomes</b>  |  |
|---|--|
| Hard Outcomes   | Soft Outcomes  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⬅ Starting a training course</li> <li>⬅ Getting a qualification</li> <li>⬅ Getting a job</li> <li>⬅ Moving into permanent accommodation</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⬅ Improved self confidence or self-esteem</li> <li>⬅ Improved individual appearance and presentation</li> <li>⬅ Improved ability to manage and plan finances</li> <li>⬅ Improved language, numeracy or literacy skills</li> <li>⬅ Better time-keeping/time management</li> <li>⬅ Improved ability to get on with people/ teamwork</li> <li>⬅ Ability to write a job application letter or prepare CV</li> </ul> |

For Lloyd and O'Sullivan (2003) hard outcomes then are the clearly definable and quantifiable results that show the progress an individual has made. In contrast, soft outcomes are those that represent intermediary stages on the way to achieving a hard outcome. This is not dissimilar to the concept of 'outcome indicator', a term which is normally attributed to non-measurable behaviours that can, however, be observed and which can 'indicate' that change is taking place. Critical to both types of 'outcome', however, is the need to monitor and track key aspects of the work being undertaken in order to lay claim to the actual and attributable outcomes of it. To make such a claim, the same information must be collected at least twice over a period of time and the results compared (Carrington, 2002:26).

Carrington also raises questions as to the value of soft outcomes as indicators. He claims that they are often personal to the client group and their measurement can be intangible and subjective. Obviously, therefore, they cannot be externally assessed and while they do not tend to be a principle concern for statutory bodies that fund other agencies to help achieve public policy or common goals, they do demand a level of trust from the funding body. However, Carrington concurs with the notion that soft outcomes, despite the subjectivity in their identification, can provide 'a good illustration' of a positive outcome of an intervention and that the learner is making progress along the way to achieving a main goal or 'hard outcome'.

There is a suggestion in this that 'outcome indicators' and 'soft outcomes' are almost the by-product of organisations' work and not outcomes in their own right. However, the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) in a paper entitled 'Soft Outcomes and European-funded Projects' (2002:1), argues that, despite the difficulties in measurement when compared to hard outcomes, soft outcomes are none the less 'real results' with a positive bearing on the development of individuals, and they can be measured, recorded and shown as such. For example, video evidence of individual before any interventions and fixed time frame video evidence of same individual dressing and presenting in an improved manner or a diary kept by individuals illustrating and recording improved skills.

Morgan et al (2007) use the term 'expected outcomes' to denote that if youth workers in schools run a personal and social development programme they can 'expect' to increase self-esteem, increase self-awareness, develop confidence and numerous other traits. Quality assurance, for many youth workers in schools was about evaluating the delivery mechanism and involvement rather than specifically the perceived growth of the individual, suggesting that if it is not possible to measure 'soft' outcomes then why waste time trying. They believed that if the right mechanism was used in terms of youth engagement then the expected outcome should be achieved. However, this requires a degree of trust between those providing the funding and their understanding of the competency of the service provider.

## The Purpose of Outcomes

The use of the concept of 'outcomes' in business or organisational settings perhaps sheds some light on their purpose for social and educational purposes. It might be instinctive for a youth worker simply to claim that outcomes are the benefits a learner gains from



his learning experience. Clearly there must be some accountability, some realistic attempt to demonstrate that such outcomes actually are the result of the intervention. Carrington (2002:35), in a publication produced for the Community Fund, quotes the CES on the purpose of outcomes, 'Organisations need to know their outcomes (the difference they have made) for two reasons: for accountability and organisational learning.'

In a subsequent Community Fund publication, Cupitt and Ellis (2003:12) of the CES expand on this, describing outcomes as being concerned with making work more effective and meeting clients' needs. They emphasise that identifying desired outcomes right from the start of a piece of work is about enabling better planning and satisfying the expectations of funders. Aspects of good management, better planning and meeting needs, are given equal status to 'better accountability' and 'satisfying the expectations of funders'. However, 'satisfying the expectation of funders' highlights an underlying concern experienced by many who are affected by the drive towards identifying and measuring outcomes. Instead of focusing on the needs and development of the young people, the interventions might have to be adjusted to comply with funders' wishes. Carrington (2002:55) urges funders to avoid adding to this negative and one-sided view by encouraging those to whom grants have been awarded to see the approach 'as their own'. Carrington (2002:35) also argues that funders should be aware of and trust the integrity and conscientiousness with which the voluntary sector carries out its obligations. He quotes the CES on the 'greater acceptance' in the voluntary sector of the good management practice associated with the process of monitoring and examining the outcomes of an organisation's work.

Outcomes, therefore, seem to have a twofold purpose. They are seen as evidence that the learning process is effective and that the young person is benefiting. And they are also evidence to funders or policy makers that time and resources are being effectively used. There is always the caveat, however, that when assessors or external funders to the intervention seek evidence of the 'added value', there are times when a substantial improvement in the development of young people may appear negligible to outside eyes.

## The Demand of Outcomes

Not everyone, however, is prepared to trust the identification of outcomes to the tutor or youth worker. One agency that demands accountability through the identification of outcomes is the Community Fund, now re-branded as The Big Lottery Fund. In 2002 the then Community Fund Chief Executive, Richard Buxton, outlined the Fund's intention to place 'a greater emphasis on outcomes'. Following Buxton's statement, it became an obligation for organisations in receipt of funding to demonstrate how they were '...making a measurable short-term difference and contributing to making a long-term difference to the lives of people they seek to help.' (Buxton, 2002:2). However, it should be stated that the demand to prove a long-term impact is virtually impossible to evidence in time-bound interventions.

Such a clear statement from a body with significant influence increases the demand for an outcomes-orientated approach to work with people of all ages and backgrounds. From the point of view of the worker-on-the-ground, such an emphasis on demonstrable outcomes

has negative implications. It inhibits their freedom to pursue one-to-one interventions with specific young people and limits creative approaches that may work in practice but are difficult to assess. Harland et al (2005:23) concluded that over-emphasis on outcomes could diminish the ability of tutors, '...to attend to the process of youth work and build relationships.' But, as suggested by Jeffs and Smith (1998:54), funders are challenging the traditional linear movement of youth from adolescence to adulthood by expecting youth work to be more creative in both their approach and measurement of outcomes. In fact, they throw down a gauntlet to youth work in regards to reinventing itself by stating, 'Youth work – much like whaling or lamp-lighting, is no longer required as a discrete activity' (p64); a rather cynical comment that may be associated with the outcomes debate in terms of the perceived difficulty that youth work has outlining its purpose and function in modern society.

Youth workers themselves, in response to similar demands from the European Union Peace and Reconciliation Programmes, expressed similar concern. The 'Peace I' and 'Peace II' programmes, as they became known, originated in the mid 1990s and brought substantial funding from the EU for work across all sectors to support the developing political and peace processes in Northern Ireland. But Harland et al (2005:54) reports that the workers were experiencing an, 'increasing pressure... to evidence specific outcomes from their work.' Outcomes that were clearly related to peace building but were still difficult to measure in any tangible way other than stating that young Catholics and Protestants came together. Did they understand each other, probably yes, because of the programme design but could this be measured in any meaningful way, probably no, given the difficulty alluded to above. The funded work, however, was exceptionally important for peace building and has left a major impact on the lives of many young people in Northern Ireland suggesting that measurement was unnecessary or meaningless. An illustration about the strength of the delivery and programme rather than the need to have clearly stated outcomes.

Lloyd and O'Sullivan confirm that the nature of the demands from the EU may generate a deal of 'administrative' stress for youth workers. This funding source brought with it European Union requirements for the identification and measurement of 'soft outcomes' as a key criterion for receipt of funding, especially where hard outcomes were not appropriate to the target group (Lloyd and O'Sullivan, 2003:3). It had already been made clear that accountability for soft outcomes is extremely difficult particularly since success often differs, sometimes quite substantially, from learner to learner.

Kendall and Knapp (1999:4-7) suggest that there are four key elements to the demand to identify and measure the outcomes of their activities, particularly in reference to community and voluntary sector organisations:

- a. The first is accountability for public funds, i.e. taxpayers' money. Public accountability has always demanded that public resources are used legally, with probity, and to achieve value for money. However, increased attention is now being placed on identifying what value is actually achieved with this public money.
- b. The second element originates from other funders. Again, *it is concerned with accountability for the funding provided and for reporting, in some measurable way, on a project's performance and its outcomes.* Cupitt and Ellis (2003:4), agree that many

voluntary sector organisations are already familiar with describing what they do and identifying who they work with. However, they suggest that the sector also needs to place greater emphasis on indicating precisely the changes that come about in people's lives as a result of the work it does.

- c. Kendall and Knapp (1999:6) see the third element as coming from managers within the publicly or privately funded organisations. They present an argument *that organisations themselves need performance-related information for their day-to-day operation and to gauge how well they are performing in pursuit of their objectives and organisational aims.*
- d. The fourth element is from members of the public at large and community expectations, not just because they are taxpayers but as stakeholders or participants in the community and voluntary sector, whether as users, volunteers, employees or donors. Kendall and Knapp (1996:7) explain that these *stakeholders seek entitlement to make demands through internal organisational mechanisms* (e.g. attendance at annual general meetings) and external channels (e.g. the media). They specifically highlight the role of 'advocacy groups' within this element of the demand for outcome and performance data.

It is apparent from all of the above that an outcome-orientated approach to the work of organisations has become pervasive across all sectors. It is not confined purely to outcomes for the immediate beneficiaries or individual end-users of services, ie. young people. There are demands on services for increased evidence of progress in a variety of circumstances, e.g., housing conditions, roads, traffic flows, recreational facilities etc. etc. Hard outcomes are expected in all Government sectors.

Given the vigour of the present focus on outcomes across such a diverse range of interested parties, it is unlikely that informal learning will escape an increasingly intense spotlight on the outcomes of its interventions. For this reason, new effective forms of measuring such outcomes and more convincing methods for assessment of soft outcomes will have to be devised.

## Youth work, Outcomes and Curriculum

The movement toward producing 'measurable outcomes' for youth workers and the youth service has been gaining momentum for almost two decades. In 1990 Jeffs and Smith (1990:26) set out their picture for the future shape of youth work. They envisaged a future in which organisations, agencies, departments and even local authorities would:

*...have to demonstrate how they will meet pre-determined criteria concerning, for example, target group expected outcomes and how they will be measured (performance indicators); compliance with the mission statements / aims of youth work as defined by the government; and expenditure targets and budgetary controls.*

This vision resonates with developments in Northern Ireland where a centralised curriculum for youth work had been in operation since 1987. In his curriculum statement, the then Under Secretary of State for Education in Northern Ireland, Dr. Brian Mawhinney (DENI,

1987), stated that it was about laying the foundation for a new sense of common purpose and a more effective means of judging performance. Value for money featured heavily in Dr. Mawhinney's presentation and he saw it as an important part of the curriculum's purpose to assist all levels of youth service to determine its own priorities within the resources available. The Minister was also at pains to point out that the curriculum was not being 'forced on' the youth service. However, it is clear throughout his presentation that failure to enter into a contract based on the core requirements of the curriculum would almost certainly ensure that an application would be rejected.

Jeffs and Smith (1990:23) said that recent changes within (formal) education, e.g. the 'imposition' of a core curriculum with a centrally defined teaching syllabus, a set of outcomes, and a testing and assessment framework to measure those outcomes may indicate certain predictions about other sectors as well. They explained that in the health sector, several kinds of outcome were now expected. For example, trusts were expected to indicate the construction of the internal market and demonstrate how it is designed to encourage hospitals to compete for resources. The Social Services were expected to demonstrate a greater focus on targeting services and the level of success in the introduction of the 'care in the community' initiative. Jeffs and Smith (1990) focused specifically on youth work and at the time of their writing, they were taking account of the words of the then Under Secretary of State at the Department of Education in London, Alan Howarth, speaking at the first ministerial conference on a core curriculum for youth work in 1989. At this conference he stated that the government was looking for a, 'directed fusillade [rather] than a scatter-gun approach...' as a methodology for the future youth service in England. The Minister went on to say that what he meant by core curriculum was not so much the aims and activities of the service but the '...priority outcomes which the service should seek to provide' (Ord, 2004:44).

His ideas, however, were not to be easily or immediately implemented. The rate of Jeffs and Smith's overall predictions, and expected outcomes in particular, slowed somewhat in the early 1990s with Ministerial changes (Ord, 2004:45) and what was generally perceived to be the Department's, '...hamfisted management' of a further two Ministerial Conferences held in 1990 and 1992 (Merton and Wylie, 2004: 63). By and large attempts to secure a core curriculum failed, mainly because the wider youth service was unwilling to sign up to a set of ideas which seemed to be centrally prescribed. However, the question of a role for the youth service was pursued throughout this period and agreement was reached on a set of common principles forming the foundation of effective youth work in England. Significantly, the agreement reached did not specify the kinds of learning outcomes to be achieved nor the criteria by which the above principles might be assessed and measured. (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA], June 2000).

While the concept of a 'core curriculum as outcomes' for the youth service had been largely evaded across England in the early and mid 1990s, throughout the same period the Northern Ireland curriculum for youth work was firmly embedded. All units and projects funded through an Education Library Board (ELB) were required to set out at least an annual work plan incorporating the nine core requirements of the curriculum document that were to be reflected in all programmes, which would then form the basis of a contract for funding (DENI, 1987).

The format of the work plans and contracts differed across the five Education and Library Board areas but, in each ELB, clubs and units were asked to specify in advance the output, i.e. numbers of young people, numbers of sessions, projects and the extent to which young people participating in programmes had progressed in the core requirements. It is clear that such demands were, in effect if not explicitly, a request for stated 'hard outcomes'. The measurement of 'soft' outcomes was side-stepped.

The demand did eventually become explicit in an occasional paper from the Inter Board Youth Panel of the five Northern Ireland ELBs (1994:8). Clearly discussions had been on-going in the background and policy-makers were becoming increasingly determined to ensure that evidence of 'value for funding' would be provided. The authors of the occasional paper emphasised that future curriculum development must have a sharpened focus to ensure the quality of the service provided to young people and be carried out in as effective a manner as possible within available resources. In conclusion it stated that any curriculum framework requires that outcomes are clearly defined prior to embarking on any piece of work.

It would thus appear that 'curriculum as outcomes', which had been strongly opposed and largely avoided in England, was still the pursuit of the statutory youth service in Northern Ireland. Subsequently, via the funding role of ELBs to local voluntary clubs and units in their areas, the requirement of setting pre-determined outcomes was extended to the wider voluntary youth sector. The 'Report of the Curriculum Review Working Group' (DENI, 1996) reflected broad agreement on the strengths and weaknesses of Dr. Mawhinney's 1987 curriculum statement (i.e. the imposition of a centralised core curriculum on Youth Work). The Working Group also reported, however, that some in the youth service had felt that the curriculum was being applied in an inflexible and prescriptive fashion and in their proposals for the future of the curriculum, the Working Group suggested that the grant-giving powers of the relevant statutory bodies (including ELBs) could encourage attention to particular curricular themes as the needs of the learners change. Even with this 'concession', there remains a clear implication here that 'the centre' is beginning to dictate the curriculum, its methods and the manners of its assessment. Such centralised control over a sector that relies on an 'informal methodology' that must be flexible, adjustable and student-centred must create fears for the effectiveness of its approach. This echoes Carrington's (2002) general concern with 'funders and compliance' as well as Jeffs and Smith's (1990) specific concern about 'compliance to achieve funding' leading to a government defined youth work agenda. The risk for the youth service in these circumstances was that focussing funding on curricular themes or 'outcome focussed funding' would result in the development of assessment-driven interventions with young people, rather than planned interventions based on the identified needs of the young people concerned. Rogers (1993) suggested that agencies can become shaped by the supply of funding, rather than the demands of the client group resulting in a temptation for the idea to follow the money, rather than the other way round. This more 'entrepreneurial' approach, states Rogers, can create management problems in addition to the ethical dilemmas.

## Curriculum Outcomes and Measuring Frameworks

In spite of a constant emphasis on outcomes across a variety of sectors, the issue sometimes

ebbed as well as flowed in DENI documents. In 2003 DENI updated and re-launched 'Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice.' The document was originally issued in 1997 at the same time as a major consultation on youth service policy in Northern Ireland was being undertaken and consequently its impact was reduced. 'The Model' sets out a central theme of personal and social development and three core principles for youth work in Northern Ireland:

- a. - commitment to preparing young people for participation;
- b. - testing values and beliefs; and
- c. - the promotion of acceptance and understanding of others.

Like its 1987 predecessor, the new version mentions effectiveness, efficiency and best value but this time more in passing than as a starting point. But a key, somewhat contradictory, feature of the Model is a curriculum and programme development cycle which notably makes no direct reference to outcomes, focussing instead on consulting, agreeing and evaluating as the means of identifying and reporting progress or the lack of it. Further, it rates as 'a strength' the fact that there are no prescribed outcomes other than those agreed in consultation with participants (DENI, 2003:20).

For others at that time, however, the issue of 'outcomes' had not disappeared. One effort to promote a 'framework' to develop monitoring and evaluation processes based on performance indicators and outcomes stands out in the Northern Ireland context during this period – not because of its influence or impact but rather because of the number of times it appears in youth sector focussed documents. 'A Framework for Interventions' (2000) was produced jointly by the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI), the Inter Board Panel and YouthNet, in anticipation of the Peace II Programme. The Framework provides a list of suggested target groups and three levels of incremental interventions:

- Level 1: Inclusion of Marginalised Young People;
- Level 2: Capacity Building; and
- Level 3: Developing Citizenship .

Each level prescribes a set of activities around which, 'characteristically', interventions could be made. Each level also contains a set of expected outcomes that would observably or measurably result from these interventions. The authors stressed, however, that the Framework was not to be seen as inflexibly prescriptive nor were the three levels of intervention to be seen or acted upon in isolation from each other. The Framework was offered as a developmental continuum around which applicants to the Peace II Programme could build a logical proposal that would, in turn, contribute to a strategic approach to the work with young people that would be funded through it.

The 'Youth Work Strategy 2005-2008' developed under the auspices of the Youth Service Liaison Forum (YSLF)<sup>1</sup>, puts forward a new vision and mission for the youth work sector in Northern Ireland. Under its theme of delivering effective inclusive youth work, a priority is to 'develop and measure performance / outcome indicators' (DENI, 2005:8), which is currently being taken forward by the Curriculum Development Unit on behalf of the YSLF.

Given the degree of contradiction emanating from DENI publications in their attitudes

to outcomes (DENI 1996:17, 2003:20 and 2005:8), it is perhaps no surprise that little progress appears to have been made on 'defining' outcomes along the lines envisaged by the Inter Board Youth Panel (1994:8). However, since enhanced partnership and cross-sectoral collaboration is crucial to the effectiveness and potential impact of the 'Youth Work Strategy', and since this will be overseen and underpinned by the YSLF who see the definition and measuring of outcomes as a priority, inconsistencies in attitudes, especially those found in DENI documents, should disappear.

## Youth Work and Outcomes

France and Wiles (1997:1) echo Jeffs and Smith's (1990) earlier prediction of more focussed targeting of resources and the consequent emphasis on achieving pre-determined outputs and outcomes in tackling the problems of young people or young people's problems. Ominously, they also note that formal monitoring and evaluation in the Youth Service was not well established. This weakness is illustrated by the failure of 73 per cent of 28 initiatives (awarded funding through a Department for Education in London sponsored crime reduction programme) to put in place a monitoring and evaluation system to produce data, '...which could demonstrate their outcomes to the satisfaction of an outsider.' (France and Wiles, 1997:8)

A similar weakness to that noted by France and Wiles is also found in work undertaken by Mattessich of the Wilder Research Centre, on behalf of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland. Mattessich (2001:15) observed that organisations funded by the Youth Council, as a group, addressed; '...outcomes that are disparate from one another and which, to the lay person, might seem one or two levels removed from the most important needs that youth have.' He went on to point out that while, 'some organisations' funded by the Youth Council could demonstrate their results, outcomes and achievements, 'most cannot.' Mattessich was keen to point out, however, that these observations referred specifically to the demonstration of 'outcomes' and that this deficiency did not imply that youth sector organisations do not address significant social needs. He was simply trying to point out that neither the average youth worker nor the Youth Council can provide measurable and observable results in a manner that easily captures, 'the approval of politicians, funders, and the general public.'

There was growing recognition by youth workers, however, of their responsibility to come to a better understanding of 'outcomes' and to develop skills in demonstrating them. During the substantial consultation process undertaken by those involved in the development of 'Step It Up – Charting Young People's Progress',<sup>2</sup> it was workers in the 'field' who highlighted the need for youth work in Scotland, '...to be properly understood and valued by other professionals, politicians and even some managers!' (Milburn et al, 2003:31). They were also able to accept that to achieve such recognition, they would have to find ways of indicating what was valuable and successful about their work.

Like the 'Strategy for Youth Work in Northern Ireland', 'Step It Up' was also based upon a new definition of the purpose of effective youth work. However, it goes further than the Northern Ireland 'Strategy' by providing a document (inclusive of practice materials and

with links to associated websites),<sup>3</sup> which contains a comprehensive range of indicators and outcomes of youth work activity around a widely agreed framework of social and emotional competencies.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, it contains a specially designed self-assessment programme providing a structure for young people to chart their own development and progress as a result of their participation in youth work activities. On paper at least, such a system could go some way to addressing the issue which Harland et al (2005:57) highlight in their study of the nature of youth work in Northern Ireland, ie. that beyond a broad description of phases in a process, relationship building and general range of skills acquired by young people, the majority of youth workers in their study, '...were unable to articulate concrete outcomes.' Harland et al argued that once youth workers and the Youth Service become competent in the articulation and demonstration of 'outcomes' they will possess the mechanism for 'communicating' the value of youth work and its 'accomplishments' to relevant funders, policy makers, decision-makers and society at large.

Some three years before Harland et al made these comments, however, the Department for Education and Skills published 'Transforming Youth Work – Resourcing Excellent Youth Services' (2002), a paper that asserted the importance of, and the need for, accreditation through a statement of outcomes. The document specified standards of youth work provision for Local Authorities across England, which included defining the target age range as 13 to 19 (with scope for working at the margins with 11 to 13s and 19 to 25-year-olds), an aim to reach 25 per cent of the age range in any given year of operation and a determination to reflect the cultural diversity of the community. Under the heading 'Measuring Performance' it set out 'Annual Youth Service Unique Targets', which re-stated the 25 per cent reach into the target population and set a further target of 60 per cent of these (N.B. this target was subsequently revised down), '... to undergo personal and social development which results in an accredited outcome.' It also specified particular groups or categories of young people to be targeted.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusions

It is clear from all of the above that connecting learning, change and development to the social interventions that take place in a youth or community setting is not simple or straightforward, '... as the causal link between activities undertaken and their impact is not entirely clear.' (Knox and Hughes 1994:248)

Community, voluntary and youth work sectors continue to make a distinctive contribution to the social world of their beneficiaries by addressing social need as they are uniquely placed to identify it. However, if they are to do this in *conjunction and partnership* with Government rather than *at its direction or 'bidding'*, then the ability to demonstrate outcomes becomes crucial. Nonetheless, 'conjunction and partnership' must not be sought 'in compliance' or at the expense of the real perceived needs of the target group. Carrington (2002:33) considers this to be a critical point that has the potential to be lost in the seemingly inexorable movement towards establishing outcomes as a basis for funding or reporting on activities and impact. He warns youth workers of:

*... the importance of ensuring that target outcomes have a meaning for and relevance*



*to the needs and circumstances of service users and are not designed to provide a tidy short term 'result' to enhance the reports of either the funder or the provider.*

Carrington's comment is interesting but does not offer an answer as to what youth workers should measure. Indeed, the quote infers that funders and policy makers appear to have a clear definition about expected outcomes. However, the answer to the dilemma facing youth workers may lie in the nature of the profession. For Schön (2002) the answer is clearly about understanding a profession based on scientific evidence or one that has 'ends' that are confused and unstable. He states (2002:39) that minor professions suffer from shifting, ambiguous 'ends' and from unstable institutional contexts for practice and are therefore unable to develop a base of systematic, scientific professional knowledge. This assertion may go some way towards understanding the difficulty experienced with attempting to measure outcomes in terms recognised as indicative of a profession, such as medicine or engineering. What are the empirical building blocks of the youth work profession or is it a profession, like teaching, that has to deal with the issues and problems in a more holistic, complex and reactive way?

Outcomes may, in the short-term, drive the development of more targeted approaches to youth work but appear to be focussed on human and economic capital at the expense of social capital. The real needs of young people are often not at the centre of the policies as they continue to be viewed as recipients of programmes that are shaped 'for' them not 'by' them. One might go further to suggest that the implicit aim and outcome of most funding is to create change in behaviour irrespective of the needs of the young people. Youth workers, chasing funding, are at times surrendering some the fundamental principles of their profession to the needs of the market. Youth work is more than personal and social development and needs to articulate, in an understandable way, what its outcomes mean, if they are to attract sufficient funding in the future.

One might then ask, is youth work a science or an art? Should youth workers abandon their quest for a solution to measuring the immeasurable? The use of soft outcomes such as self-esteem, confidence, association with others, relationships and openness are vital for many young people and, while they may be difficult to measure nevertheless need to be evaluated and developed. The debate about a strict definition of outcomes in youth work is a barrier to the development of the youth work profession that should be highlighting the strengths of their relationships and association with young people at crucial times in their lives. Funders and policy makers, and those who inspect the profession, need to be educated about this important role. Measurement, if it is needed, should relate to the formal school system through qualifications, otherwise encouragement should be given to the youth work profession to get on with what it does best working alongside young people using 'expected' outcomes based on the delivery of a quality assured professional input based on continuing post-qualifying training.

## Notes

- 1 The YSLF is a body chaired by the Department of Education and inclusive of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, the five Education and Library Boards, YouthNet (the voluntary Youth Network for Northern Ireland), the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum
- 2 This was a comprehensive report produced in 2003 by the Community Education Department of the University of Strathclyde and the Prince's Trust Scotland to support developmental work with young people in youth work settings across Scotland.
- 3 Step It Up youth workers materials can be found online at [www.youthlink.co.uk](http://www.youthlink.co.uk) The Step It Up self-assessment website is at [www.youngscot.org/stepitup](http://www.youngscot.org/stepitup)
- 4 The social and emotional competencies identified in the Scottish model as central to effective youth work and young people's development are: *awareness of myself; solving my problems and making my decisions; my working relationships with others; my communication with others; managing my personal and social relationships; and the world around me.* (Milburn et al, 2003:7).
- 5 To include a locally agreed target for those assessed as not in education, employment or training (NEET) or who are at risk of, or who already fall into the following categories: teenage pregnancy, drugs, alcohol or substance abuse or offending (DfES, 2002:16).

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# Educating Youth Workers as Public Advocates

*Judith Bessant*

*The case is made in this article that public advocacy is an important practice for youth work in the current context and that it needs explicit training that entails the design of a professional youth work curriculum which equips practitioners to be effective. This includes having a stand-alone advocacy or social action subject in the formal curriculum, as well as a renewed concentration on the role of language and how 'youth problems' are framed. This can take different forms in different subjects. For example in a subject area such as 'Youth Policy' it may include analysing the 'problem setting' activities of the media and other policy makers. In history based subjects, it can entail a study of public and 'respectable fears' and how they are connected to the ways young people have been regularly described as 'hooligans' and trouble-makers, thus warranting 'special' treatment. Some of the central elements of a stand-alone youth advocacy or social action subject are also detailed in this article.*

**Keywords:** youth work, advocacy, training

Most western societies are now understood to be going through a far-reaching social, economic and cultural transformation. Social scientists have identified themes like 'globalisation,' 'neo-liberal discourse' and 'individualisation' to describe aspects of those changes and to refer to the ways in which we are now encouraged to experience human agency and see ourselves as 'individuals' leading self-defining lives (Giddens, 1991; Moran, 2005; Massey 2007; Beck, 1997). It's a social context that is different in many ways to the conditions that prevailed prior to the mid 1970s when we were said to have more prescribed lives and 'roles' defined by more stable and predictable social worlds. Having said this it is arguable how much of that theoretical work adequately describes the actual transformation of social relations and everyday lives. No less problematic are the ways that many human service professions including youth work, and those charged with the professional education of youth workers, have understood the last few decades of sweeping change in the organization of western economies and in the apparatus of policy making.

Analytical consideration of these changes has the potential to promote curriculum changes designed to achieve transformations in the ways human service professionals intervene in the lives of young people. This article was written from the vantage point of contemporary Australian youth work which has been manifestly shaped by the ideas and practices brought by British teachers of youth work and text books from 1960s through to the 1980s. During those decades Australian youth work education saw a heavy and largely uncritical reliance on developmental psychology and group work (Heffernan, 1995; Connell, 1964; Hamilton-Smith and Brownell, 1973; Ewen, 1983; Dyson and Szirom, 1983; Szirom and Spartels, 1995). Even during the 1990s the training of youth work students in some Australian institutions drew upon related and uncritical accounts of deviancy theory, 'the science of youth at risk' and case management. The professional youth work curriculum also

traditionally equipped practitioners to organise recreation, sport and leisure activities on the basis of this conceptual approach to practical intervention, alongside the development of skills necessary for office administration.

Within the field the *idea* of youth workers as 'advocates' for young people has long been a conventional way of thinking about youth work, but in the history of formal Australian youth work education, advocacy as a public practice has had a largely fugitive existence and the idea of advocacy was largely limited to certain kinds of relationships which practitioners are expected to build with young people. Although advocacy has been predominantly understood as a commitment to speaking for and expressing solidarity with young people in the various spaces where youth workers practice invariably that notion was more distinguishable by its therapeutic and psychological characteristics than by any political or policy qualities which drew upon the conceptual insights of those disciplines (Massey, 1950; Benjamin et.al, 1997; Connell, 1964; Hamilton-Smith and Brownall, 1973; Landells, 1983). Thus in one Australian state government review of youth work training it was argued that, 'While some attention to sociological theory and policy analysis is necessary, we question the extent of its importance by comparison with the pragmatics of providing programs and services for young people' (Heffernan, 1995: 61).

During the 1990s Australian youth work and many young people paid a heavy price for this long traditional and constrained idea about 'advocacy' within the professional interventions. For example in two jurisdictions Western Australia (WA) and the Northern Territory (NT) mandatory sentencing was introduced targeting young indigenous men, a 'development which was clearly in breach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) and common law principles of judicial discretion and 'let the punishment fit the crime.' It meant for example that in NT people age between 15 and 16 years of age faced a mandatory 28 days in a detention centre for a second offence, while people found guilty of a third offence face a 12 month sentence. WA's laws have been amended now but they have not changed in the NT. Also since the 1980s, successive Australian governments routinely imprisoned children and young people in high security 'detention centers' without trial or charge because they were 'asylum seekers' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1998). During the late 1990s a number of local governments, again in violation of UNCROC, introduced youth curfews. In the early 2000s there were changes to electoral laws that saw the closing of the electoral rolls early denying many people- mainly young – the right to vote.

Whilst young people were enduring the consequences of such repressive policy developments numerous 'peak' bodies (like Australian Youth Policy Advocacy Council and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria) were de-funded by governments keen to silence the small and relatively quiet voice of the youth sector. While some of those de-funded organisations have subsequently revived to date Australian youth workers do not have a national professional association, nor is there an agreed national set of minimal professional education standards. Whilst the youth sector seems to have been growing in strength, including a developing national network of 'peak' bodies, many of them remain wary of being too outspoken given the earlier withdrawal of their financial support by some governments and a more general culture of fear. State and Territory governments also 'restructured' local government in the 1980s and 1990s which had long been a major

employer of youth workers. This saw the dismantling of many youth services, in part through the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering.

Against a backdrop of persistent and high levels of youth unemployment in the 1990s the federal government introduced the 'work for the dole' scheme, targeting 16-21 year olds, with relatively little protest from the youth sector. The finale came in 2001 when the Federal government successfully legislated to make age based discrimination lawful when applied to 16-21 year olds. That legislation, which placed Australia in breach of both International Labour Organisation (ILO) and UNCROC codes, went through the Australian Parliament with minimal public contestation or forceful representations from the youth sector. The reintroduction of a youth wage was mandated in terms that made it lawful to engage in age-based discrimination yet it remains unlawful to engage in age-based discrimination when dealing with other age cohorts.

The introduction of new public space laws which control and exclude young people's freedom of movement and access to public domains is also an affront to young people's basic rights. Similarly, 'move on notices' give the police authority to remove a person from a location for 24 hours if they say there is a risk of them acting anti-socially or of a breach of peace. The fact that these initiatives which turn the gatherings of young people in public spaces into an anti-social act are described by their proponents as 'progressive' and 'kinder' options to arrest and criminal conviction is worrying. In states like WA some politicians have been so keen to win the approval of the electorate that they have been prepared to implement further draconian measures that belong to times and places like South Africa under apartheid. The same desperation to appeal to 'law and order' was evident in that state's former Deputy Liberal leader Colin Barnett's proposal to spend \$300,000 on a mobile water cannon to be used to suppress 'out-of-control hoodlums' on the streets of WA's capital Perth. In 2007 while in election mode Australia's former Prime Minister John Howard introduced new welfare reforms 'requiring' parents identified as having children 'at risk' to have their social security incomes taken over and managed by government approved agencies (Howard and Brough, 2007; Howard, 2007).

Contextual considerations like these were important in 2006 when the youth work programme at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University), the oldest youth work degree in Australia (established in 1979), undertook a major curriculum review involving a lengthy consultative process with employers, governments, peak bodies and other non-government agencies in the youth sector. That review led to significant changes including a decision to focus on equipping youth workers to engage in public advocacy. The consultative process revealed considerable support for the proposal that contemporary youth work educators needed to equip youth work graduates to be effective public advocates. It was also clear that developmental work was needed to identify the skills that public advocates need to be effective.

Unlike areas of professional practice such as medicine, psychology, or engineering youth work educators, and practitioners, rarely in a written form capture, record or reflect on their own practice. In other words, there is insufficient systematic recording of and reflection on good practice that can provide a knowledge-base and help build a repertoire of knowledge and skills to be used to guide others in their professional development. Identifying the

qualities of a good youth work advocacy means that some of those traits can be copied and learned. And, while some may have more capacity to effectively argue a case, to re-frame a 'youth problem' or promote the interests of young people than others, anyone studying for entry into the youth sector can benefit from learning and applying relevant skills and principles. It is those traits or practices that are now identified in a bid to encourage the practice of youth work advocacy.

## Youth work as public advocacy: why it matters

Public advocacy is an important part of general youth work practice because young people are among the groups who continue to be disadvantaged and have yet to receive the kinds of civic rights and entitlements most people in societies like Britain, Australia or Canada take for granted (World Bank, 2007; National Children and Youth Law and Defense for Children International, 2005; HREOC, 2005). Similarly there is clear evidence with developments like the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into the UK's Human Rights Act 1998, and the passage of human rights Charters in some Australian jurisdictions (eg., Victoria, 2006) that such rights based frameworks present new opportunities for advocacy. Equally the introduction of the Advocacy Service for Children in 1999 created a statutory and institutional framework in which advocacy can now be engaged in the UK.

Public advocacy should be an important, even indispensable part of contemporary youth work because young people tend to be treated in biased and unfavourable ways. On the basis of age, many confront certain basic and persistent political, legal, social and economic inequalities of opportunity, power, rights and access to valued resources or capabilities (National Children's and Youth Law Centre and DCI, 2005; Silver, 1994; Carson, Fitzgerald and Roche, 2000). One source of that systemic disadvantage lies in the popularity of ill-informed stereotypes and prejudicial ageist assumptions and ideas which inform many policies and practices, and which directly cause difficulties in accessing full-time employment, in being a full-time student, being a consumer or simply enjoying normal citizenship rights. Patterns of ageism involve significant power differentials in relations between older and younger people, and an array of barriers for young people to participation in democratic practices – including access to public space (Aitken, 2001). Addressing discriminatory policies and practices born of age-based prejudices is why public youth advocacy is critical.

Public youth advocacy is critical in the contemporary context because as writers like O'Neill (1994), Mizen (2004) Osgood et al (2005), Settersten et al (2005) note from the last quarter of the twentieth century we have witnessed major changes to the 'cost of being young' and a general reversal in the fortunes of many young people. The revival of economic liberalism and its promotion of a 'market society,' the privatisation of responsibility and the sponsoring of claims that fiscal virtue ought to determine the provision of basic services like education, and health services has had a disproportionate impact on the lives of young people. As O'Neil explains: 'Submission to market-generated values, perspectives, and imperatives has limited the scope of public options to care for children and sustain national continuity (1994:ix). Similarly, Mizen argues, '...in recent times the consequence of government policy for young people has been felt in terms of the reconstitution of youth into a more costly

‘state’ to be, as governments have set about eroding young people’s access to and claims upon key sources of support’ (2004: xiv).

### ***Duties and ethical obligations to advocate***

Such developments present good reasons why youth workers and youth work educators who have a commitment to justice and the well-being of young people ought to ensure public advocacy is a critical component in their repertoire of professional skills. In short, youth workers have an obligation to advocate for and with young people. First the normal expectations of fiduciary duty, such as the duty of due care and diligence, apply to their professional practice. In other words youth workers have an obligation to act in good faith towards a young person for whom they have accepted a responsibility in such a way as to confer a benefit on them. Second, and from the point of view of a ‘developmental ethics’ committed to the development of human capabilities, youth workers have an obligation to promote the fullest development of a young person’s capabilities (Nussbaum, 1996). In the framework of virtue ethics this can be construed as an obligation to act ‘justly.

In schools, the juvenile justice system or housing and community services, young people consistently encounter prejudice, lack of respect, and minimal access to decision-making about most aspects of their lives. They are institutional settings characterised by power differentials that affect the economic, political, legal and cultural resources available to young people and where the lesser moral and legal status of young people directly effect relationships with adults. Therefore the institutional settings in which most youth workers are employed provide an immediately accessible site for change. Youth work practice provides workers with a range of experiences, insights and knowledge that equips them to advocate with and on behalf of young people to help overcome ‘structural’ or cultural deficiencies and obstacles. Youth workers can also use the information and insights about the circumstances of young people’s lives that are not normally available to government, other agencies and professionals. This is a quality or feature of their practice which if used strategically can advantage young people and the wider community. For these reasons competent youth advocacy is an obligation and should be a core feature of effective contemporary youth work.

## **Sites and modes of public youth advocacy**

Good youth work involves public advocacy on behalf of, or with young people. It can enable young people to advocate for themselves and involves supporting them in doing that and it takes place in a range of public places such as education institutions and juvenile justice systems as well as non-government or community agencies. Youth work advocacy can take the form of evidence presented to government inquiries; it can involve the preparation by youth workers of a media release, writing an opinion piece, editorial for the press or interviews for TV current affairs programmes. Youth advocacy can be done in various organisations from government funded and run departments and institutions like schools to Non-Government Organisation service providers; it takes place in all kinds of jurisdictions nationally and internationally through to the United Nations and organisations like UNESCO. It can happen in peak youth agencies, in generalist lobby groups, in political parties and social movements. Youth work advocacy can also be practised through research that



includes producing information and arguments to re-frame 'youth problems' in ways that challenge problem setting activities which unfairly disadvantage young people.

## The Ethics of advocacy

Public youth advocacy has various ethical and rational dimensions that need to be acknowledged. To help with this there are certain safeguard tests that can be used to check that 'good' public advocacy is taking place. A consideration of these safeguards follows.

The practice of public advocacy typically entails particular forms of speaking (or writing) and action on behalf of oneself or others for the purpose of attaining a particular social good. While one important and legitimate role of a youth worker-as-advocate is to speak on behalf of young people or to support them to advocate for themselves there are certain problems and traps associated with this which are best avoided.

To begin there is a temptation experienced by many people who work in human service settings to engage in social ventriloquism. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1992) spoke of symbolic violence, or 'usurpatory ventriloquism' when he referred to the ways in which practices like advocacy can project meanings on to others (in this case young people) that are not the meanings the young people themselves give. Bourdieu pointed to the way certain practitioners can produce knowledge (or messages) by creating the belief that they (as spokespersons) are simply a symbolic substitute for the people being talked about. In other words, the youth workers 'become' the young people on whose behalf they are speaking. 'Usurpatory ventriloquism' means imposing meanings, politics and views on to the meanings and experiences of the young people being represented. One consequence of this is that the practitioner's intervention can inadvertently compound or reinforce the oppression of young people by weakening or taking away their own stories and replacing them with other story lines that position young people and 'their issues' in particular ways. For example as not competent enough to participate in decisions in which they have a direct interest.

To avoid this certain techniques can be used to protect those being represented while simultaneously safeguarding the youth worker's own credibility and integrity as professional youth advocate. Verifying with young people the accuracy of the worker's interpretation of their account is one way of preventing 'usurpatory ventriloquism' and a way of ensuring there has been an accurate reading of the issues at stake and meanings given to what was said. This entails listening and self-reflection alongside an awareness of any tendencies on the part of the advocate to change, or reinterpret, the meaning and accounts given by young people.

One other related 'danger' in speaking on behalf of others, is the tendency to represent or position them in ways that disadvantage them. Advocating for another involves representing and positioning them in certain ways. This can happen by describing the young people's intellectual and social capacities in particular ways, for example their limited capacity for self-control and partial cognitive capacity due to their age and life-stage, or post-adolescent brain maturation (Giedd et al, 1999). Such depictions reinforce popular

prejudicial assumptions of young people as high risk, troubled and troublesome. They can also have the effect of restricting young people's rights and opportunities to develop and enjoy certain experiences by narrowly defining the possibilities of what are, and what are not, socially appropriate actions for 'them'.

Finally reflection on how the advocate's own position or identity is interpreted by others is also relevant. How a message is listened to and judged depends on who is talking, who is listening and the context in which the conversations take place. Considering how other people interpret events provides opportunities to evaluate the merits of the approach being used and to explore alternative strategies (Harre and Moghaddam, 2003). This may entail asking if certain assumptions about youth workers are being made which reinforce or diminish perceptions about the authority of the speaker. In addition are other identity markers like gender or ethnicity influencing the status of the speaker as a credible spokesperson and truth-teller (ibid)?

Ethical advocacy therefore entails first ensuring that what is said accurately reports the views and experiences of those being represented. Second that the practitioner represents young people in ways that empower and advantage them, rather than the opposite, and third that attention is given to how the advocate is perceived by those they are speaking to so they can put strategies in place to ensure they are 'read' as competent tellers of truth.

## **Advocacy as rational thought and action: practical considerations**

Basic expectations regarding what constitutes effective public rationality includes clarity about the key claims to be made, internal coherence, validity and ethical standards. It also includes the use of well formed concepts, logic and evidence (such as observations or facts), or reasoning to support the claims. I now turn to some of those standards.

### ***Coherence***

The skill of speaking or writing clearly and coherently rests on a capacity to construct well informed and well formed arguments. Effective arguments depend on an ability to reduce complex matters to their essentials by identifying the different issues necessary for persuading an audience and then presenting them in a logical, fluent and accurate way. In other words advocacy in youth work involves the production of arguments that meet standards for public rationality; and it involves ordering in sequential logical ways the various issues, evidence and arguments while at the same time collating the various phrases or sentences in ways that contribute to the meaning of the whole. A further test of public rationality is whether the basic rules of plain English have been observed. Such standards require the use of short sentences, speaking in the active voice and avoiding use of unnecessary words, jargon and clichés.

Coherence relies on clarity about objectives. For example is the objective to persuade people to change their minds about a matter? Is it to shift thinking and feelings in ways that produce certain action? Being clear about the reasons for the advocacy at the start makes it more obvious what arguments, evidence and reasoning will best achieve those outcomes.

Some research is also needed into the collective and individual profile of the target audience. What are their views, can their minds be changed on particular issues, and if they can, how can that be achieved (Tetlock, 2005; Gardner, 2006)? While it is clear that members of an audience come to certain views by listening, reading and experience, its not always clear what factors or levers induce them to think or feel a particular way. Are there likely to be decisive 'thunderbolt' turning points that can be taken advantage of to influence members of the target audience, or is decision-making likely to be a long and cumulative process that requires a sustained effort over a number of years? While some people are resistant to new ideas and find it difficult to be 'open minded', others are receptive to such a prospect. Resistance or willingness to change our thinking also differs according to the particular issue, context and time. The skill is in knowing who is susceptible to a change 'of heart', and how the arguments and evidence can be put together to achieve that end.

A critical component of any good argument is the use of relevant information. Arguing to evidence *works to either validate or to cast doubt*.

### **Argument to evidence**

Reason and empirical research has a powerful appeal to the cognitive aspects of the human mind. So too does argument and evidence that resonances with what the target audience already know or believe because it appeals to the affective components of our being. Attention to the role of emotions and how an issue or argument might resonate positively or negatively with other feelings and experiences can advantage the youth advocate (Gardner, 2006).

The integrity of the evidence used to support an argument and its relevance to the argument are decisive. Yet before it can be decided what evidence is best the youth worker needs to be clear about the kind of appeal that will be made. Is it for example best to appeal to values like justice, equity or freedom? In a case where a school prohibits students from taking a same sex partner to the end of year formal social event will it be more effective to make an appeal to justice? If so then should that appeal focus on the issue of fairness or equity, or simply the right not to be discriminated against? Once that is clear the kind of supporting evidence that will be needed should be apparent. It is also worth noting that in most cases a number of different appeals can be made.

The persuasive power of the evidence also depends on the kind of research methods used for example ethnographic, case histories, clinical or statistical. It may be that a composite or range of different kinds of research using different methodologies is appropriate. While effective advocacy involves use of some or all of the above approaches, a logical and well structured argument is critical.

### **Valid logical structure**

Structuring a case involves establishing what all the relevant pieces of information are, how they connect to each other and how they can be ordered to produce the strongest case. Doing this means collecting, classifying and analysing the material, and working out the significance or bearing that the various points and evidence have on the case. This planning stage is when decisions are made about what is, and what is not, pertinent. There are further decisions to be made about how the material can be arranged and how the parts

relate to each other in ways that produce a persuasive narrative that adds up to an 'obvious' and persuasive conclusion.

How an argument is structured and the evidence used also depends on the profile of the target audience.

### ***Acknowledging the specific audience***

If the task is to persuade a person or group about a matter relating to young people then some background information on the audience whose thinking you want to change is critical. For example what are their experiences and attitudes towards the issue in question; what are the formal and informal positions of those people? If it is a committee is there one individual who has greater influence than others in the group?

Effective advocacy involves taking a sound 'reading' of the person or in the case of a group where appropriate appealing to one or more members of the group who may be receptive. Reading a group well also entails being alert to antagonisms so as not to alienate people. In some instances this involves employing good judgment about when to stop and 'cut losses' or when to work harder.

Being context sensitive rests on knowing something of the people you are working with as well as something of the institutions and the broader social or political context in which they operate. It entails asking what cultural and institutional practices or beliefs are likely to have a bearing on the case being put. For example if the addressee works in a children's court or a local government council then institutional requirements, rules and laws will influence the arguments and actions that an advocate can and ought to make. In the same way quite specific customs or protocols, including courtesies, operate in many communities. In some indigenous Australian communities, for example, rules dictate whom one can speak to and what topics can and cannot be spoken about. In certain contexts permission is required before certain members of the community can even be approached. Breaching these protocols will seriously damage the prospect of a 'good result' (Watkinson and Bessant, 2000). If the people you are working with belong to a religious or ethnic community, particular dress codes and other rules about the body may apply. In some communities protocols relating to physical or direct eye contact with certain members of the group need to be respected if there is any chance of the advocacy being effective. Similarly there may be prohibitions on shaking certain people's hands, or taboos on being alone in a room with a person of the opposite sex.

To be effective and respectful youth work advocates need to be informed about the general predilections, world views and attitudes of the people they plan to address. A School Council for example operates quite differently to a Human Rights Commission, while a group of conservative Roman Catholics are likely to function differently from a community of progressive environmentalists. Each are bound by different community standards, value frameworks, work practices, interests and in certain instances, quite different legislative requirements. Knowing about these is conducive to good professional youth work practice and effective representation.

Knowing the relevant laws and procedural rules which govern official agencies is vital

for any advocate appearing before a court, tribunal or appeal panel. Basic preparation entails being fully apprised of the details and circumstances of the case and having a good knowledge of the applicable laws. This includes having some knowledge of the basic situation including what the young person wants, and whether there are any relevant legal issues. And given that the informal policies and values of an organisation are often just as powerful as any law, or formal policy, it is remiss to overlook them.

### ***The role of rhetoric***

Rhetoric is a form of speech or writing that aims to convince others about a particular course of action through use of stories, speeches and exhortations. There are a number of linked linguistic abilities that include the capacity to convey ideas in crafted text and being a conversationalist who can get and deliver information through discussion. When one or more of these abilities combine we have a person who is likely to succeed as a youth advocate.

Youth work advocacy recognises the value of a broader social science interest in the study of rhetoric (Nelson, Megill and McCloskey, 1991) which is quite different from the popular notion of rhetoric as a disparaging or derogatory comment which implies the speaker (or writer) is 'just talking' or going through the motions without substance or a commitment to action. Use of the term in this article refers to the techniques used to secure the authority and credibility of our knowledge claims and the wherewithal to persuade others. As mentioned above, those techniques include appealing to evidence or 'facts'; the use of various forms of logic and statistical tests of validity and significance; the construction and use of narratives; and use of metaphors (McCloskey, 1998). The skilful use of these elements can constitute a 'framework of authority' which a youth advocate can use to convince to their audience (McCloskey, 1998: 185-5).

Metaphors are a critical part of rhetoric and invaluable for youth advocacy. They are figures of speech or tropes of resemblances which displace or extend the meaning of a word (Ricoeur, 1983). In other words, a metaphor involves giving a name to something that belongs to something else. 'Going off the rails' is an example of a metaphor used almost exclusively to refer to young people. It is a metaphor that refers to the idea of a linear track or path that somehow secures a young person's 'transition' from childhood and through that precarious and 'risky period of adolescence' to responsible adulthood. 'Going off the rails' is to go 'off course' and thus towards a different, undesirable and typically dangerous destination. 'Going off the rails' is to connote high risk, disruptiveness and to signal danger or potential wreckage. For the youth advocate one benefit of questioning standard metaphors and using metaphors creatively lies in their capacity to persuade others to think, see and feel in particular ways.

Creating a sense of authority relies on an ability to bring the audience in and for them to see the issues in specific ways. Here opening words or images provide opportunities to capture people's attention, to communicate the basic point and make a positive first impression. Good openings introduce and explain the central issue at stake. A quote from an authority written to achieve the same object can be used to good effect; likewise reference can be made to an arresting fact which will capture peoples' attention. Opening sentences are important because they are generally when the advocate has the undivided attention of all

members of the group, making it something that should not be squandered. One further technique for opening is to articulate the merits of the issue or to refer to a pertinent point of justice. Likewise pointing to the legal, policy or moral issues gets people's attention while also starting to frame the issue in a particular way. Plunging straight into long and tedious detailed reading of a policy or a lengthy citation of some other authority is simply wasting the opportunity. A sharp and arresting opening rests on there being no ambiguity about how the problem is framed.

### ***Framing the problem***

To talk of framing a 'youth problem' is to acknowledge that how we described the problem influences how it is seen and, in turn, how it is responded to. Framing refers to the selective use of language to create mental structures or configurations which provoke certain images that assist us to think about things in particular ways. By bringing a particular frame into play the advocate can to an extent shape future discussions and set the agenda. Frames also have moral values embedded in them which helps to make them powerful rhetorical tools. A rich literature is also available for advocates to draw on in re-framing youth problems in ways that articulate moral perspectives from the central ideas of progressive thought (Schön, 1980; Hacking, 1999; Yeatman, 1990; Lakoff, 2004).

Recognising that we can challenge how problems are framed rests on a recognition that youth problems and social categories are much more than straightforward and objective descriptions of 'what is there'. This insight rests on an appreciation of the generative role of experts, the media, and others in describing and measuring the problem. While recognizing the constitutive nature of youth problems and what can be gained by examining the language used in problem setting discourses, reframing problems is a far more challenging task (Lakoff, 2004). Attention to the character of language and thought, particularly to the ways metaphors are used to describe youth problems will prove helpful in attempts to reframing a problem. As Schön notes:

*When we examine the problem setting stories told by the analysts and practitioners, it becomes apparent that the framing of the problems often depends upon metaphors... One of the most pervasive stories about social services for example diagnoses the problem as 'fragmentation' and prescribes 'co-ordination' as the remedy ... where under the spell of metaphor, it appears obvious that fragmentation is bad and co-ordination is good. (1980: 255)*

Since the late 1980s Australia's youth sector has been under the spell of these kind of metaphors deployed by economic liberals convinced of the virtues of 'rationalised' 'services, competition policy, the application of 'the market' model to state and community services and the need to 'roll-back state' support from youth and related domains. Metaphors like 'fragmentation' and 'duplication' played a critical role in economic liberal problem setting discourses through the 1990s. Metaphors like 'fragmentation' functioned very effectively as rhetorical devices because they invite us to see youth services as divided, disintegrated, lacking in unity and cohesion, doubling-up on expensive activities and 'wasteful'. From that account of the problem, the answer is obvious that the 'amalgamation' of services (a euphemism for closures) would produce a more 'rationalised', more coherent and unified sector (Cerny, 1992; Yeatman, 1990). 'Economies of scale' was not only declared a social

good it was 'economically and morally responsible'. Having framed the problem as such it was 'logical' what the solutions were: they involved locating where the 'over supply' and duplication of services were and cutting them. This inevitably meant reducing the number of youth workers employed in those agencies, a move typically accompanied by increased work loads for those who remained.

Challenging the way a problem has been framed is a political activity which involves contests over meaning. It entails entering disputes and struggles about how the identities of the participants are named and thereby constituted, how their needs are known, and how their relationships are named (Yeatman, 1990:155). For example a dominant way illicit drug use by young people has been framed is as a crime, a 'law and order' problem as Manderson observes: 'the development of our attitudes to drugs have been strongly influence by these rhetorical devices' (1999: 182). The framing of 'the drugs problem' in these terms means the actions of those who are involved come to be known as criminal, corrupt and transgressive. As a crime problem 'appropriate' solutions include 'get tough campaigns', increased law enforcement measures and stricter penalties. Similar framings like those which describe users as 'drug addicts' work to solicit negative images because the metaphor 'addiction' encourages a particular understandings of the action involved. As 'an addict' the young person loses volition, and is without free will or self-control. Their behaviour is compulsive or pharmacologically 'driven', and for that reason they need close management. If, on the other hand, illicit drug use is framed as a health problem we are invited to see it and the people involved quite differently. When framed as a public health concern those who use drugs become victims, are positioned as casualties, injured parties or even patients. This framing of the problem leaves the way open for quite different responses, so rather than increased punishment or incarceration, more support or medical treatment and health services are called-for.

Lakoff's advice is not to rely on the language that is already in use in framing or reframing a youth problem because when we negate or argue against a particular frame we actually evoke it. Framing is about finding new words that fit the perspective you intend to communicate rather than drawing on the worldviews of those being contested. It means being clear about the values that inform our ideas and using the right words to evoke the messages we wish to communicate (Lakoff, 2004).

## Conclusion

What does all this mean for youth work practice, youth work curriculum design and good learning and teaching? I suggest it relates to the transformative roles of both youth work practice and education. It can inform youth work practice in ways that make positive differences to the lives of young people. It can inform youth work education in ways that improve programmes and achieve graduate attributes like the ability to articulate and practice good youth-work that includes the exercise of critical argument, reflection and responsibility regarding ethical conduct and values related to ideas like respect and acceptance. This matters in the education of youth workers because it can play a critical role in shaping the identity of youth work and the activities of youth workers in ways that promote desirable social change to improve the lives of young people. In places like

Australia, where there is no national professional association which can standardise the education of practitioners through accreditation processes educators have the job of shaping the education experiences that help define youth work practice (Tucker, 2004: 87).

For the reasons articulated above equipping youth workers to advocate for or with young people should be a central feature of youth work curriculum and a defining feature of professional youth work. Since advocacy does not come easily or naturally to all, both teaching it and learning how to do it well needs to be a core feature of the curriculum. This also matters if we are serious about creating the social conditions in which respect for young people's human rights becomes more than rhetoric.

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# Youth & Policy

## WOMEN'S CONFERENCE **Thinking Seriously About Work With Girls and Young Women**

The second 'Thinking Seriously' conference organized by *Youth and Policy* is a women only event which will focus on the subject of **Work with Girls and Young Women**.

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# Rethinking the 'Problem of Youth': Refocusing on the Social and its Interrelationship with Dominant Power Structures

*Charlie Cooper*

*What follows challenges the dominant discourses shaping contemporary social policy responses to the 'problem of youth', arguing that these accounts fail to acknowledge structurally-determined social contexts (beyond the control of individuals, families and 'communities') within which social inter-actions (and their related tensions) are played out. At the same time, it is contended that these discourses are serving to divert attention away from possibilities of more imaginative social policy interventions, leading instead to the intensification of the 'criminalisation of social policy' and increasing harms for disadvantaged young people.*

**Key words:** *New Labour, neo-liberalism, managerialism, 'problem of youth', 'criminalisation of social policy'*

## Background

Throughout modernity, the health of society has largely been seen to depend on the contemporary state of childhood and youth – it being considered vital for social stability that young people develop into law-abiding, socially-integrated and economically-productive adults. An anxiety about the status of young people's development and the threat this posed to society's long-term well-being has been evident throughout industrial times. This fear has invariably been exploited to legitimate interventions aimed at the surveillance and strict control of young people – interventions increasingly initiated since the late nineteenth century by the state.

Unease about the state of youth remains, although the context has changed. In post-industrial times the conditions shaping young people's opportunities and experiences have altered. Economic, social and political transformations have led to radically different life chances for young people – particularly the least advantaged – due to changes in labour markets, occupational patterns and welfare entitlements. Transitions to adulthood have become increasingly unpredictable and risky for many. Inequalities are widening, leading to increasing social marginalisation, the erosion of social solidarities and a rise in intra-community tensions (Byrne, 2005; McGhee, 2005).

The mainstream political agenda for young people continues to focus on youth as *the* problem – a 'deficit model' of youth. In particular, this 'problem' is conceived in terms of their individual deficiencies: poor attitudes to schooling, training and work; lack of aptitude and skills; and their 'risky' and 'anti-social' behaviour (France, 2007). This assessment has

been supported throughout modernity by theories rooted in positivist explanations of dysfunctional conduct which argue that behavioural problems are due to either biological or psychological flaws, or sociological and environmental influences. Such accounts of the 'problem of youth' have served to justify various policy interventions since the 19th century aimed at dealing with both the deficiencies of dysfunctional individuals (to change their attitudes and behaviour) and the places where they live (to generate safer neighbourhoods) (Cooper, 2008).

There was a brief period in the three decades following World War II when such policy interventions embraced Keynesian welfarist principles which, in tandem with economic growth, produced significant gains for the working classes' (Byrne, 2005). However, since the late 1970s, there has been a punitive turn in social policy, largely shaped by neo-liberal political economy and Left/Right realism, involving a hardening in attitudes towards social problems. British governments have abandoned the Keynesian welfarist model's concern with universal support for meeting social need in favour of prioritising the management and control of the 'dangerous' and 'deviant' outcasts of the new social order – in particular, the (new) 'anti-social' youth.

## Theoretical perspectives on the 'problem of youth'

### ***Positivist theories***

Positivist theories lay claim to explaining social phenomena through the application of 'scientific logic'. In respect of explanations of deviant behaviour, a distinction exists between 'individual positivism' and 'sociological positivism' (Muncie, 2004). In the case of the former, 'problem' behaviour is largely explained by reference to specific biological or psychological factors unique to certain groups; in the case of the latter, individual behaviour is explained by reference to social or environmental influences (Brown, 2005).

Individual positivism is heavily rooted in a medical/psychological perspective and focuses on 'identifiable' behavioural or physiological anomalies which, it is claimed, distinguishes the 'criminal'/'deviant' from the 'non-criminal'/'non-deviant'. This idea is largely associated with Lombroso (1876) who claimed that 'criminality' was inherited from our parents (biological determinism) and that 'criminals' could be identified by physical defects (such as a large jaw, high cheek-bones, a hawk-like nose or handle-shaped ears) (Muncie, 2004). Other examples of individual positivism include G. Stanley Hall's (1905) claim to have discovered 'adolescence' as a physiological stage of development brought on by puberty – a stage he pathologised as a period of 'hormonal turmoil' and 'storm and stress'. Hall's thesis was to influence Burt's (1925) work on 'delinquent' behaviour which argued that this was caused by a lack of self-control. The implication of such theories is that if the 'criminal' and 'anti-social acts' of young people are the result of uncontrolled individual abnormalities brought about by genetic inheritance or flawed psychological development then the policy solutions should include more effective supervision, regulation, treatment and therapy – with a crucial role here for psychologists (Brown, 2005; Muncie, 2004).

Sociological positivism focuses on the influence of social factors external to the individual on their behaviour. It is largely associated with ideas that emerged out of the Chicago

School from the 1920s onwards – particularly the work of urban sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (Cooper, 2005). These theorists were concerned with understanding the impact of urbanisation, economic growth and migration on social relationships. Urban areas were seen as sites of conflict where 'dominant groups' were able to settle in the more desirable locations – leaving the disadvantaged behind in 'zones of transition', areas of run-down, inner-city housing occupied by transient populations, where social cohesion breaks down and 'crime' and 'delinquency' flourishes. Patterns of urban development are conceived here in Social Darwinian ecological terms, as a 'natural' process where the 'fittest' of the species claim the most attractive locations. Moreover, the nature of the physical and social environment is seen to affect the frequency of 'crime' and 'deviance' (environmental determinism) (Muncie, 2004). The implication of this theory for social policy is that if environmental factors influence the incidence of 'crime' and 'incivility' then the solution to the 'problem of youth' should include social programmes aimed at repairing faulty places and restoring social cohesion around shared values.

These early positivist positions are, however, highly deterministic and fail to acknowledge structural forces, including the persistence of unequal power relations and conflicting social values, which shape the way social relations are played out. A more sophisticated perspective is presented by Robert K. Merton (1938) who located the source of 'crime' and 'deviance' within the context of society itself. Merton offered a 'strain' theory explanation of 'youth crime' where the aspirations of working-class youth to attain the 'American Dream', material success defined for them by the dominant value system, are frustrated by lack of opportunity. This leads them to deploy unconventional or illegitimate means to achieve success. This represents a reworking of Durkheim's (1952/1897) 'anomie' theory<sup>2</sup>, emphasising how highly materialistic societies can induce a sense of being outside the norms that guide everyday life. Here, Merton draws attention to the link between 'crime' and relative deprivation (Giddens, 2006). Whilst Merton's emphasis was on individual responses to frustrated ambitions, his analysis was to have significant influence on the development of sub-cultural theories in both the US and Britain in the period after World War II. Such theories emphasised the collective coping strategies adopted by working-class males unable to access affluence in legitimate ways.

### ***Subcultural theories***

Merton's ideas had a major influence on the work of Albert Cohen (1955) whose study of 'delinquent boys' in the US concluded that violence and vandalism represented a collective solution to 'status frustration' and a rejection of middle-class values (Marsh, 2006). In a similar vein Cloward and Ohlin (1961) argued that a 'criminal subculture' was more likely to develop in lower-class neighbourhoods where the opportunity to achieve success is small whilst the prospects from associating with 'successful' criminals are large (Muncie, 2004). Later Phil Cohen's (1972) study of working-class young people in East London concluded that sub-cultural formations (such as skinheads) represented a positive development, as opposed to being mere 'deviance', in rediscovering 'community' identity in the aftermath of destructive economic and social changes (Brown, 2005). Meanwhile, Hall and Jefferson (1976) locate youth subcultures in the context of class relations and resistance to hegemony.

Whilst subcultural theorists do at least acknowledge social context and the existence of conflicting social values they can also be accused of reductionism and subordinating

'understandings' young people have of their behaviour to their own (potentially prejudiced) analytical meanings. For instance, explaining the emergence of an 'oppositional subculture' amongst young people in terms of a 'strategy of resistance' or representing the need to 'rediscover community identity' is questionable. In essence motives may be far more banal. For instance, Willis (1977) describes the drive behind such subcultures amongst working-class pupils as 'having a laff'.

More recently cultural criminology has observed a convergence in core values around narcissistic individualism and consumerism. This is a development driven by decades of neo-liberal ideology stressing 'self-interest, acquisition and social competition' (Hall et al, 2008: 4). Hall et al argue that we now inhabit a materialistic culture where identity is symbolised by conspicuous consumption. The drive to consume and indulge in the 'pleasures laid out for our delectation by the culture industries' now controls our motives, regardless of what this means for our relationships with others. '[E]goism now dominates advanced capitalist culture' (Hall et al, 2008: 4). It is the same hedonistic desire motivating competitive individualism in neo-liberal markets that is behind the development of 'criminal markets, predatory crime, violence and a raft of well-documented social problems' in run-down neighbourhoods (Hall et al, 2008: 13).

### ***Radical critiques – Marxism, 'race' and 'gender'***

Radical theories emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a challenge to the overly deterministic emphases of positivist approaches. Radical critiques emphasise power and the way dominant notions of 'crime' and 'deviance' are socially constructed by the powerful 'to define unwanted behaviour as acts of crime' (Christie, 2004: 51). They offer a more nuanced understanding by locating the 'problem of youth' within the context of broader structural forces underpinned by class, 'race' and 'gender'.

For Marxists, crime and deviance need to be understood in the context of capitalist power relations. Marx argued that the superstructure of society, including the political, legal and criminal justice system, reflects the interests of and supports the economic base. The law is therefore an instrument of the dominant (capitalist) economic class. This explains why governments and policy makers focus on the relatively minor misdemeanours of the least advantaged whilst the crimes of the powerful, committed by corporations (Pearce, 1976) and governments (Griffin, 2007), remain largely concealed.

Shortcomings identified in the Marxist critique include its failure to adequately address the enduring focus on 'race' and 'gender' in policy debates. Since the beginning of the last century, the perceived need to control (black) immigration in the national interest has remained part of the political landscape. Constructs of 'race' and identity have largely been shaped by Eurocentric perspectives of 'White Supremacy' legitimated by the likes of Freud (1919) and Jung who both believed that Africans were 'savage' and 'primitive' (Robinson, 2004). Back argues that throughout modernity, 'European racisms have ... insisted that the distinction of the European be established and maintained in the face of barbarism and inferiority of the native, the immigrant or the ethnic minority' (Back, 2004: 28). The concept of 'racial identity' provides the backdrop for understanding mainstream perceptions portraying black migrants as a primary cause of civil disobedience, a violent sexual threat to white women, work-shy welfare scroungers, and as inherently criminogenic. A consequence

of this for young black people in Britain has been direct and indirect racisms within all social institutions (Cooper, 2008).

'Gender' has also been central to shaping identity. Socially constructed 'gender' differences have reflected essentialist notions founded on biological or psychological determinations based on anatomy and brain chemistry. Robb (2007) argues that these differences are culturally relative. We need to talk, therefore, about different types of 'masculinity'/'femininity' which will possess different meanings to different people. Equally, in any given time and place, there will be a dominant, hegemonic definition of 'gender', a culturally preferred version, which will be held up as the 'ideal model' against which all will be gauged. Effectively, there will be a hierarchy of 'masculinities'/'femininities', linked also to other structural inequalities. Young women's behaviour has been understood and judged in terms primarily shaped by stereotypes of gender identity.

Taken together, these radical critiques offer a clearer picture of the 'problem of youth' by situating the experiences of young people in the context of power – a context largely shaped by the wider structural influences of class, 'race' and 'gender' rather than flawed pathologies.

### ***Realist theories***

Throughout the 1980s, 'realist' perspectives on 'crime' and 'deviance' came to dominate the social policy debate. The New Right argued that the increasing 'crime' and 'disorder' of the period, including the inner-city disturbances of the early 1980s, were a symptom of declining moral standards caused by the permissiveness of the 1960s, welfare dependency, family breakdown, illegitimacy and lack of discipline. New Right sociologist Charles Murray (1990) proposed a solution to this 'underclass crisis' that combined tougher sentences, more prisons and cuts in welfare entitlements to 'unmarried mothers'. Right realism was to retain a popular appeal under Thatcherism throughout the 1980s. Whilst the extremes of Murray's proposal were never implemented by the Conservatives, welfare entitlements were severely cut, notably via the 1986 Social Security Act, and a populist punitive agenda on crime was pursued, particularly against young people, under Michael Howard.

Not to be outdone by the political right, 'left-wing' academics in the 1980s sought to forge their own version of a populist agenda on crime and disorder, a project that took the title Left realism. Left realism criticised the right-wing dominated law and order debate for failing to acknowledge the link between social deprivation and crime. At the same time it attacked elements of Marxist criminology for being too utopian and idealistic, and for failing to take 'working-class crime' seriously. Left realists argued that 'working-class crime', i.e. street crime, burglary and violence, was a genuine problem for working-class communities rather than a social construct manufactured by the powerful and needed to be addressed. In contrast to Right realists, Left realism argued that solving the problem of crime would also require measures to address relative deprivation and perceptions of social injustice, particularly amongst young Afro-Caribbean males. Left realists also argued for a criminal justice system that gave greater consideration to the voices of victims of crime, greater democratic control of the police, and alternative penal sanctions to custody such as victim restitution schemes and community sentences (Lea and Young, 1984). Since the 1980s, realist perspectives on youth crime and deviance have dominated British social policy



(Muncie, 2004). Meanwhile, there has been little attempt by politicians and policy makers to engage with debates that draw attention to structural forces external to individuals, 'communities' and neighbourhoods that contribute to an understanding of 'crime' and 'disorder'.

In order to understand how populist authoritarian notions of 'crime' and 'disorder' came to dominate the social policy agenda it is useful to refer back to Stanley Cohen's (2004) thesis on 'mods' and 'rockers' in which he describes how 'folk devils', 'deviants' whose behaviour runs counter to mainstream social values, and moral panics, metaphors for all that has gone wrong in society, are generated by the media through sensationalised reporting. This permits attention to be drawn away from the structural causes of harm towards a generalised panic, a projection of adult anxieties around specific categories of young people, leading to a public outcry for tougher sanctions and a linked populist and opportunistic authoritarian political agenda.

Cohen's critique, alongside other radical perspectives, offers a lens through which distorted assumptions underpinning 'commonsense' understandings of the nature of 'crime' and 'deviance' can be made more transparent – allowing us to refocus the spotlight on to the structural foundations of contemporary social problems.

## **The changing structural context in which to be young in Britain**

There is a growing and compelling body of evidence to suggest that living in Britain has become an increasingly unhappy experience for disadvantaged young people. Research evidence points to a decline in young people's emotional well-being in the last 20 years (Collishaw et al, 2004) and that this can, in part, be attributed to widening social inequality wrought by three decades of neo-liberal social reform (Dentith et al, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and the emergence of a post-industrial society characterised by a shift from a manufacturing to a service economy (Bell, 1973; Allen and Massey, 1992) involving the loss of a clearly defined role for many young people. The 2007 United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef, 2007) assessment of children's and young people's well-being in 21 'advanced' nations placed UK bottom. A similar study of young people's well-being in 2009 for the Child Poverty Action Group placed Britain 24th out of 29 European states (CPAG, 2009). Other studies suggest a decline in young people's well-being in relation to educational experience (The Primary Review, 2007), access to public space (Mayall, 2001), trust and belonging (NEF, 2009), age discrimination (Davies, 2009) and the pressurised socio-cultural context of living in a consumerist society (Layard and Dunn, 2009). NHS figures released in December 2007 showed that 4241 children under 14 in England had attempted to take their own lives that year. 'About one in 10 children and young people will suffer behavioural, emotional or mental health problems before the age of 18' (Revill and Lawless, 2007: 2). A report in 2008 by the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE), monitoring progress against UN recommendations on children's rights in the UK, criticised the government for failing to protect children's human rights. The UK continued to imprison more children than most other European countries, imposing on many of them brutal restraint methods during strip searching. And despite being the fourth richest country in the world, over a third

of children continued to live in poverty in an increasingly unequal society (Ward, 2008). According to a recent report by an all-party panel chaired by the former cabinet minister Alan Milburn, Britain remains one of the least socially mobile countries in Europe (Wintour, 2009: 4).

## **New Labour and the 'problem of youth'**

The social policy agenda since the 1970s has prioritised cutting back public spending and incentivising individuals, families and the 'community' to take greater responsibility for their own well-being, the 'responsibilisation' agenda. Under Thatcherism in the 1980s this largely applied to finding a job and working hard, buying your own home and investing in private insurance schemes, particularly for health care. Over the last decade the responsibilisation agenda has broadened to embrace 'social exclusion' and 'anti-social behaviour', a reflection of the additional influence of Left realism in New Labour's social policy discourse.

New Labour's approach to tackling 'social exclusion' has prioritised inclusion through engagement in paid employment with policies focusing on how best to incentivise individuals to find work. 'Old' Labour concerns about class inequality no longer find a place in New Labour's lexicon. The 'problem population' now targeted includes young people 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET). Over the last decade a range of initiatives have been introduced aimed at getting young people into paid work. These include the New Deal and the Connexions Service which aim to provide young people with personalised intensive support to develop the 'right attitudes' and to engage in training or work-based experience.

The effects of these policies 'have at best been moderate' (Rodger, 2008: 49), not surprising given the 'reality' explicated by the neo-liberal globalisation thesis that there can be no guarantees that secure, regular paid employment will be obtainable. Moreover, given the strong correlation between 'NEET' status and multiple deprivation (Rodger, 2008), and the current recession facing Britain where unemployment is expected to rise to 3 million (Milner and Kollewe, 2008), the effects of a strategy based on inclusion through paid work look likely to be modest. Perhaps in recognition of this, schools are being prepared to pick up the pieces of the 'NEET problem' and New Labour announced the intention to raise the school-leaving age to 18. Those who refuse to stay on at school or take up a training opportunity may be served with an 'attendance order', a breach of which will constitute a criminal offence (Rodger, 2008).

The intensification under New Labour of the punitive sanctions initiated by previous Conservative administrations to regulate the behaviour of young people is unprecedented. Of particular concern here has been the extension of criminal justice sanctions to control and punish the relatively minor 'incivility' of young people, in the process often denying their human rights. New Labour's strategy includes not only the use of the civil law (eg. anti-social behaviour orders ['ASBOs'] and dispersal orders) but also welfare sanctions aimed at enforcing civility and good neighbourliness (eg. withholding benefits or security of tenure) – once again, a reflection of positivist and realist understandings. The ASBO and dispersal order regime has particularly targeted young people 'hanging out' in public places,

closing off spaces where they can freely meet and increasing their likelihood of becoming criminalised. A breach of an order is a criminal offence. Incivility can be intimidating for communities but its causes are more complex than acknowledged by the positivist/realist position adopted by New Labour (Rodger, 2008).

Lone parents, predominantly young women characterised as a problem for society because of their benefit dependency and their failure to socialise their 'feral' offspring, have also been invariably threatened with benefit sanctions or eviction (Cooper, 2008). A New Labour Green Paper in 2008 included further proposals to force lone parents back into work. Those with children aged seven or over will be now expected to seek work or risk losing benefit and those with children below seven will be expected to do training in preparation for work (Stratton, 2008). These measures are consistent with the anti-welfarist 'underclass' thesis of Charles Murray (1990). Parenting orders, child safety orders, acceptable behaviour contracts and fixed penalty notices are all part of a "responsibilisation strategy" that informs the current approach to juvenile crime and justice [which] concludes ... it is not only the errant children who must be punished but also the failing parents' (Rodger, 2008: 128).

The operationalisation of services to young people has also changed significantly in recent years, emerging out of what were efforts to improve public service efficiency under the new model of managerialism introduced by the Conservatives in the 1980s. This model applies techniques from the business sector, eg. cost-benefit analysis, target setting and performance measurement, to the statutory and voluntary sectors. New Labour have retained this model and developed it to include an emphasis on 'joined-upness' and 'partnership working'. This has led to a blurring of the 'professional boundaries and paradigms between the criminal justice system and the world of welfare in the fields of child welfare, youth justice, and community education and development' (Rodger, 2008: xii). In a society fearful of the 'anti-social underclass':

*Social policy increasingly is viewed in terms of its direct consequences for incivility and crime...welfare concerns have recently been undermined by strategies primarily aimed at emasculating the autonomy of social welfare professionals as government strives to appear to be tough on law and order violations.* (Rodger, 2008: xii)

An example of this is the way in which 'social housing' managers take on the role of police officers in the investigation of 'anti-social behaviour' (Cooper, 2008).

In the field of youth policy the ability of youth work organisations to engage with young people in empowering ways is now drastically restricted by the development of Children and Young People's (CYP) strategic partnerships. These work towards achieving mandatory outcomes set by government – targets largely relating to the management of 'problem' behaviour (eg. smoking, teenage conceptions, drug and alcohol use, obesity, dysfunctional parenting, bullying, sexual offending, truancy and school exclusions, and youth offending); raising educational achievement; raising the numbers in education, employment or training; promoting accredited learning awards; enhancing the take up of sport and leisure activities; and providing opportunities for young people to participate in decision making (LCC, 2007).

Whilst some of these issues are clearly important, the strategies themselves fail to

acknowledge the structural context shaping children's and young people's lives. Moreover, some of the strategies are excessively harsh and run the risk of stigmatising young people who have not committed an offence. The influence of New Labour's ideological direction, wedded to realist/ positivist perspectives on the 'problem of youth' and the new managerialist approach to solving it, together with the significant role played by the police in CYP partnerships, is diverting youth work away from more democratic models of involving young people (Cooper, 2008). It is an approach consistent with the increasing 'criminalisation of social policy' (Rodger, 2008) in Britain, a development that is disproportionately harming disadvantaged young people.

## Conclusion

Public concern about 'problem youth' and their unruly behaviour is not new. Throughout industrial and post-industrial times, there has been an enduring unease about 'troublesome' youth seen as somehow 'in deficit'. This disquiet has largely been kindled by media and political discourses fuelled by positivist and realist perspectives. Except for a brief period post World War II, the structural underpinnings of difficult life experiences, particularly linked to social class, have not been acknowledged in mainstream social policy developments. The evidence is that changes to the structural context for living in Britain since the 1970s, generated by the rise of competitive individualism and the breakdown of social solidarities, has engendered increasingly unhappy young people.

Over a decade of New Labour social policies have failed to deal with this unhappiness and the increasingly difficult social context disadvantaged young people have to navigate. This failing is largely caused by New Labour's embrace of positivist/realist explanations of social problems and neo-liberal managerialist solutions to these – a consequence of which is that the social context within which societal relations are played out has been allowed to decay further. Economic and social interdependence has increasingly weakened alongside a decline in political engagement for the most marginalised. As sociologists have observed, in such circumstances, mutual trust and empathy for the 'Other' evaporates, and differences between social categories, particularly based on 'race' and culture, become overstated. Meanwhile, the potential for violence, aggression and incivility intensifies. It is the social context responsible for determining these harms that is 'the problem'.

Addressing the 'problem of youth' requires social policies that are responsive to young people's lived realities. This requires greater acknowledgement of radical critiques of the 'problem' that draw attention to the changing social context – such as that wrought by 30 years of neo-liberal social reform – and the impact this has had on human relationships, power relations and well-being.

## Notes

- 1 Whilst we acknowledge that the benefits of the post-war boom and welfare state were not shared equally, something new Left municipalities attempted to address in the 1980s (Cooper, 2008), it would be prudish not to recognise the significant

- improvements to the lives of many working-class households during this period.
- 2 Durkheim's concept of 'anomie' represented a condition of malcontent and disorder caused by the loss of consensus around shared social values and the manifestation of infinite aspirations generated by the emergence of industrial society. In contrast, Merton argued industrial societies did display shared values around material goals; where there was a lack of consensus was around the means of legitimately achieving these goals (Hall et al, 2008).

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# Reviews

Owen Gill and Gordon Jack

**The Child and Family in Context: Developing ecological practice in disadvantaged communities**

Russell House Publishing 2007

ISBN 978-1-905541-15-7

£18.00 Pbk

pp. 166

**Charlie Cooper**

This book is concerned with recent developments in children's policy which focus attention on the 'ecology of childhood' and more 'holistic' understandings of children's well-being – i.e. where children's experiences of well-being are seen to depend as much on 'the wider community contexts in which their development takes place' (p.1) as on their immediate family circumstances. Gill and Jack argue that this development – evident, they say, in elements of the Assessment Framework for Children in Need and in service initiatives such as Sure Start, the Children's Fund, extended schools and children's centres – represents an important shift away from traditional individually-oriented and family focused approaches to welfare work with children in the UK. They identify what they see as significant organisational changes to the delivery of children's services resulting from this development – including greater emphasis on early interventions to prevent 'social exclusion' and 'problematic behaviour', and the different child welfare agencies working more closely together in the delivery of 'community-based' services. To oversee these changes at national level the government has integrated responsibility for children's education and social services under a new Minister for Children and, in England, established a new post of Children's Commissioner 'to act as an independent champion for children' (p.5). At the local level, the overall planning and delivery of children's services was to be co-ordinated by children's trusts. Under the Children Act 2004, children's services authorities have the duty 'to safeguard and promote the well-being of all children living in their area' (p.5), largely through encouraging inter-agency working.

Despite these seemingly favourable developments, however, Gill and Jack feel that, as they stand, the mechanisms put in place to safeguard and promote the well-being of all children are doomed to fail. This is because:

*There is virtually no acknowledgement [by the UK government] of the need to develop more 'holistic practice approaches' to safeguarding and promoting well-being. Nowhere is this more evident than in the guidance published to aid multi-disciplinary working, which identifies over 150 different areas of knowledge and skills required by the new children's workforce, only one of which makes even passing reference to the influence of the wider social context of children and young people's lives on their development. (p.6)*

Given the growing body of evidence suggesting a steady decline in young people's emotional well-being since the 1980s (some of which is alluded to here but also includes important work by Mayall, 2001, Collishaw et al, 2004; The Primary Review, 2007; Unicef



2007, Layard and Dunn, 2009; and NEF, 2009) and that this can largely be attributed to widening social inequality wrought by three decades of neo-liberal social reform (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009) and the emergence of a 'post-industrial society' (Bell, 1973) characterised by economic transition, social change and, for many young people in particular, the loss of a clearly defined role, this lack of attention to social context represents (in my view), at best, gross negligence on the part of government and, at worse, a deliberate and cynical disregard of the brutalising circumstances in which many young people and their families struggle for survival. In response to the limitations they see in mainstream approaches to child welfare, Gill and Jack advocate:

*[A] form of practice which is systematically underpinned by ecological theory, developing holistic and integrated approaches which are capable of simultaneously understanding and addressing all of the significant influences in the lives of children and their families.*  
(p.v)

The focus of these approaches is the connections between the child and their family, and their neighbourhood and community environment, and the development of working practices 'that can successfully combine neighbourhood and community level interventions with individual child and family interventions' (p.9). Whilst this may appear to simply re-endorse multi-agency partnership working – effectively, a restatement of current government policy thinking – Gill and Jack add 'a further very important challenge related to issues of empowerment' (p.9). For them, a key aspect of ecological theory which sets the approach apart from mainstream practice:

*... is its emphasis on a phenomenological perspective, in which the subjective views and experiences of children and other family members are understood to be of central importance in shaping their behaviour and development, and the subsequent course of their lives. ... As a consequence, ecological practice ... has to operate within a framework in which power is shared, with an emphasis on listening to and acting upon what individuals and groups of people think is important in their lives and may want to change.* (p.10)

On reading this, I was optimistic that this volume could make an important contribution to current developments in the sociology of childhood championing young people's competence as social actors and acknowledging their agency (James et al, 1998). Historically, the 'voice' of young people has been marginalised in social policy and they have largely been treated as passive recipients of 'expert knowledge' (France, 2004). Lately, however, there has been growing recognition of the need to listen to young people, to acknowledge their agency and to empower them to transform unjust social relations through, for example, Participatory Action Research (PAR) which allows the research 'subjects' to explore, reflect and act upon their social world and, in doing so, strengthen their capacity for self-determination. (Dentith et al, 2009). PAR involves a dialogical approach where the researcher and research population co-investigate dialectically the object of the study – a process Paulo Freire (1996) described as 'conscientization'. Research themes are discussed not in a vacuum but in the context of power relations and their structural manifestations. In contrast, whilst Gill and Jack agree that 'children and young people ... are not the passive victims of the pressures of their situation' (p.10), what they describe as 'the main elements of ecological practice' (p.10) include

listening carefully to discover what children and families consider to be the origins of any difficulties and then working:

*... to make disadvantaged communities more supportive ...; to bring into play the physical and social resources of disadvantaged communities ...; to enhance ... skills; [and to develop] sources of support, personal resilience, and other coping resources. (p.10)*

Far from offering a framework in which power is shared and where genuine opportunities for discovering alternative routes for self-development are fostered, Gill and Jack continue to pedal a 'deficit model' of disadvantaged individuals and communities – their lack – consistent with New Labour's discourse on 'social exclusion'. The solution to the 'problem' lies in incentivising individuals to become more skilful and resilient, and their communities to develop the 'social capital' to be more supportive to the individuals living there. Meanwhile, the broader structural factors shaping life chances remain intact. The positivistic deterministic stance underpinning the authors' thinking really stands out from page 38:

*[H]yperactivity and impulsivity in childhood, which have strong genetic components, are consistently identified as risk factors for anti-social behaviour that tends to persist through adolescence into adulthood. Low intelligence and cognitive impairment are also identified as risk factors ... . Personal attitudes can also come into the equation, with factors such as lack of social commitment, alienation and acceptance of criminal behaviour (including drug misuse) all implicated as risk factors. (p.38)*

Additionally, '... children of low birth weight tend to be at increased risk of becoming offenders. Children of teenage mothers are also at increased risk of developing anti-social tendencies, including the early use of legal and illegal substances'. (p.39)

By this stage I had become infuriated with the authors' undifferentiated treatment of the material and the inconsistencies within their analysis – which ranges from a highly moralising understanding to acknowledgement of the structural context shaping life chances – and totally lost faith in the argument. This is a shame as the book initially promised so much more on what is such an important area of social policy.

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Colin Flint and Chris Hughes

**Not just the Economy. The Public value of adult learning**

Niace

ISBN 978 1 86201 332 2

£12.95

**Gill Davison**

This new book provides a welcome overview of current issues and debates in lifelong learning, with particular reference to the skills debate. This collection of twelve papers critically debate current issues, problems and dilemmas in lifelong learning and highlight the growing concern about the current position of adult learning and the value placed upon it by practitioners, politicians and learners themselves.

Contributors argue that adult learning is being required through the skills agenda to undergo more than simply a change of teaching practice and learning styles but a fundamental shift towards an emphasis on learning and assessment which focuses on skills development, economic activity and employment.

The contributors discuss the issues and dilemmas which are becoming visible at each level of learning as public subsidy for adult learning is being reduced, yet increased emphasis is being placed on the value of 'skills development' for employment throughout the life course. The authors present case studies and empirical research which discuss potential ways in which these dilemmas can be balanced.

Contributors include Chris Humphries, who argues that the skills challenges the UK faces are very complex and potentially too slow moving to be able to fully embrace the radical change which is needed by the UK to remain both competitive and to develop social inclusion. Humphries advocates a fundamental change in social policy and puts forward ten proposals for change, including the need to adapt the school system, developing a broader curriculum which will enable young people to be prepared, and to be able to access, a lifetime of learning. Humphries also discusses the role of Further Education, advocating that this sectors 'core purpose' should be to provide skills for employment and the labour market.

Leon Feinstein and Ricardo Sabates present findings from seven years of research by The Centre for Research of the Wider Benefits of Learning. The authors describe the roles of learning at various points in the life stage and the way in which it can support people to engage in lifelong learning. Three main outcomes of learning are highlighted – skills, competencies and beliefs, the development of social networks and qualifications. Feinstein and Sabates argue that for these conditions to be met, learning has to be organised and delivered in an equal way to ensure quality and equity of opportunity for all learners.

Ursula Howard argues that we need to look to the future, not the past, to find new, flexible models of provision. Howard argues that learning is essentially a social practice and lifelong learning opportunities need to be embedded in the social context – that is – in the communities where people live and work. This is essentially about authenticity in the learning process, learning which is situated in a context and made meaningful to people, will be seen as both valid and useful by participants. Howard argues that provision should be concentrated on people with the greatest need – primarily learners at Entry Level 2, to target social exclusion and poverty.

Further chapters (Stott and Lillis) look at the potential impact of a credit system and the public value of learning and achievement; John Stone asks how we demonstrate public value and argues for a greater transparency in decision making, arguing that the focus should be moved to that of institutions meeting citizen's needs. In addition, Schuller argues for the need to develop greater innovation and research to explore how we can implement good practice.

This book will be useful to both the experienced practitioner and for readers new to Lifelong Learning – It provides a coherent, accessible yet critical discussion of current issues and debates which are relevant not only to Adult Learning, but to education and training in all areas of society.

**Gill Davison University of Northumbria**

Carol Hayden

**Children in Trouble: The Role of Families, Schools and Communities**

Palgrave Macmillan

2007

ISBN 978 -1-4039-9486-8

£19.95

pp.156

**Steve Hargrave**

In the days before the Credit Crunch, the part-nationalisation of the banks, and questions about why our Local Council had invested in Icelandic Banks, the issue of troubled and troublesome youngsters was never far away from the news agenda. Reading Carol Hayden's book was therefore an excellent reminder of the impact of our failure to nurture happy and healthy children in the UK.

Hayden approaches the issue of children in trouble from a left realist stance, acknowledging that some children and young people are indeed troublesome individuals and that the trouble caused by the behaviour of groups of young people in certain areas is not just a figment of headline writers and opportunistic politicians. Locating being 'in trouble' within the wider context of widespread economic and social disadvantage however she demonstrates the role that inequality and poverty play in depriving children and young people of their sense of self-worth and willingness to invest in a future that seems ever more precarious :

*The risk to children in adverse circumstances are numerous and varied, ranging from the likelihood of low achievement at school, poor employment prospects and welfare dependency, to drug misuse and involvement in criminal activity.*

New Labour's social policy has sought to address these issues and has been characterised by various area-based programmes which seek to promote social inclusion, community safety and neighbourhood renewal. And yet a UNICEF report of some 18 months ago highlighted the fact that children growing up in the United Kingdom suffer greater deprivation, have worse relationships with their parents and are exposed to more risks from alcohol, drugs and unsafe sex than those in any other wealthy country in the world.

So what do we mean by 'being in trouble'? Getting into trouble is a normal part of growing up; but where does an appealing sense of childhood naughtiness; adolescent angst and 'cool' teenage rebellion collide with the world of ASBOs and ABCs? Are young people hanging round on street corners victims of a lack of communal facilities, the decline of open spaces and youth clubs to play in, or a more sinister force that threaten their neighbours, their peers and in fact any-one unlucky enough to cross their paths? Should we punish and control or understand and help? Or should we do both – but 'Tough on Crime and Tough on the Causes of Crime' has been tried before.

This tension between care and control, dangerous or vulnerable, inclusion or exclusion, rights vs. responsibilities is well highlighted throughout Hayden's immaculately researched and immensely readable book. She examines the historical context of how successive Governments have been subject to the political pressures of balancing populism with positive change, of listening to tolerant analyses of how we can best help whilst at the same time appeasing outraged voters with the need to be seen to be doing something. So that for instance, 'the Children Act 1989 enacted after 10 years of right-wing government was widely interpreted as a progressive piece of legislation with child welfare at its heart.'

Hayden clearly and articulately illustrates the muddled thinking that has been apparent for so long in both the public and political debate. We give confusing messages to young people about their role, responsibility and position in society – children can be seen as investments, as threats or as victims depending on a whole range of different and often contradictory factors.

The book is structured in a helpful and concise way. Locating children in their worlds of families, schools and communities, Hayden's analyses are intelligent and thought-provoking. The importance of families and parents is of course key. Families are where children first

learn how to behave towards others, and whilst most families thrive, get by or survive without coming anywhere near formal interventions, support for families whose children are in trouble – for example parenting support and skills development – clearly needs to be easily accessible at a time of crisis.

How can schools help and support this process? For many of the children and young people we are concerned about, school is often the only consistent and safe place in their lives, a place where he or she has the chance to be valued for him or herself. In effect a surrogate secure base to contain their anxieties, to provide compensatory healthy and positive relationships and experiences and can contribute to building a child's resilience and sense of self-worth.

Examples of best practice underpin a more general examination and debate around 'what works?' Hayden makes the point that early intervention is generally recognised as being a good idea and provides a range of well-researched and evidenced programmes in support, whilst acknowledging that much of this evidence is either US-based or relatively small-scale. Lessons can be learned – the guidelines for more effective programmes to reduce offending behaviour and for the effectiveness of delinquency treatment are practical well-researched examples – one of which is the need to be extremely careful about implementation given the political and practical realities and sensitivity and awareness around not stigmatising children and families (and communities) who are being identified as at risk in the provision of services at an early stage.

Hayden ends with a look to the future, with a cautious optimism about the general direction, driven by better integrated services for children – (YOTs, Sure Start and Connexions etc.); a process accelerated following the Children Act 2004 and the appointment of Directors of Children's Services and underpinned by the *Every Child Matters* agenda. The efforts in the early years and the move towards Extended Schools are both rightly seen as further evidence to underpin the author's optimism.

I would have liked more detailed examination of the implications for Children's Rights of some of these issues of control and restrictions and the book ends with some very pertinent questioning on these very issues: – 'reflect for a moment about how adults might feel if they were told to keep away from areas in the evening because of the actions of a minority'

To end on a 'lighter' note I loved the historical reference to the public school at Winchester being often hit by serious disturbances in the early Nineteenth Century including on one occasion requiring the intervention of soldiers armed with fixed bayonets before order was restored. What would we make of that nowadays?

**Steve Hargrave is the Chief Executive of Faith in Families**

Bernard Davies

**The New Labour Years: A History of the Youth Service in England**

Volume 3: 1997-2007.

National Youth Agency, 2008

ISBN: 978 086155 342 6

£14.95 (pbk)

pp193

**John Holmes**

This book is the third volume of Davies' *History of the Youth Service in England*, the previous two volumes covering the period 1939-1999. Davies states that this volume dealing with the New Labour government started as the final chapters to volume two but outgrew this to become a third volume. We should be thankful that it did grow into a book as Davies has written a detailed critical analysis of how New Labour social policies impacted on young people, youth work and in particular the Youth Service. Much has been written elsewhere about New Labour social policies and their impact on young people but this is written by somebody with inside knowledge about the Youth Service and from somebody starting from youth work principles and values. As such Davies is able to develop a narrative that has direct meaning for youth workers and their managers. This book is essential reading for tutors and students on professional youth work courses, and if politicians read it they might at least have a better understanding why their initiatives are less successful than they had hoped.

Readers may well disagree with Davies' conclusions and his 'often very critical judgements' (p7) and he does not lay claim to this history as objective and detached, rather the book comes with attitude and emotional commitment to youth work. However, in my view, this gives a refreshing transparency to the underlying perspectives that inevitably inform any analysis but is often hidden in writers desires to have their version of the truth as definitive (not least in government policy statements). Admittedly this book is more a critical analysis of recent and current policies than a history. I would value Davies returning to look at the New Labour project in a few years time (if he still has the energy) when the dust has settled somewhat and it is clearer which initiatives are being kept and which abandoned, probably by a new government which increasingly is unlikely to be Labour. The danger of making conclusions from current policies can be seen from the early New Labour period when it seemed to many (including Davies at the end of volume two), that the potential demise of the Youth Service was coming with the subordination of the Youth Service into Connexions and the talk of a new profession. Instead we have seen Connexions quietly downplayed in importance and now the threat is seen as coming from subordination into Children (and Young People's) Services.

Davies is asking similar worrying questions in this volume:

*Could anything that was recognisable as a coherent Youth Service survive New Labour's 'modernisation'? (p72)*

He does not conclude that the Youth Service will die, or that the distinctive form of practice called youth work will perish, but it is clear he is not optimistic about the future. The

current climate is bleak not only because of the 'modernisation' agenda which combines increasingly integrated services with commissioning out of delivery (as Davies points out this may well lead to fragmentation not integration), but because New Labour has 'demonised' youth (to a greater extent recently than in the last 50 years in Davies' view). The consequence of this is that youth policies are directed to get young people to conform to adult expectations, particularly in terms of behaviour in public places and in terms of employability, and any conception of youth work responding to the interests of young people, as young people, is marginalised.

There is so much of value in this volume about current issues and developments in youth work. The complex funding of the local authority, and voluntary and community sectors are analysed, as is the impact of New Public Management and the changing inspection criteria and regimes. Ongoing issues such as anti-discriminatory practice is revisited in the climate of the supposed demise of social class, a shift from work with girls and women to work with boys and young men, and the decline of anti-racism in favour of community cohesion in the context of the fear and stigmatisation of Muslims. Growth areas are explored such as the new emphasis on faith based work and volunteering. The turbulent decade in relation to training and qualifications in youth work is recorded.

The one area that could be said to be under represented is analysis of the tensions and contradictions where youth workers can find some space to work within both to practice real youth work and to challenge top down directives. Davies acknowledges this as a possible weakness but feels this reflects the pressure from above to meet pre specified targets, and the micro management that goes with these targets. Whilst it seems true that some youth workers have succumbed to being technicians and lost sight of their principles and values it would have been valuable for Davies to identify the contradictions more clearly. As a university tutor I have found the key policy tensions and contradictions that Davies identifies in volumes one and two, as particularly helpful. These are:

- Universalism vs Selectivity
- Education vs Rescue
- Professionalism vs Volunteerism
- Voluntarism vs The State

It is important to understand that the Youth service has had to live with these tensions and that if the youth work tradition is to continue they will remain irresolvable as tensions. The fact that youth policy is both top down (from government) and bottom up (from young people and local communities) can be added as another irresolvable tension. Early New Labour policy seemed to be trying to resolve these tensions in favour of State directed top down policies involving selectivity, rescue, and professionalism with the early policy (*Bridging the Gap*) on reducing NEETs. However with Connexions the pull towards universalism and education returned. Yet the target set by Gordon Brown and the Treasury to measure the effectiveness of Connexions was the reduction of NEETs, a target that has not been reached. This is important because generally New Labour's targets have often been too blunt instruments and failed to measure success especially when different and even contradictory aims are being sought. Maybe the classic example of contradictions in policies relates to targets on participation. Davies explores the tension in government policy around targets



for participation and listening to young people when the government has such a fixed idea of what young people should become (this was maybe best demonstrated with the government's hostile response to young people walking out of school in protest to the Iraq war). Surely it is the role of youth workers to continue to try to find space for conversations and from these argue that the voices of young people must be listened to, pointing out contradictions in targets when they occur.

**John Holmes, Newman University College, Birmingham.**

Sue Peat

**Equipping Graduates for Youth Ministry**

YTC Press 2008

ISBN 978-1-8479926-7-3

£8.95 (pbk)

pp.144

**Andrew Orton**

**I**nexperienced newly-graduated youth workers struggling with their first full time posts within church contexts that are poorly structured and provide limited support: a familiar picture for those working in this field?

This monograph summarises Peat's findings from research undertaken with graduates of Cliff College, an evangelical Christian Bible college near Sheffield, and those who have employed them. The academic monograph format adopted is consistent with the case study approach adopted, but may limit the audience.

Based on data from questionnaires, she finds that at least 19% of the graduates from Cliff College entered youth ministry, making youth ministry the largest single destination of their graduates. However, 57% left their initial post within two years, with only 17% of these continuing to work in youth ministry for their next post. This extremely-high attrition rate is partly explained by the limited previous experience of many of these graduates. Many had little previous experience of youth ministry, and for 63%, this was their first full time job in any field. Several wider factors were suggested in interviews and focus groups to be contributing to this concerning retention rate.

Respondents expressed particular concern about the unrealistically high expectations and general lack of support frequently provided to youth workers taking on jobs within church settings. These were exacerbated by poor employment practices, such as unclear job descriptions, unclear lines of accountability, and expectations of excessive hours. Rather than church employers recognising these practices as problematic, Peat finds that they are frequently underpinned by dubious theological 'justifications', requiring direct theological reflection to challenge them.

Peat's evidence is based on a good response rate, with around three quarters of those contacted returning the questionnaire, and also demonstrates a concern for contacting

a broad range of stakeholders. Whilst her precise approach to sampling interviewees, focus group participants and job descriptions is not clear, her findings do reflect concerns expressed in wider research, such as that carried out by Cann (2002) in Manchester. This lack of clarity within the sampling rationale highlights one of the particular difficulties with the text. This is that the cross-referencing to summaries of data in the appendices contains numerous errors, including some referrals to material (such as sample job descriptions) which has not been included. This proves distracting when trying to understand the information given in context.

Throughout, Peat encourages others involved in employing and training youth workers to consider the relevance of these factors in their own settings. For example, a key set of Peat's concerns centre around the suitability of the training provided for working with young people. As a generic Bible College, delivering programmes initially in 'Biblical and Evangelistic Ministry', and latterly in 'Theology', these programmes were not designed to focus specifically on youth work issues (although they did include an optional module on 'Evangelism and Young People', and Cliff College has since introduced more specific part time programmes). Given the destination of many of their graduates, Peat wonders whether such programmes should include more focused accredited training, such as a JNC-recognised qualification. Whilst Peat does provide some details of course structure and developments, along with a good summary of the specific college context, she provides little detail of the precise course content. The limitation of this for wider readers is that without more detail about the course content, it is hard to reflect on what the wider implications of her findings might be for other programmes. This highlights the problematic tendency of this monograph to occasionally over-generalise the case study findings and assume that they apply normatively to practice in general.

Similarly, Peat does include some useful personal critical reflection on the college context which highlights potential issues arising from the college's particular approach to short-term event-based 'missions' run by teams of students. She helpfully connects this with difficulties that students find when trying to adjust to practising on their own after leaving the 'bubble' of the supportive college community. The unusual degree of theological unity at the college is recognised as a factor which might be supportive at the time but creates difficulties for students when they have to deal with theological differences in later employment. However, the text seems to miss the importance of exploring diversities of identity and perspective as part of the informal educational role of the practitioner, something which Clarke (2005, whose features of community Peat cites) sees as essential. Indeed, other research with practitioners and professional students in related fields (e.g. Banks, 2004; Orton, 2008) is increasingly finding that this learning is central to enabling practitioners to find ways of managing difference and ethical dilemmas in practice.

Overall, these findings clearly show the need for approaches to professional formation which extend beyond seeking to just give new workers 'bags of resources' to employ. The importance of supporting students in their vocational exploration and development throughout training is shown to be paramount, as is helping them to develop an appropriate framework of reflective practice for their work. The results also show the importance of integrating substantial placements with reflection on learning in order to develop practice proficiency. In places, the importance of reflecting on the impact of

different theologies on practice also becomes clear, particularly in Peat's recognition of the impact of different understandings of 'mission' on the expectations of those involved.

Perhaps the most important contribution made by Peat is the way that she highlights the lack of support provided for new workers, who often become isolated within these settings. Crucially, this raises the question of how this might best be addressed by both employers and training institutions. Peat is to be commended for tackling these often-neglected issues, and for undertaking research on training in faith-based practice more generally, as these are important areas which require more focused research. As a result, her monograph may be of interest to those training or employing youth ministers in church settings, who wish to draw on the comparative experience outlined here to reflect on how to tackle these issues in their own settings.

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**Andrew Orton Durham University**

Harriet Ward, Lisa Holmes and Jean Soper

### **Costs and Consequences of Placing Children in Care**

Jessica Kingsley Publishers

ISBN 978-1-84310-273-1

£39.99 (hardback)

pp.286

**Joe Smeeton**

This important book, based on substantial empirical work for informing social work managers, planners and policy makers tries to not only describe the indescribable but also to offer a model for ascribing costs to the associated activities, which seems at times to be like casting nets to catch clouds. What the authors are particularly clear about is that there is no clear description of what a typical looked after child is or should be and that the needs and therefore services required to meet their needs are numerous and vast. These are often compounded and made more complex by the particular aspects of local authorities e.g. whether they are urban or rural; the size of the authority in terms of population and area; and the profile of the service users within that authority. What is particularly striking is the often vast differences in practice between authorities. This is often due to history, culture, policy and practice and therefore the way services are structured and the costs associated with the resulting practices, especially about the way that unit costs are calculated.

The authors are able to understand and effectively explain how such vastly different costs for children in care can arise which lead to differences like the typical weekly cost of residential care in one authority is £603 while in another it is £3213.

This isn't a book that is going to inform frontline practitioners about how to work with children and young people and isn't a light read for the casual or interested observer of policy and practice in children and families social work. However, it is an invaluable resource for those charged with making some sense about how budgets need to be planned to effectively meet young people's needs; budget decisions that understand and are responsive to the local conditions within which the service is being provided. Consequently the model is indeed a complex one, which the authors have developed into a computer resource (available for inspection at [www.ccfc.org.uk](http://www.ccfc.org.uk)). It is therefore likely to require local agencies to have a sound grasp of the needs of their local population, which is sophisticated enough to allow planning for complex and changing needs. I worry that this may lead to a more onerous burden upon frontline workers as data collectors and in-putters that may take them away from frontline work even more than they currently are. I also worry that unless senior managers and planners have the insight and flexibility to use this model in a way that will facilitate good practice that they may fall back on or rely on more simplistic notions of the relationships between needs and costs that local authority bureaucracy is prone to, which can stagnate and frustrate professional decision making that should be responsive to changing needs.

However, don't let me leave you feeling that this is just one big exercise in cost calculations. There is a strong theme running through the book of consultation with young people, which highlights some of their concerns and gives some useful insight into how differences in the characteristics of placements impact upon their experience, behaviour and outcomes. A finding that may surprise some is that children often do better in education after they become looked after, which would support David Berridge's view that the link between poor educational outcomes and being in care is a complex one, though they also recognise the link made by Sonia Jackson that breakdown's in placement and school have a close association. The book therefore highlights the importance of making sure that the needs of the young person are closely matched to the placement. As the manager of a Looked After Children Team, it was anecdotally always clear to me that the relationship between the cost of the placement and the outcomes for the child was never a clear one. The important consideration was getting the right children into the right placements, not necessarily filling up the cheap beds before accessing more expensive provision which usually ended up costing more in the long run, financially but also significantly to the development of the young person. Hopefully this cost model can help planners to achieve that end. The authors succinctly recognise that:

*...an initiative such as this one (should) not focus on cutting costs and reducing support to our most vulnerable children, but (should) ensure that public money is effectively deployed in the provision of services that have a proven value in promoting their well-being.*

In conclusion, this is a model that should be welcomed if it is to be used as a tool to inform better planning and decision-making, but we must remain cautious that it could be

misused to justify cost-cutting. We must also be aware of any unintended outcomes that implementation of this model may have, such as increasing already stretched staff time in servicing the model's need for data and outputs from the model that may fly in the face of professional common sense.

**Joe Smeeton University of Sheffield.**

Peter Lauritzen

**Eggs in a Pan – speeches, writings and reflections**

Council of Europe 2008

ISBN 978 92 871 6492-6

€39

pp 415

**Tom Wylie**

British youth work has little engagement with European youth matters. A few individuals or organisations are honourable exceptions but the British state and its principal agent, the British Council, now appear to have narrowed their horizons to the mobility programmes of the European Union. That there is a world of European youth work, thought and practice well beyond such foreshortened interests is exemplified in this fine collection of speeches and writings.

Peter Lauritzen was a Council of Europe civil servant working in its department of youth affairs for thirty-five years before his untimely death in 2007. The Council of Europe, which covers the wider Europe – 48 member states from Iceland to Turkey, from Russia to Ireland – is primarily interested in human rights and inter-cultural understanding. It is a field of work rooted in human interaction; an interaction reflected in the youth-related institutions and processes which Lauritzen did so much to build – the European Youth Foundation, the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest, and the developing structures for intergovernmental and civil society co-operation on youth policies. It was a fitting lifetime's work for a German boy, born in Flensburg on the German – Danish border during world war II, living post-war in the British – administered zone and offered an education, formal and non-formal, which was open-minded, liberal and, most of all, oriented towards European co-operation. Those of us who grow up where national cultures collide can sometimes retreat into a partisan nationalism, shaping our personal identity through accentuating difference. Lauritzen did not; he looked instead for understanding of others, for dialogue, for the rich, shared European inheritance. His interest in ideas and in history, his political and sociological imagination was carried into his work as a trainer and civil servant – speaking and writing to articulate many themes: how to promote intercultural learning; the place of non-formal education and youth work; the development of youth policies nationally and at European level. He liked to work with metaphors – hence this book's title – and abhorred PowerPoint for its tendency to produce disconnectedness between speaker and audience.

His value base shines through the text. Describing himself as a scholar of education for human rights and democratic citizenship, he defines these as:

*Human Rights Education is a whole programme for lowering levels of humiliation and discrimination, and education for democratic citizenship is a 'learning by doing' invitation to become involved in culture, social affairs and politics. And as for method:*

*what I am talking about is the capacity to listen, and the capacity to accept what is said within a dialogue as equally valid. This is about symmetric communication and it defies dominance. Tolerance of ambiguity goes together with insecurity. By offering insecurity I also offer space for influencing and being influenced, I create fluidity within the dialogue. In a larger sense this is very relevant to young people; insecurity is almost an existential condition of their life, with regard to employment, the value of education and the complex process of identity formation.*

These values and approaches are, in Lauritzen's view, to be carried forward through youth policies and youth work – 'the main objective of youth work is to provide opportunities for young people to shape their own futures'.

In the various settings from which these papers are drawn, Lauritzen was able to situate the role of youth work and of European level youth actions and institutions in a wider social context. Moreover, given the longevity of his engagement, he was able to speak about the impact of modernisation on different societies, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ultimate symbol of the breakdown of the Soviet empire, its ideology and its youth structures. He was quick to see the difficulty, not least for the young in European societies, which turned to 'a model of aggressive, globally organised, neo-liberalism as if the fall of communism had also meant the end of their own social commitments'.

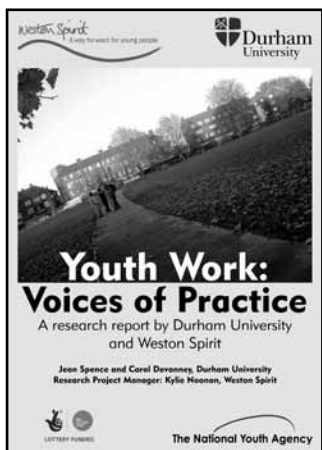
It was in this changed context that Lauritzen argued for a youth policy-national and international – which reflected the values of the Council of Europe:

*such as the principles of equity and fairness, the social embedding of the economy and the democratic process, the obligation of public authority to ensure free education for all, to encourage healthy lifestyles, to build the capacity of civil society and the associative movement, to facilitate the entry into the labour market of young people and to care for children, young people, families and communities, finally to watch over a climate of tolerance and societal dialogue and guarantee the security of minorities remain incompletely intact – these are achievements of the late twentieth century and late modernity which must not be sacrificed for profits, the financial manoeuvres of a few and an economistic concept of governance. This means that the youth field is not as politically neutral as many think.*

For those readers interested in how, over time, Europe collectively structured itself to handle youth issues, there are several chapters – on youth policy, on the role of voluntary bodies, on research, on the European Union's 'white paper'. He wrote, too, of his own role as the first director of the second European youth centre whose establishment in Budapest represented the new opening of central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The two European Youth

Centres are sites for intercultural learning through training, seminars and multi-national conferences. Lauritzen saw that 'the construction of a new Europe has to be launched in the minds of people... the world of today cannot function on authoritarian principles'. The Budapest Centre had previously been a meeting place for communist youth organisations and was refurbished and given to the Council of Europe by the Hungarian government. Such a gesture of imagination and generosity of spirit is reflected also throughout Peter Lauritzen's life and work. This collection is a tribute to his professional contribution and an enduring record of his part in the development of Europe's youth sector. One cannot conceive of a British civil servant involved in youth policy being able to draft anything comparable; but how one wishes that the British government could at least enable our young people and youth organisations to be more fully engaged in such work.

**Tom Wylie, Chief Executive National Youth Agency 1996-2007**



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*The Thompson Report* (1982) Experience and Participation, Cmnd 8686, London: HMSO.

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**Squaring the Circle? The State of Youth Work in Some Children and Young  
People's Services**

*Bernard Davies and Bryan Merton*

**The 'Teen Brain' research: an introduction and implications for practitioners**

*Howard Sercombe and Tomas Paus*

**Thinking the Unthinkable: Youth Work without Voluntary Participation?**

*Jon Ord*

**Measuring outcomes in youth work in Northern Ireland**

*Tony Morgan*

**Educating Youth Workers as Public Advocates**

*Judith Bessant*

**Rethinking the 'problem of youth': refocusing on the social and its  
interrelationship with dominant power structures**

*Charlie Cooper*

**Inter-racial Conflict and Identity Formation**

*Joan Bailey*

**Reviews**

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